The Problem Solver Job
Peer-Mediated Conflict Resolution

Many preschool teachers establish a positive learning environment by including children in setting a few simple classroom rules, modeling appropriate behavior, and reinforcing positive behavior. Despite these efforts, day-to-day conflicts between children still occur and are usually resolved by teachers. As a result, children tend to look to the teacher when they can’t settle disagreements. Appointing a Problem Solver for the day is a child-centered and child-directed method of resolving conflicts with long-term benefits for all the children.

At the beginning of each year, I (Sharma) introduce the role of Problem Solver and provide the tools children need to get started. Five laminated solution cards, each with a different message, are held together with a ring. Each card has words and a picture, and I explain what to say when using it (see quotes next to cards). Through class meetings, role-playing, and interactive modeling, the children learn how to use the cards.

Peer problem solving in action

When children solve problems for each other, the process can look much different from a teacher solving problems for them. The teacher might offer one solution and expect the children to accept it. At times the Problem Solver may suggest a solution that is unacceptable. When this happens, the Problem Solver refers back to the cards and finds a new solution that the children in the situation agree to.

At the sand table in a classroom of 3- and 4-year-olds, Samantha hits Miguel on the head with a small plastic shovel. Mr. Nguyen comes over to see what is going on. Samantha collapses on the floor and refuses to get up, talk, or even lift her head off the floor. Mr. Nguyen asks Eddie, who is the Problem Solver, to come over and help. He prompts Eddie to start by asking the children, “What happened?”

Miguel: She hit me!

Samantha [from floor]: He took my dump truck!

Mr. Nguyen: Eddie, can you find a solution to both problems?

Eddie takes out the Problem Solver cards and flips through them. Samantha gets up so she can see the cards. Eddie chooses the Peace Place card and shows it to Samantha.

Samantha: I don’t want to go to the Peace Place!

Eddie: No hitting. Use gentle touches.

Eddie then chooses the “Set the timer” card and shows it to Miguel.

Mr. Nguyen [with the timer]: We need the timer, please.

Eddie [to Mr. Nguyen]: We need the timer, please.

Mr. Nguyen with the timer]: You may each have two-minute turns with the dump truck. Miguel, when the timer rings, it will be Samantha’s turn. Eddie, what else can you do to help?
Eddie picks the “Give a hug” card and shows it to both children.

Miguel: I want a hug!
Samantha: I don’t need a hug.

Eddie hugs Miguel and Miguel smiles. Mr. Nguyen asks Eddie, “Do you think Samantha and Miguel are ready to continue playing?” He says yes. Mr. Nguyen checks with Samantha and Miguel, and they say they are ready to play. Both children resume playing at the sand table.

Benefits for all

The Problem Solver job is assigned to a different child each day. It helps children build skills needed for social-emotional development. Peer-mediated problem solving also has a long-term positive effect on the classroom environment.

At first, the job is new and exciting. The Problem Solver stays busy throughout much of the day. By the end of the year, a disappointed Problem Solver might say, “There were no problems today! I had nothing to do!” This may be a letdown for the Problem Solver, but it is a positive outcome for our learning community.

One third of the children in my classroom have special needs. Some have delays in physical, language, cognitive, or social-emotional development, and some are on the autism spectrum. Children who have delays in social-emotional development tend to need more support being the Problem Solver, but I respond to any child who needs help carrying out the steps in the problem-solving process.

If the Problem Solver is unable to resolve a conflict, or if the conflict escalates, I immediately take the lead role. Even when my assistance is necessary, children learn through observation and modeling.

My attitude toward problems has changed since I added the Problem Solver job to my classroom. Years ago when I heard two children arguing over a toy, I would think, “Oh great, here we go again!” Now I think, “Oh great, a chance for us to help each other!” Changing the problem-solving role from adult-led to child-led has created a classroom where there are fewer problems, problems are resolved more quickly, and there is less stress for everyone.