

Teaching Your Child to Solve Problems Before Asking an Adult to Fix Them

Children need adults for safety, guidance, and support, but they also need repeated chances to handle manageable problems. If an adult immediately fixes every forgotten item, disagreement, difficult task, or minor frustration, the child can learn to look outward for rescue before looking inward for a strategy. The American Academy of Pediatrics notes that one of the hardest parts of parenting can be doing less—allowing children to struggle through appropriate problems long enough to develop a sense that they can handle challenges.¹ AAP guidance on growing independence similarly encourages adults to guide children through social problem-solving rather than automatically solving the problem for them.² Harvard's Center on the Developing Child explains that executive-function and self-regulation skills—including planning, flexible thinking, and managing information—develop through practice and supportive interaction.³ The key is to distinguish a problem the child can practice solving from a situation that requires adult protection or authority. Safety threats, bullying, abuse, serious health concerns, and problems beyond the child's developmental capacity should not be handed back as independence exercises. For everyday problems, use a short coaching sequence: “What is the problem?” “What have you tried?” “What are two possible next steps?” “Which one will you try first?” Resist giving the answer before the child has generated an option. If the first attempt fails, treat that as information rather than proof the child cannot solve problems. Offer enough help to restart thinking, then step back again. Praise the process specifically: “You stopped, thought of two choices, and tried one before asking me to fix it.” Over time, reduce prompts. The goal is not a child who never asks for help. It is a child who can judge when to try, when to persist, and when responsible help-seeking is the right solution.

Did You Know?

- ✓ AAP guidance encourages parents to allow children to work through manageable problems instead of automatically solving them.¹
- ✓ AAP independence guidance recommends coaching children through social problems so they can practice calm, appropriate solutions.²
- ✓ Harvard describes executive-function and self-regulation skills as capacities that develop through supportive interaction and repeated practice.³

Research Sources

1. American Academy of Pediatrics. “Raise a Problem Solver: 3 Ways Play Can Help.” [HealthyChildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org/healthychildren/1-to-2-year-olds/active-living/Pages/Raise-a-Problem-Solver-3-Ways-Play-Can-Help.aspx).
2. American Academy of Pediatrics. “Growing Independence: Tips for Parents of Young Children.” [HealthyChildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org/healthychildren/1-to-2-year-olds/active-living/Pages/Growing-Independence-Tips-for-Parents-of-Young-Children.aspx).
3. Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. “Activities Guide: Enhancing & Practicing Executive Function Skills.” May 6, 2014.

Ten-Minute Try-It-First Problem-Solving Plan

Use this page for a safe everyday problem. The goal is to build a habit of thinking before rescue.

Child's name: _____

Date: _____

Problem: _____

Where: _____

1. State the Problem - About 2 Minutes

Have the child describe the problem in one clear sentence.

The problem is: _____

2. Name What You Tried - About 2 Minutes

Ask for any step already attempted, even if it did not work.

I already tried: _____

3. Generate Two Options - About 2 Minutes

Have the child name two reasonable options before the adult supplies one.

Option 1: _____ Option 2: _____

4. Choose and Try - About 2 Minutes

Select one option and define what trying it will look like.

I will try: _____

5. Decide Whether Help Is Needed - About 2 Minutes

After trying, decide whether to try again or ask for appropriate help.

☐ Try another option ☐ Ask for help because _____