



November Theme Problem Solving



In *Pear and the Lost Leaf*, Pear and her friends try to solve the problem of losing a leaf. They try searching for it in every place they can think of. Pear gives up on the problem, but her friends are more creative - they work out how to replace the leaf with a new one. This story can show children how perseverance and creativity can help to solve a problem, and is a good platform for teaching very basic problem solving skills.

Try the activities below or some of your own.

Activity One: The Panic Balloon

This activity shows children how panicking and getting upset at a problem is perfectly natural, but can hamper their chances to look for a solution.

Show the children a flat balloon and ask them to imagine that this is their body and brain. Something goes wrong and the balloon has a problem to tackle. Start to blow up the balloon. Explain that this is how your body and brain starts to get full of scary and upset feelings when something goes wrong. As the balloon gets bigger and more stretched, talk through how your body feels tight and full of feelings when you get upset or scared about a problem. When the balloon is very full, hold it by the open end and ask the children to think about when their body is very cross or scared or upset and they are full of their feelings. Then let the balloon go and as it flies madly around the room, let the children see how frantic the movement is and how it is hard to control where it will go next. Tell them that this is how your body feels sometimes when it gets full of tense feelings. This is not a good way to look at solving a problem because your body and brain are not under control.

Then help the children to learn how to relax their bodies. Encourage all the children to breathe in very deeply and breathe out until all their breath is out of their bodies. Some children can work well with a rule of 1:3:10. That is, when you feel tense and tight, say **STOP!** (one time), do three deep breaths, and count slowly out loud to ten.

Some children who are very active find some physical release helpful before they calm down, this can be running on the spot, doing a few star jumps etc for a count of twenty, before doing the rule of 1:3:10. If children need some physical release, try to teach them to use their leg muscles rather than their arms (hitting a cushion etc). There are two reasons for this. One is that the leg has the largest muscles and can burn off adrenalin very fast. The other is that leg exercise will be something they can continue to do as they get older (it will always be acceptable to get up from your desk to go to the toilet or to make a drink but punching things would not be acceptable in most social scenarios).

You will know your group of children best and may alter your approach to suit. The point of the exercise is to show children that they will be able to think better (and change things for the better much more easily) if they notice when their bodies are feeling like the stretched balloon, and take some steps to let their tension "air" out.

Activity Two: Guess and Check

This activity shows very young children how to devise different solutions for a problem and then decide which one is their best choice.

Using one of the problems on page three or some of your own, get the children in the group to shout out different possible solutions to the problem. This is the GUESS stage (what adults call brainstorming). Write a key word or use a small line drawing to represent the idea on a list. It is important at this stage NOT to criticise any suggestions, however far out they may be. And don't let other children put down any ideas - all ideas are welcome at this stage. Children need to understand that an open mind leads to creative solutions.

Then comes the CHECK stage. Looking at each idea, check which ones are possible, and which ones might work. This is the stage to gently rule out any outlandish, dangerous or socially unacceptable ideas. The children will usually as a group tell you why some ideas would not be good, so the checking can come from them. You will be left with a couple of solutions which would be feasible to fix the problem. This shows children how their own brains can come up with ideas and then filter them for practicality. Obviously at this age they will need help with this strategy, but the more they practise it, the more they will feel able to do it when they have no adult help.

Activity Three: Spot The Problem Solver

This activity helps children to see examples of problems being solved in familiar stories.

Before reading each story, ask the children to look out for any problems the characters face, what solutions they try and whether they work. You will find lots of books with great examples in, but here are some to get you started:

Charlie and Lola: I want to play music too by *Lauren Child*

Charlie and Lola: But excuse me, that is my book by *Lauren Child*

Ginger by *Charlotte Voake*

The Three Little Pigs traditional

The Story of the Little Mole Who Knew It Was None of His Business by *Werner Holzwarth*

Frog on a Log by *Roxbee Cox and Stephen Cartwright*

Frog is a Hero by *Max Velthuijs*

A Squash and a Squeeze by *Julia Donaldson and Axel Sheffler*

Guess and Check Suggested Problems

Suggested problems (some are simpler for younger children, some are more complex for older ones). Do choose other problems based on your experience of the group - what kinds of problems do your children deal with regularly?

PROBLEM ONE: Bertie's bedroom is very messy and he can't find his favourite teddy bear. He doesn't like to go to grandma's without a toy. What can he do?

Possible Solutions: Tidy his room, ask for a grown up to help him find the teddy, choose a different toy.

PROBLEM TWO: Katie and Joe are fighting over a green pen. Katie had been using the pen first but Joe needs a green pen to finish his picture. They are both cross and trying to snatch the pen off each other. What can they do?

Possible solutions: Find another green pen for Joe. Let Katie finish her turn and ask Joe to wait for a turn. Use a timer to take turns. Ask Katie if she wants a different colour, and let Joe have the green one. See if Joe can use a different colour than green.

PROBLEM THREE: Annie tripped over at school and fell on David's lego model. The lego model smashed. No one saw Annie do it, but everyone is coming in from playtime soon. What can she do?

Possible solutions: Pretend it wasn't you. Tell David and say sorry. Try to fix the model quickly. Hide the broken model. Tell the teacher and ask for help. Offer to help David fix it. Pretend it was someone else.

PROBLEM FOUR: Tim's three best friends want to play football. Tim is scared because he doesn't like playing football, he doesn't think he is very good at it. What can he do?

Possible solutions: Have a try anyway. Ask friends if they can play something else. Play with someone different. Play by yourself. Ask friends to help him to learn to play. Ask a grown up for help to join in.