12 Teaching Children to Problem-Solve Through Puppet Play Interactions[1]

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Young children often react to their problems in ineffective ways. Some cry, tantrum, and yell, others hit, bite, and become destructive, and still others tattle or lie to their parents or teachers. These antisocial, but normal, responses do little to help children find satisfying solutions to their problems. In fact, they create new ones. Research shows that children continue to use these inappropriate strategies either because they have not been taught more appropriate ways to manage their emotions and to problem-solve and/or because, in the short term, their inappropriate strategies work to get what they want.

The Incredible Years Dinosaur small group treatment and classroom prevention curriculum for young children have been shown in randomized studies to show increases in children's emotional language, social skills, school readiness, and appropriate problem-solving (Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Stoolmiller, 2008) as well as reductions in conduct problems, hyperactivity, and inattention at home and school (Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1997; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2016, 2005; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Beauchaine, 2013; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2001, 2004). This curriculum has been described in detail in a book entitled *Incredible Teachers: Nurturing Children's Social, Emotional, and Academic Competence* (Webster-Stratton, 2012) as well as other articles (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2003, 2005, 2008a, 2008b).

In this chapter, we will focus on how we use puppets in the Incredible Years Dinosaur Program to teach children emotional management and problem-solving skills. The puppets in this curriculum are large, child-size puppets dressed according to the different cultures and gender they are working with. Moreover, like children they regularly change their clothing according to the climate and local customs and to represent different developmental issues. For example, some child puppets may have glasses or a hearing aid if that is an issue being addressed with the group. However, for a limited budget clinicians can use smaller puppets and in fact almost any puppet with a moving mouth. Young children, ages 4–8 years, are enthralled with puppets and will talk with them about painful or sensitive issues more easily than an adult.

The Feeling Literacy and Identification Combined With Emotion Regulation Are the First Steps of Problem-Solving

The beginning steps of problem-solving focus on the link between feelings and problems. Clinicians can use puppets to help children understand that an uncomfortable feeling such as anger, frustration, sadness, fearfulness, or loneliness is a "signal" that they have a problem that needs to be solved. Because children this age are visual thinkers and love imaginary play, one of the ways to promote a child's emotional language and self-regulation skills is through stories and puppet play. Puppets can facilitate pretend play that helps children experience the feelings of other characters (early empathy development). Puppets act out stories with children and explore feelings and ways to cope with uncomfortable feelings. Puppets model feeling talk and tell children about times they are feeling left out, teased by other children, frustrated because they have difficulty learning to read, anxious about inviting a friend over, angry because their parent won't buy them new shoes, or worried about their parents fighting. Puppets also talk about positive feelings such as being proud at learning to ride a bike, happy playing the drums, pleased at getting a compliment for sitting still, or excited to have learned to read. For example, the puppet Wally (a character used in the Incredible Years Dinosaur Child Social Skills Program) might share his feelings by saying, "*I am angry because my brother took my airplane and broke it.*" The clinician replies by asking Wally if he used one of his secrets to calm down. Wally replies, "*Yes, I realized I needed to take three breaths. Can you help me take those three deep breaths?*" The child and puppet take some deep breaths together and practice using calming self-talk, "*I can calm down. I am going to think of my dog who makes me feel happy.*" After they practice this several times, the clinician praises Wally and the child for practicing how to stay calm. The clinician says, "*You have helped Wally stay calm by taking deep breaths, counting, telling yourself you can stay calm, and thinking of your happy place. Do you think you could use this idea when you get mad with your sister or a friend?*"

Many scenarios with puppets can be used to help children practice talking about their uncomfortable feelings and then practicing using calming thoughts, positive images, and deep breathing. Here are some sample scripts that the puppet can use to model positive and negative feeling talk. The puppet says to the children:

"*I am frustrated building this tower, but I take a deep breath and try again when it falls down.*"

"*I am so proud of how I finally built that.*"

"*I am excited about playing in the bath. Are you?*"

"*I am having fun playing with my friend, Molly. Who do you have fun playing with?*"

"*I am disappointed that I can't go to the playground with my mom. I will think of my happy place.*"

"I feel left out and lonely when other kids won't let me play with them. Do you ever feel that way?"

"I am sad that my fish died. Have you had a pet die?"

Problem Identification and Brainstorming Solutions

After teaching children emotional language and calm-down strategies, clinicians begin to use the puppets to teach children basic problem-solving steps. It is important that this teaching be done first at a time when the children are actually calm and not when they are engaged in conflict. The first steps focus on problem identification and solution brainstorming:

1. What is my problem? (Define the problem and feelings involved.)
2. What is a solution? What are some more solutions? (Brainstorm.)

For children between the ages of 3 and 8, the steps of identifying the problem and generating possible prosocial solutions are the key skills to learn and practice. Later they will learn subsequent steps of evaluating consequences and implementing solutions. The ability to think ahead to possible outcomes for each solution is a big cognitive developmental step and will be particularly difficult for hyperactive, impulsive, and very young children.

Puppets are an extremely effective teaching technique for modeling these first problem-solving steps and for engaging children in practices that bring problem-solving discussions to life.

A fun way to begin problem-solving discussions with children is to ask them to pretend they are "detectives" who are trying to solve a problem that

1 What is my problem?

their puppet friend has. The puppet tells them about a particular problem he or she wants help solving. These problem scenarios are selected to be similar to the child's actual problems. Sample problem scenarios that can be acted out by puppets include the following:

Wally and Molly and Their Friends Ask Children for Help Solving These Problems

* Wally is afraid to bring home his behavior chart from his teacher because he hasn't done well.
* Wally has had a fight in the school yard with other children who won't let him play with them.
* Molly fights with Wally over what channel to watch on TV and ends up being sent to time-out.
* Molly is not invited to a party when most of her friends are going.
* Wally takes his friend's baseball glove because his parents won't buy him one.
* Oscar the Ostrich hides his head in the sand and is afraid because his parents fight—he is sure they are fighting because of him.
* Tiny Turtle is afraid of an adult who gets angry at him.
* Wally tells a lie because he is afraid he will get into trouble.
* Wally is teased and doesn't want to go to school anymore.
* Freddy Froggy is hyperactive, impulsive, and jumps around a lot. He finds other children are annoyed with him.

Defining the Problem: The puppet tells the children about the problem. The children guess how the puppet is feeling and then say the problem in their own words. For example: *"Wally, I think you are sad because your mom is going out and you don't want to stay with the babysitter."*

After the problem has been defined, the next step is for the clinician to invite the children to help the puppet think of solutions. The idea is to encourage them to generate as many different solutions as they can in order to solve the puppet's problem. This brainstorming process is fun and teaches children flexible thinking while encouraging them to realize that there is often more than one reasonable way to solve the problem. It is important to avoid criticizing or editing any of the children's ideas, no matter how silly they may seem. Instead, encourage imaginative thinking and try to use the puppet to model creative solutions. Be sure to praise children for their attempts to solve Wally's problem. In particular, it is helpful to praise them for their *different* solutions (e.g., *"Good, that is a different idea"*) because it will encourage a broader variety of solutions.

If children are having difficulty finding a solution, Wally might suggest some ideas or ask them to check *Wally's Solution Kit* for other ideas. In this kit there are pictures of a variety of solutions such as: walk away, wait, say

2 What is a solution?

3 What are some other solutions?

please, do something else, trade, share, offer to help, ask for help, talk about your feelings, ignore, ask politely, calm down, think of happy place, take deep breaths, admit mistake, apologize, give a compliment, or forgive.

What Happens Next?

Helping

Sharing

Acting Out Solutions

Once children have discussed a variety of solutions or chosen a solution from the Solution Kit, then the parent or teacher asks them to show Wally what these proposed solutions look like (see Fig. 12.4 and 12.5). It is fun for children to act these solutions out with hand puppets or toy characters. For example, if the children have suggested saying "please stop" and ignoring as possible solutions to the problem of being teased, then ask them to show Wally how they would do this. The puppet would act out the role of the teaser (children are never asked to act out negative behaviors). The child would show how she could say, "Stop teasing me," and then walk away. Children will love participating in these "plays," and the practice helps them to experience what behaviors and words are involved in carrying out the solution. Behavioral practice is far more important to a child's actually learning and using new problem-solving behaviors than theoretical cognitive discussions.

It is important to keep problem-solving practice paced to the child's developmental level and attention span. Most young children will be happy to help the puppet with one or two solutions in a session and then will be ready to move on to another activity. After a problem-solving practice with the puppet, it may be useful to have the puppet just play with the child in a free play setting and to comment on all the friendly solutions that the child uses with the puppet. For example: *"Wally wanted that block and you gave it to him.*

That's such a friendly solution." Or "I see that you want the car that Wally is using and you are waiting. That's a great solution."

Sample Problem–Solving Scripts

The following script is one that would work well for early elementary school children who have had practice with identifying feelings, problems, and generating solutions.

Sample Script for Puppets: "Wally Gets Teased"

Wally:	Today the kids at school were teasing me and calling me a monkey face!
Clinician:	How did that make you feel?
Wally:	I felt so mad, I called them names back!
Clinician:	How did you feel about that solution?
Wally:	Not so good, because they called me a dummy and said I couldn't play with them.
Clinician:	I wonder if there was a different solution that might have worked better? Do you want to ask these kids for their ideas?
Wally:	I guess so—but I bet they never get teased.
Clinician:	Oh, I think all kids get teased sometimes.
Wally:	Really? Well, how do you kids feel when you are teased?
Clinician:	*(Encourages students to label their feelings)*
Clinician:	Well, I guess those feelings are clues there is a problem. Right? So, Wally, how would you state the problem?
Wally:	The problem is I feel really mad because they are teasing me.
Clinician:	That's right, so now what can you do to solve that problem? What are some solutions or choices of what to do? *(Encourages students to generate solutions—such as ignoring, walking away, being humorous in response, taking a deep breath and calming down, explaining feelings)*
Clinician:	Wally, these kids are great problem-solving detectives, look at all the solutions they came up with.
Wally:	Can we practice some of those ideas, because I'm not sure I know how to do that?
Clinician:	Okay, let's pick two children who will show you how to react when someone teases you. And Wally, you can be the one to tease, okay? *(Two students volunteer)*

Wally:	Neaner, neaner, you are a monkey face!
Students:	(*Role-play some of the solutions that were discussed*)
Wally:	Wow, that was cool—I didn't get any reaction from either of you when I teased—it wasn't much fun. I'm going to try that next time someone teases me. I'll let you know what happens.

Is your solution fair?

Evaluating the Consequences of Solutions

After children understand how to identify problems and brainstorm solutions, they can begin to evaluate their solutions by thinking through the consequences. The puppets and children learn that a consequence is "What happens next?" and solutions can have good or bad consequences.

What Happens Next?

There are three questions that are used to decide whether the solution is a good one: Is my solution safe? Is it fair? Does it lead to good or okay feelings?

4 What happens next? (consequences)

The following script adds in the evaluation step of problem-solving to Wally's teasing scenario.

Next Session

Wally: Hey, you know what, someone was teasing me again and saying I was stupid and couldn't even kick a ball, and you know what I did?

Clinician: Tell us, Wally.

Wally: *(Wally demonstrates)* Well, I was feeling really mad, and I knew I was supposed to say how I felt about the teasing, but I just couldn't do it, so then I took some big breaths so I could calm down. And I thought to myself, "I'm not going to pay any attention to him, I can be stronger than him." I walked away and found someone else to play with.

Clinician: How did you feel about that?

Wally: Oh, it was so cool, I felt so powerful.

Does Your Solution Lead to Good Feelings?

Clinician: *(to students)* How do you think Wally did? Was his solution fair? Did it lead to good feelings? Was it safe?

Many young children will not be ready to evaluate consequences until they have had considerable practice with the earlier steps. When children are ready to evaluate solutions, the puppet asks what would happen if he tried one of their solutions. For instance, if a child suggested "grabbing" or "hitting" in order to get a toy back, clinicians help the child to consider the possible outcomes by asking, "*Imagine what might happen next if you did grab the ball away.*" Children will likely picture such things as losing a friend, getting into trouble with the teacher, or getting into a fight. This discussion should be carried out in a noncritical way even though the solution proposed is inappropriate. If children feel criticized for their solutions, they may avoid suggesting ideas in the future.

Next, children are asked to imagine the possible consequences of a different solution, such as asking the friend politely to have the toy back or offering to share. This might result in getting the toy back. It's also important to consider that even a prosocial solution might not work (maybe the child

won't give the toy back even if asked nicely). Often, children are surprised or upset when things don't go according to their plan, and learning to predict possible outcomes can help a child cope with disappointment. Solution evaluation is an important part of problem-solving; however, be sure that this does not become a burdensome or compulsive activity. Children do not need to discuss the consequences of every single solution.

Sample Script for Puppets: "Felicity Steals Something"

Felicity (a puppet):	Well, I came today because I have a problem. I need your help.
Clinician:	These kids are great problem-solvers; I bet they could help.
Felicity:	I did something at school this week. My friend Ruby had this stuffed animal, and she had it in her locker. And I really wanted one like that, so I just took it! She was really upset because it was her special animal.
Clinician:	What happened then?
Felicity:	Well, the teacher asked, "Who took Ruby's animal?" and I didn't want to tell so I lied and said, "Not me." I really thought I would get in big trouble if she found out it was me. I knew I shouldn't have taken that animal but I thought I would lose Ruby as a friend if she found out it was me. And the teacher would send a note home, and I would definitely get in trouble from my parents.
Clinician:	Well, you know Wally says you're supposed to pick solutions with good consequences. Sounds like you had two solutions—first you took the stuffed animal because you wanted one so badly, and then you lied because you were scared. So let's think about the consequences of those two solutions.
Students:	(*Brainstorm why students think her solutions might not be the best ones in terms of safety, fairness, and good feelings*)
Felicity:	I see, so I see that I used two bad solutions and I made one problem into two problems because I lied. What should I do now?
Students:	(*Generate solutions such as admit mistake, tell teacher and Ruby, apologize, give back animal*)
Felicity:	Are you disappointed in me? Do you think I'm really awful because I did that?
Clinician:	Well, you know, Felicity, everyone makes mistakes sometimes. How do you students feel about Felicity now?

Students:	*(Tell her how they feel)*
Felicity:	Well, I'm worried I won't be strong enough to admit my mistake. Can we practice doing that?
Clinician:	Sure, let's have someone be the teacher, another person Ruby, and another person be Felicity.
	(Student role-plays admitting mistake to Ruby and teacher and experiencing consequences)
Felicity:	Okay, let me try it now and see how I do. "Ruby, I am really sorry I took your doll, here it is back. I shouldn't have taken it, and I want to make it up to you. Would you like one of my toys for a while? Do you think we can still be friends?" Well, how did I do?

In this sample scenario, the clinician and puppet encouraged thinking about another's perspective and feelings, admitting a mistake, apologizing, and forgiving. Be sure to have the children only practice prosocial solutions, not inappropriate solutions. If the consequences of an inappropriate solution are to be role-played, the puppet should be the one to demonstrate the bad choice, not the children.

To Sum Up . . .

- Use puppets to present hypothetical problem scenarios to engage children in problem-solving practices.
- Use puppets to model talking about feelings and help children clearly define the problem and to recognize the feelings involved.
- For preschool children, use the puppet to help children focus on generating many different solutions.
- Help children practice the solutions and show the puppet what the solution looks like.
- Use the puppet to demonstrate how he or she used one of the solutions a child came up with.
- For primary- or elementary-age children, use the puppet to help them focus on thinking through to the various consequences of different solutions so the puppet or child can make the best choice.
- Use the puppet to help children anticipate what to do next when one solution doesn't work.
- Make these problem-solving scenarios fun and engaging, and praise children for their ideas/solutions.
- Model effective problem-solving yourself and with your puppet.
- Remember it is the process of learning how to think about conflict that is critical, rather than getting the correct answer.

Notes

1   The figures in this chapter were drawn by David Mostyn and have been reused with permission of the Incredible Years program.

2   Carolyn Webster-Stratton has disclosed a potential conflict of interest due to the fact she provides training and instructional materials for these Dinosaur Programs and therefore stands to gain financially from a positive review. This interest has been disclosed to the University of Washington and has been managed consistent with federal and university policy.

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