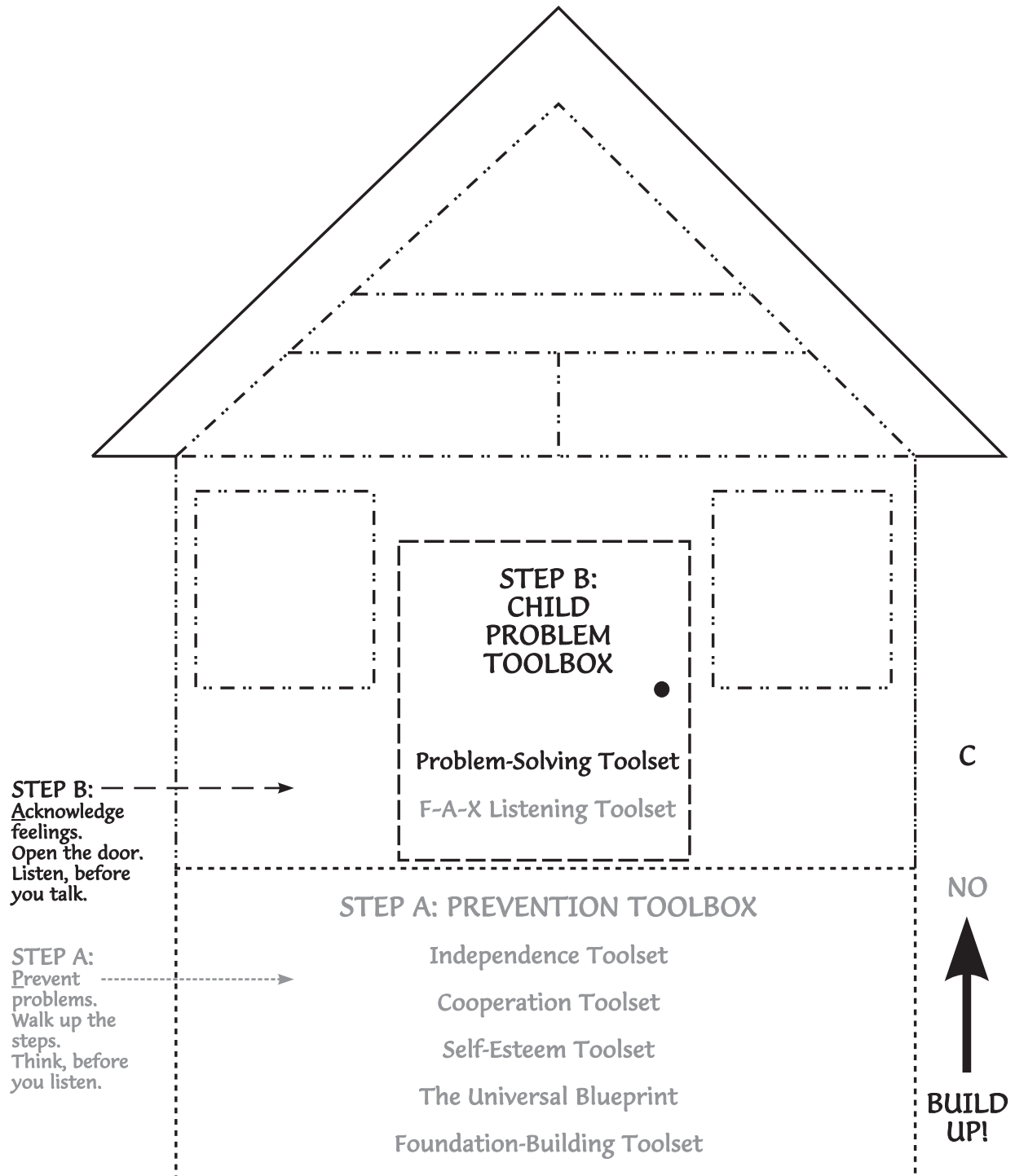


# CHAPTER 8

## PROBLEM-SOLVING TOOLSET



## CHAPTER

# 8 PROBLEM-SOLVING TOOLSET

*We usually experience some problems with our house that are frustrating but need no repair. All we can do is vent our frustration, “I wish we had more room.” Other times, there are problems we need to solve, “That darned sink is clogged up again!” If we simply do the first thing that comes to mind, we might grab a hammer and start banging out our frustration. A better approach is to look at the different options and decide which is the best plan to resolve the problem.*

*Likewise, people are sometimes frustrated or aggravated about a problem and simply need to vent, “First this happened, then that . . .” There isn’t anything they need to do about the problem, they just want to be heard and have their feelings understood. Other times, people need to **do** something about their problem. The first idea that comes to mind might be irrational or poorly thought out. It can be helpful to look at the possible options and decide the best plan for responding to the problem. In these cases, the Problem-Solving Toolset is most useful.*

## IN THIS CHAPTER

When we use the Problem-Solving Toolset, we don’t solve problems *for* our children. We help children look at different ways *they* can solve their own problems. The problem-solving process is a universal decision-making method we can apply to *any* type of problem. This process begins with the first step of the F-A-X Listening process that we learned in Chapter 7:

### **Step B1. Focus on feelings.**

Invite people to share their feelings about the problem. Listen carefully and let them know you heard and understood them. *The most common mistake is to rush this step.* We stop at this step when people simply need to vent.

The last two steps, Ask helpful questions and X-amine possible options, require logical thinking. In these steps, we help people correct mistaken beliefs, consider the possible solutions and make a final decision. This chapter teaches these last two steps. In it we consider several important points:

### **Step B2. Ask helpful questions.**

- There is a difference between helpful and unhelpful questions.
- We can ask a series of questions that lead people to a conclusion or point that we want them to consider—*without* offering advice or shutting down communication.

### **Step B3. X-amine possible solutions.**

- There is a basic problem-solving process we can use in *all* types of relationships and problems.
- We can apply this problem-solving process to all types of Child problems.

### **Flowing through the steps of F-A-X Listening.**

- There are specific times when we stop at a step or move to the next step.
- We can shift gears between the listening steps and between the Child Problem Toolbox and other tools, depending on the child’s needs or the situation.

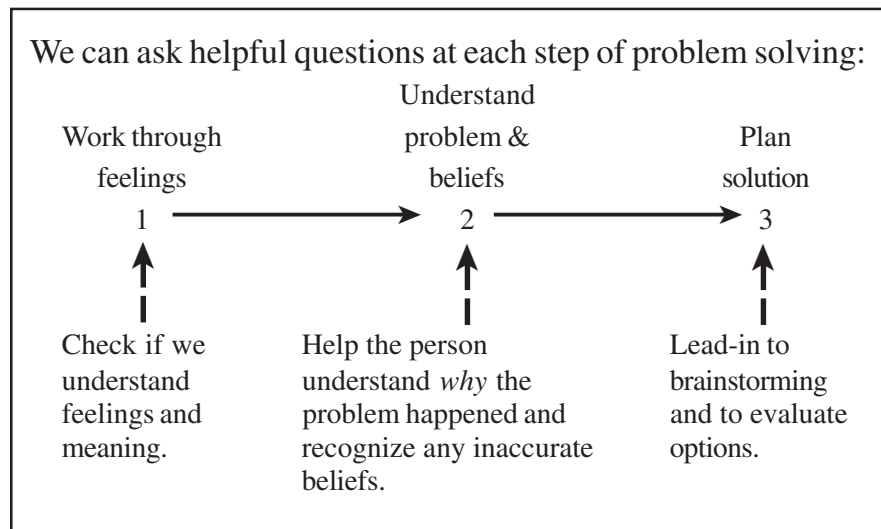
## WHEN TO USE THIS TOOLSET

We can ask helpful questions *if* we have first acknowledged feelings or if the questions clarify the other person's feelings, thoughts, or beliefs. Once people have worked through their feelings, we can also ask helpful questions to examine different perceptions of the problem or as a bridge to problem solving. *Only* move to problem solving when the person with the problem seems ready to think logically about solutions.



## STEP B2: ASK HELPFUL QUESTIONS

Helpful questions are a bridge between listening and problem solving, because they help us accomplish each goal of the 1-2-3 problem-solving process we learned in the last chapter. Helpful questions can help the listener and talker (person with the problem) clarify feelings and meanings, reveal inaccurate beliefs, and examine options—all without taking over the problem.



Asking questions at the listening step is the riskiest, because we may want to ask probing questions about facts. Questions at this step should only relate to feelings. Once people understand their feelings, they still might be confused, however, about *why* the problem happened. This shift to logical thinking is a sign to move to the next step. Here, we use questions to help people gain new insights by looking at the problem from different perspectives. Some questions are more helpful than others.

## Unhelpful Questions

Unhelpful questions usually have yes or no answers or shut down communication. We especially want to avoid questions that involve any of the following communication barriers.

- Questions that analyze, criticize, or judge, because people feel defensive. “Why do you feel that way?” “I don’t know!” “Why did you do that?” “Because I felt like it!”
- Asking too many questions, prying, or “giving the third degree,” because we usually get non-answers. “So, how did it go last night?” “Okay.” “Did you have a good time?” “Yeah.” “Where did you go?” “Around.” “What did you do?” “Nothing.”

Many parents have had these exchanges with their children (especially teens). Children use vague responses to protect their privacy, to avoid criticism, or when they simply don't feel like talking.

Some parents think they aren't being good parents if they *don't* ask their children questions. If their children don't come home and immediately spill out a long detailed story, parents often feel impatient and could make one of the following inaccurate assumptions:

- “If I don't ask them, they'll never tell me what is going on in their lives.” This is not true. Usually people talk more when they can volunteer information and aren't *forced* to talk.
- “If I don't ask questions, they'll think I don't care.” If we listen, they'll know we care.
- “They must be hiding something.” Wanting privacy is different than covering up something bad.

***A Personal Story.*** *My son is a very private person. When he started attending school, I was naturally curious about what he was doing. If I asked him what he did in school, he'd say “Nothing” and “I dunno.” I tried simply saying, “Hi! It's great to have you home. Did you have a good day?” If he didn't volunteer information, I'd drop the issue. But he still wasn't sharing much. Finally, I discovered several options that worked well.*

*I said, “I'm really curious about what you learn in school and how your teachers teach things. I know you don't always feel like talking right after school. I can understand that. Will you tell me more about school at bedtime?” He said “Yes” and sometimes did, but sometimes weeks would go by and he had not told me a thing.*

*One day, I said, “There are times when I am so curious about your day that I have a hard time waiting until you feel like talking. Can we make a deal for those days? If I hold up three fingers will you tell me three things you did that day if I promise not to ask any more questions?” He agreed. The first time, he said, “I rode the bus, ate lunch, and had recess.” When I asked what happened during those activities, he said, “The same thing that happens every day, nothing new.” So I amended the agreement. Now three fingers meant “any three things besides lunch or recess and one specific thing about each.” I kept my agreement not to use the three-finger signal very often and he told me more specific information. I still didn't get information every day, but it was a great improvement. By junior high, he readily shared specific information about school **and** his social life. He knew I wouldn't overreact or judge his friends. Occasionally, I had concerns, but I asked questions that didn't put him on the defensive and helped him consider my concerns, without giving him a lecture.*

## Helpful Questions

Helpful questions invite more feelings or information. People can't simply answer yes or no. “What” and “how” questions develop thinking and judgment skills. “Why” questions are *only* appropriate if they are totally void of judgment and express a sincere desire to understand the child. Here are some examples of helpful questions:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| ▶ “You look ( <u>feeling</u> ). What happened?” | ▶ “What do you think caused that to happen?” |
| ▶ “How did you feel?”                           | ▶ “What did you think at the time?”          |
| ▶ “Could you give me an example of . . . ?”     | ▶ “What did you learn from that?”            |
| ▶ “What do you mean when you say . . . ?”       | ▶ “Is there anything else bothering you?”    |

We must have a respectful tone of voice that says “I really want to know” or “I'm not angry” when we ask these questions. If our tone of voice is intimidating or disrespectful *at all*, it doesn't matter what words we use—people will close their emotional doors.

## Give Information

While clarifying the problem and understanding *why* it happened, offering information or pearls of wisdom can be helpful, *if* we avoid lecturing or shifting the focus to us. When we give information, timing is everything. We want to wait until people have had a chance to share their feelings. If they seem confused or ask “Why?” we know they are open to the information. Our purpose in sharing information is not to play the one-upmanship game, “Well I went through something even worse than that!” Our purpose is to express empathy and understanding, “I’ve been there. This is what I did and what I learned from my decision (positive or negative).” **Keep it brief** and quickly shift the focus back to them, “Is that how you feel? What do *you* think you might do?”

We can also give information that explains other people’s behavior. Use general words to describe people’s behavior, rather than the person’s name, which could sound like we are taking sides or judging the person. For example, instead of saying “(Sister’s name) is too young to know how to share,” explain, “Two-year-olds still don’t know how to share. Your sister’s learning, but it might take her awhile to share as well as you do.” Remember to keep it brief—these are small pearls of wisdom, not giant rocks. Just plant the seed of an idea, don’t try to grow the whole plant at once. Here are examples of common behaviors children might not understand and how to explain them.

- ▶ *Bullies*: “Sometimes people are mean because they don’t know how to use words when they are angry.” “Some people try to get what they want by being mean or feel important if other people are scared of them.”
- ▶ *Cliques*: “Some people need to be part of a group before they believe others like them.” “Some groups make others feel left out so they can feel that their group is special and important.”

## Keep the Ball in the Other Person’s Court

It is difficult to “keep the ball in the other person’s court” when we have a concern, opinion, or idea we want to share. If we don’t, it can easily turn into a lecture or sound like advice. It’s also difficult, but important, to hold children accountable for their problems even when *they* aren’t taking responsibility for them. The most skillful way to use helpful questions is to walk people through the logical thought process that leads them to our point, without actually telling them what to do. Our questions help them realize and choose, *on their own*, to do what we would have told them to do. Because they think of the idea on their own, they act on it. If we told them to do it, we could easily get into a power struggle.

*A Graduate’s Story.* It was time for Robert, (age 11) to get ready for a softball game but he was still watching TV. In the past I’d remind him and try to motivate him, but he usually says I’m nagging, argues, and we get into a power struggle. I wanted to help him realize **on his own** what he needed to do.

Mom: What time is it?

Robert: I dunno. About five, I guess.

Mom: What do you have going on tonight?

Robert: Umm. Oh yeah, my softball game.

Mom: What time is your game? (I already knew the answer.)

Robert: Six o’clock.

Mom: When do **you** plan to get ready?

Robert: After this show.

Mom: (I knew that wasn’t enough time.) Will that give you enough time to eat?

Robert: (He thought.) No, I guess not. I’ll just skip dinner.

Mom: (I wasn’t crazy about that solution.) Will you have enough energy to last all seven innings?

*Robert: Probably not. I guess I'd better start getting ready now.  
Relieved inside, I pleasantly said, "Good idea." I knew he could figure it out himself; he just needed a little guidance without pushing.*

Here, the mother had to say more sentences than if she were reminding and nagging her son, but she knew that approach didn't work and was tired of him depending on *her* to remind him of *his* responsibilities. She wisely spent her time and energy using open-ended questions to lead her son through the logic that helped him realize her point. Because he decided *on his own*, it made more of an impression than her lectures, which he would have tuned out and resisted. It also gave him experience in remembering a commitment, which will help him in the future.

## Build a Bridge to Problem Solving

There are times when both parties understand *what* happened and *why*, but the remaining issue is *how* the person can resolve the problem. When we reach this phase and are still trying to use reflective listening statements or clarifying questions, we often feel like we've reached a block. At this point, we want to ask one of the following questions that lead to problem solving:

- ▶ "Would you like to think of some ideas for dealing with that problem?"
- ▶ "So what do you think you can do about this?"



### STEP B3: X-AMINE POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

If people seem ready to discuss solutions or start offering ideas on their own, begin the five-step problem-solving process:

- a. Brainstorm ideas.
- b. Evaluate each idea.
- c. Choose a solution.
- d. Make a plan.
- e. Commit to a trial period.

In the Child Problem Toolbox, we learn one-on-one problem solving, when another person has a problem that doesn't directly affect us. Later, in the sibling section, we learn how to use this process to mediate conflicts between children, siblings or peers. In the Parent Problem Toolbox, we add a few steps to account for our part of the problem. In the Family Council Toolset, we use problem solving to resolve conflicts and make decisions that affect the entire family.

**Problem-solving sessions include the people the problem affects and those people must all agree on a solution.**

Let's learn the general steps, then we'll apply them to several types of Child problems.

#### a. Brainstorm Ideas

Once we ask a bridging question to start problem solving, we allow others to suggest as many ideas as they can think of. Ask, "What else?" until they can't think of any more ideas. Remember these important points when brainstorming.

**All ideas are okay.** During brainstorming, don't evaluate or judge ideas. Allow *all* ideas, even if they sound bad, silly, or stupid. There are several important reasons to do this.

- Ideas get the creative juices flowing.
- People are rarely serious about acting on irrational ideas, but the fantasy is a final way to vent.
- If we criticize or judge people’s suggestions, they are less likely to offer more suggestions. These other suggestions are usually the better ideas.
- A bad idea can contain the seed of a good idea. If we allow all ideas, we might see (at the next step) that there is some value in an idea that we were first tempted to throw out.

**Write down the ideas whenever possible.** Older children can write down the ideas themselves. Writing down ideas serves several important purposes:

- Children feel their contributions are important when someone takes the time to actually write them down. It encourages them to share more ideas.
- It is easier to *look* at all the options, instead of trying to remember them.
- Children learn a valuable tool for sorting through their feelings, thoughts, and ideas.

**Get as many ideas from the other person as possible.** Keep *your* suggestions to a minimum so children don’t always depend on you to solve their problems. If children cannot generate ideas (they may not have much practice thinking for themselves) allow a few seconds of silence before offering your ideas. Present your idea as a suggestion, not advice. For example, “Could you . . . ?” “What about . . . ?” “Have you considered . . . ?”

**Whenever you are tempted to give an idea, turn your statement into a question that will help the other person think of your idea.**

## b. Evaluate Each Idea

For each idea, ask “What would happen if you (whatever the idea is)?” Help children consider the possible effects of inappropriate or unhelpful ideas, which also teaches children to think before they act. We need to be careful giving *our* opinion of *their* ideas—we don’t want to label the ideas *good* or *bad*. Instead, we want to acknowledge their feelings and ask questions that help them consider the possible effects. For example, “You are so angry with him, I can see how it might feel good to bop him in the nose! But what do you think would happen if you did that?” If you get no response, “Do you think it would help the problem or make him more angry?” A question can lead people to the points we want them to consider if we offer clues in the question. For example, “If you hit him, would you be doing the same thing he did to you? If it was wrong for him to do that, is it wrong for you to do it?” Judgments, lectures and preaching close the door on communication. If children figure out the answers themselves, they are more likely to use the information to avoid or resolve problems in the future.

## c. Choose a Solution

After evaluating the ideas and eliminating some, look at the ideas that remain. Ask, “Which idea do you think is your best option?” We want to be careful not to push *our* favorite idea. The person (or people) affected by the problem needs to choose or agree to the solution. Take a broad view on choosing solutions—there are always choices; even doing nothing is an option! Even if their choice doesn’t seem best, the insight children gain from the experience teaches them important lessons.



## d. Make a Plan

Discuss the specifics of their solution, asking who, when, where, and how questions. Ask them what they plan to say and how they can say it. Teach children effective communication skills. Role playing the solution is helpful to teach effective body language. Ask, "What's the worst that could happen," then plan for it. If they know how to handle the worst, anything less is manageable, too.

## e. Commit to a Trial Period

Once children have a plan, get a commitment from them to try it for a specific time period. This leaves the door open to discuss unsuccessful attempts to use the plan. We want children to learn that no single solution is the *only* possible way to solve a problem. They can always adjust their plan later, once they see where the flaws are. Children are more likely to try solutions if they know there are other ideas to try later.

***A Personal Story.** As a creative problem-solving coach (which I described in Chapter 6, Independence Toolset), I cannot offer **any** suggestions or advice that might directly affect my team's decision. I **must** rely on questions to guide and support them through the problem-solving process.*

*There are many times we spend the entire practice time solving **one** problem. Do I get tired and frustrated? Yes. Do I get a headache? Yes. Am I excited when the children solve a problem on their own? Yes. Is it worth the time and effort? Yes! Even if they don't make perfect props or make mistakes along the way, it is okay. The only thing that counts is that they do **everything** on their own—and learn first-hand lessons in the process. Since I've been a coach, I notice I wait longer before offering suggestions to my own children and ask more questions to help them plan their own solutions.*

## WHEN TO MOVE FROM STEP TO STEP

When we are unsure when to move from one F-A-X step to the next, we simply look at the clues the speaker gives us. We can ask ourselves certain questions at each step.

**Step B1. Focus on feelings.** Is the person still expressing *emotion*?

- If the answer is "yes," continue using warmth, empathy, and listening skills.
- If the answer is "no," move onto the next step.

**Step B2. Ask clarifying questions.** Is the person talking about *facts, thoughts or beliefs*? Is the person confused about what happened or why it happened? Are the perceptions inaccurate or unhealthy?

- If the answer is "yes," use open-ended or leading questions and give information.
- If the answer is "no," move to the next step.

**Step B3. X-amine possible options.** Is the person talking about *solutions or ideas*? Is the person considering unhealthy goals or options?

- If the answer is "yes," do problem solving to set healthy goals and get commitments.
- If the answer is "no," you may need to return to a previous step if the person is still emotional or talking about feelings (B1) or is expressing beliefs or confusion (B2).

While we generally follow the F-A-X, 1-2-3 steps in order, we might shift between the skills to respond to people's comments. For example, if we are discussing options and people share feelings, we temporarily shift to our listening skills (B1) to show we understand what they said. Then we can ask a helpful question (B2) to help them resolve the feeling or reconsider their options (B3). Remember the Universal Blueprint's rule: At whatever step we are on, we can always use tools from previous steps.



**A Personal Story.** Several weeks after Chris started junior high, he came home upset.

Chris: I failed my reading test today.

Me: (with surprise) You did?

Chris: We were just starting to take a test and the kid next to me said something to me. I told him to be quiet. The teacher heard me and gave us both an automatic F.

Me: Did you explain you were telling him to be quiet?

Chris: It wouldn't matter, we just get in worse trouble if we say anything.

Me: Oh? (I paused, letting my mind process the situation.) I guess I can see why. Can you imagine if teachers listened to every child's reasons?

Chris: Yeah, we'd never get to the test.

Me: (with a smile) Can you imagine some of the excuses they'd hear? (He nodded.) So what did you learn?

Chris: Not to sit next to **that** kid again!

Me: (Since he suggested a solution, I moved to problem solving.) So what can you do the next time someone tries to talk to you? Can you just say *Shh*?

Chris: (Tears welled up in his eyes and he raised his voice.) That's what I did! I gave him a dirty look, did this (he put his finger to his lips) and said, "*Shh!*"

Me: (He was upset again, so I moved back to focusing on feelings.) I bet it was discouraging to get in trouble when you were trying to **avoid** getting in trouble! (He nodded. I went back to problem solving.) So if you can't even say "*Shh,*" what **can** you do?

Chris: (He thought before he answered.) Just ignore him, I guess.

Me: And not even look at him or make a sound, huh? (He agreed. I ended with a bit of encouragement.) Most of us have made the same mistake, but we usually only make it once—'cause it's a hard lesson to learn.

Chris: Yeah, really.

## VARIATIONS OF PROBLEM SOLVING

We can always use the F-A-X process to respond to Child problems. There are certain points we want to remember, however, when dealing with children of certain ages or certain types of Child problems. This section details some of these important points.

### Young Children

**Give young children time to think of ideas—don't rush them.** They haven't had much practice. If they can't think of any ideas, combine the brainstorming and evaluating steps by saying, "What would happen if you . . . ?" Start with one idea. Use an **abbreviated format** with young children by saying only one sentence at each step: "You didn't like it when Bryan took your truck. You wish he would ask you first, huh? What do you think you could do?" If they don't offer any ideas, continue, "Could you try saying, 'Bryan, ask me first'? Are you willing to try that?" (Teach young children the exact words to say, instead of giving vague suggestions like, "Use words.")

**With young children, writing ideas has advantages and disadvantages, depending on the child.** Most children like us to record their ideas. It's like writing a gift list and they become more involved. Young children with short attention spans might lose interest. Some children even get upset when we write their ideas (especially the irrational ones) because they think we are carving it in stone. They don't understand it is just *one* idea of many. Try writing ideas and see how children react. If we get a negative reaction, wait until they are a little older and try again. We don't want to give up the idea, though. There are tremendous benefits to teaching children this process. If they learn to write down their ideas, it will be a process they can use on their own in the future.

## Older Children

**The problem-solving process can move in spurts or extend over weeks.** Older children and internal problem solvers usually want to solve their problems on their own at their own pace. Give them space. If they share a problem, just acknowledge their feelings. They will probably feel better, disengage, and go within again. Just take the process at their pace.

**Avoid offering suggestions to teens.** They are usually quite capable of solving their own problems, if we give them some time and encouragement. If we have an idea or see a possible problem with an idea, we use helpful questions to help *them* realize the point on their own.

## Sibling/Peer Mediation

When more than one child is involved in a problem, our role is to be an objective middle-person, not a referee who takes sides. Our goal is to involve each child in the problem-solving process. We will explore sibling conflicts in greater depth later in this chapter. If you have an only child, that child still interacts with other children and may experience similar conflicts. As you read the sibling section, substitute the word *peer* wherever you see *sibling*.

## Problem Solving “On the Run”

We can use the abbreviated format of problem solving or mediation mentioned above in the “Young Children” section when conflicts involve any of the following factors:

- It is a minor problem.
- Children have short attention spans.
- The problem does not occur often.
- We don't have enough time to do thorough problem solving. (Don't use this factor as an excuse to *skip* problem solving, just postpone it.) Problem solving and mediation usually *save* us time in the future, because children learn how to work out problems on their own.

## USE A PROBLEM-SOLVING WORKSHEET

If you would like an outline to follow or a worksheet to write ideas on, use the “Problem-Solving Worksheet” on page 205. You can use it for Child problems, mediation between two people, C/P problems, or family councils. Here are directions for its use.

1. **Feelings and Perceptions.** Write the person's feelings and perception of the problem—almost exactly as the person states them. If it is a Child problem, write only the child's feelings. If you are mediating, write each person's feelings. If it is a C/P problem, write your feelings as “Person #2.”
2. **Summarize the problem.** Once we've listened to the description of the problem and the person's feelings, we want to sum up the problem in our words. Check the accuracy with the other person first, which will help identify the “core of the onion.”
3. **Options.** Write *all* the ideas that are mentioned during brainstorming.
4. **Comments (+ or -).** Evaluate the positive and negative points of each idea.
5. **Plan.** Decide the details of the plan. Role play or teach skills so the child can put the plan in action.
6. **Next time it happens.** If this is a Child problem, have the child select a backup plan. If the problem is a C/P problem or it affects the family, decide the consequence of breaking the agreement. (Chapter 13, “Discipline Toolset,” details specific possibilities.)
7. **Signed.** Signatures are optional, but are useful when mediating between two people or emphasizing an agreement between parent and child. Signatures are not proof of guilt or innocence if agreements are broken. They are tangible ways to emphasize agreements and commitments to try a plan.

## PROBLEM-SOLVING WORKSHEET

FEELINGS AND PERCEPTIONS:

PERSON #1: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

PERSON #2: (if it applies) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

SUMMARIZE THE PROBLEM: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**BRAINSTORM**

**EVALUATE**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

DECIDE: (Who, What, When, How, Other) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

NEXT TIME IT HAPPENS: Backup plans (or reveal discipline for Parent problems)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

SIGNED: \_\_\_\_\_  
(Person #1)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Person #2)

## COMMON CHILD PROBLEMS

This section describes the four most common Child problems that parents tend to take over: fears, sibling/peer conflicts, school issues, and parents' concerns about children's friends.

### Fears

When dealing with fears, it is particularly important to start where children are in the problem-solving process. They are usually stuck at the first step, being overwhelmed with feelings. Some fears are valid and helpful. For example, a fear of heights or mean dogs will cause people to be extra careful. When fears start to *control* people, they need to look at what's really going on and learn how to take control of their fears.

Children often have *imaginary* fears, "There's a gorilla in my closet!" Don't tell children their fears are silly or to simply stop feeling that way. To them, it is very real. You can notice and name the feeling without agreeing that the imaginary object exists. "It must be scary to think there's a gorilla in your closet." After naming the fear (B1), you can ask a helpful question (B2), "I'm going to turn on the light. Can you show me what looked like a gorilla and where you saw it?"

If children have a hard time talking about their fears, have them draw a picture or act out their fears with play characters. If they have fears that are caused by something that has really happened to them, they may benefit from seeing a therapist. Young children are best helped by play therapists, who help children express and work through their emotional issues through play.

When dealing with common fears, ask helpful questions, to reveal children's thoughts and beliefs. Give them factual information to explain anything they misunderstand. Tell children that they have control over their thoughts and feelings. Teach them how to talk themselves through their fears. Examine possible options that help children take control of the situation and calm their fears. If they practice and rehearse their response, they can use these skills to face their fears.

***A Personal Story.*** *Several years ago, I was helping my mother sort through old toys in her attic. We found my old Raggedy Ann doll, scorched and brown, which triggered my earliest memory, a childhood nightmare.*

*I was sleeping in my crib when an evil witch appeared in my room. She commanded me, "Say you hate your brother!" "No!" I said. She set a corner of my room on fire. She continued this pattern, "Say you hate your father . . . mother . . ." Each time, my fear intensified and I hesitated longer, but still said "No." Each time, she set another part of my room on fire. By now, the entire room was in flames and she was leaning over my crib, pointing her fire wand at me! She yelled, "Say you hate God!" I knew if I agreed to do this she would set me on fire and I would die. I hesitated, knowing I would be lying if I agreed, closed my eyes and prepared to die as I yelled, "NO!" She fired her wand, but only hit the Raggedy Ann doll I had in my arms. I woke up as the smoke cleared. I looked around my room and everything was exactly as it was before she had appeared—except my doll. My Raggedy Ann was truly scorched from head to toe. I was very upset, but was too young to tell my parents about the dream. By the time I was old enough to speak well, I had put the dream in the back of my mind.*

*When I found the doll in the attic, I told my mother (for the first time) about the nightmare. She had no logical explanation for the burns on the doll's body. Suddenly, this memory became a puzzle piece that finally explained my lifelong fear of sleeping alone. As a child, my parents used a pleasant, loving bedtime routine. Nevertheless, I hid under my blankets, slept with the door open, and kept a night light on. I slept on the floor with the dog, outside my parents' closed bedroom door, since this was the closest I could get to them at night. I'd sneak back into my own bed before they awoke. I slept with a doll until I was 12 and snuggled with pillows until I was married. Although my adult mind has rationalized that there is no reason to fear sleep, I still have many of these deeply ingrained habits. The memory of the nightmare helped this all make sense.*

*If you have goose bumps after reading this story, you can only imagine how freaked out I was as a young child. Take my word for it, children’s “imaginary” fears can be **very** real to **them**. If they can remember and tell us their fears, we can help children work through them. Fearful children need our reassurance and understanding, not pressure to “grow up” and to “stop being so childish.” They’ll only stop being afraid when they feel secure and more in control of their thoughts and feelings. We can best help them by using the F-A-X process.*

## Sibling Conflicts

### UNHELPFUL RESPONSES

The best way to increase sibling conflicts is to interfere in unhelpful ways. Some parenting advice says to let children work out problems by themselves. If children have never learned healthy conflict resolution skills, this approach can result in harmful, unfair resolutions. On the other hand, if parents always get involved in sibling conflicts, children get the payoff of our attention and don’t learn how to resolve conflicts independently. Here are some common unhelpful responses to avoid:

- **Telling children to stop fighting or arguing.** They might stop, but the conflict is unresolved. The resentment that’s left over crops up again, with the same issue or another.
- **Taking away the item they are fighting over\*.** The child who didn’t want to share “wins” because he doesn’t have to share and the other child resents this child for winning.
- **Sending them to their rooms\*.** Children don’t learn how to work out the problem because they are separated. In their rooms, they spend their time thinking about how to get revenge on each other or how unfair you are. One or both feel more discouraged and angry.
- **Punishing all the children, because one or two children are misbehaving or arguing.** This increases resentment between the siblings and toward the parent. Revenge is sure to follow.
- **Offering a solution and making them use it.** Children might go through the actions, but they didn’t learn how to find a solution on their own and follow through with the resolution process. If the suggestions don’t work, they can blame the parent. Use problem solving instead.
- **Finding out who started it.** This keeps parents going in circles for some time without resolving the core issue. If the parent is wrong, the parent’s solution will be unfair to someone. F-A-X listening reveals this information, without the negative side effects.
- **Taking one child’s side.** One child loses and resents the parent and sibling. When parents take the youngest child’s side, older children resent the parent and sibling. Youngest children learn they can get away with anything.
- **Voting or flipping a coin to decide the solution.** Whatever the outcome, there is a loser—and the loser may sulk about the solution or try to sabotage it. Use this option only if both parties agree to it and always acknowledge the loser’s feelings.

### HEALTHY PARENTING GOALS FOR SIBLINGS

Many parents want their children to love each other and be best friends. We can’t *make* children do either of these. What we *can* do is teach them how to get along with people who are different from them and live or work together peacefully. As children learn how to work through their differences respectfully, they usually have fewer sibling/peer conflicts and naturally develop feelings of friendship and love for other children. The healthy goals for parents of siblings are to help children learn how to do several things:

\*There are helpful variations of these responses—under certain circumstances and *if* they are presented in specific ways. As we detail sibling/peer conflicts, we learn these variations.

- Listen to each other's needs.
- Respect each other's differences.
- Learn ways to resolve differences respectfully, even if they never become close friends.

## WHEN TO INTERVENE

If we are unsure whether to step into a sibling conflict, we can ask ourselves the following questions:

- Is one child being emotionally or physically hurt?
- Is their problem disrupting the entire household?
- Does this problem keep coming up and they can't seem to resolve it?

## HOW TO INTERVENE

**Sibling and peer conflicts are always Child problems.** When the conflicts involve a SHARP RV issue, they are combination Child/Parent problems. In these C/P sibling conflicts, "keep the ball in their court" as much as possible. Only use the Parent Problem Toolbox to address the parent's part of the problem. Once you've interrupted the dangerous behavior, shift back to the Child Problem Toolbox to guide the children as they resolve their conflict.

1. ***Listen to each child's feelings and side of the conflict with respect.*** Repeat what you heard, to check out the accuracy. **We are not searching for the truth about the facts.** We may get two very different stories and could go in circles without resolving anything. Instead, we want to hear and acknowledge each person's feelings and perspective. "So you want \_\_\_\_ and you want \_\_\_\_." This alone might calm them down. If children are blaming or calling names, we can restate their feelings or opinions in more tactful ways. If children are still upset, keep reflecting feelings and asking helpful questions.
2. ***Summarize the problem in your own words.*** Show appreciation for the difficulty of the problem. Look through the surface issues to what is really going on. For example, the surface problem might be one toy and two kids. The *real* issues might be one child's ownership of the toy and the other child's boredom. *These* are the core issues you want to state and resolve.

**The next step depends on the children's ages and their skill at problem solving.**

- 3a. ***If children know effective conflict management skills,*** tell them you believe they can work out a fair, agreeable solution and leave the room.
  - *If they keep arguing,* say, "If you can't work it out, we will need to sit together and work out some agreements for what to do when this problem comes up again."
  - *If their solution always results in the same child giving in,* discuss this issue with each child individually. Teach the one who always gives in how to be more assertive. Ask the one who always wins to consider the positive feelings that come from win/win solutions and whether resentment and hurt feelings from losing may create more conflicts later.
- 3b. ***If children haven't mastered conflict management skills,*** mediate by saying, "So what do you two think you can do that is fair and respectful to both of you?" Continue mediating until they reach an agreement.

## Sibling/Peer Mediation

**When conflicts continue or the same issue keeps coming up,** take the time to guide the children through a more thorough problem-solving session, using the Problem-Solving Worksheet. Mediation applies each step of the F-A-X process, back-and-forth, to the two parties. We can use this process with *any* two people: siblings, children and their friends or two adults.



1. **Set a time to discuss the problem.** Allow a cooling-off period first, if children are too upset to calmly discuss the problem. Before you start, set some ground rules, such as no interrupting or name-calling. Tell the children that they *both* will have an equal chance to be heard and respond to what the other child says.
2. **Allow each child a turn to share his or her feelings and side of the conflict.** Write each child's feelings and concerns on the worksheet, then *read them* aloud to make sure they are accurate. Allow differences of perceptions and opinions.
3. **Let each child respond to the other child's comments.** At this step, they can add new information or state their disagreement. Be careful not to get sidetracked with debates about who did what. Quickly move to the next step.
4. **Summarize the problem in your own words,** trying to focus on the *real* issues of the conflict.
5. **Brainstorm solutions.** Write down all ideas. Do not evaluate the ideas, yet. Don't label the idea as "his" or "hers." *Once an idea is suggested, it doesn't belong to anyone.* It is simply *one* idea. This prevents hurt feelings if the idea is rejected or someone says "See, I was right!"
6. **Evaluate the ideas,** asking each child's input on a particular idea. As they evaluate the ideas, get specific details for how that plan would actually work.
7. **Decide on the solutions everyone can live with.** If discipline is necessary, wait to discuss those options at this step. There are several problems if you discipline earlier:
  - Children think we don't respect their feelings or understand their perspective.
  - Children misinterpret the discipline as punishment, because it seems like a reaction, not a planned response.
  - The parent has taken over the problem.
  - One or both children will resent you *and* the other sibling for getting them in trouble.
8. **Encourage them to try the solution for a trial period.**
9. **Follow-up** later or remind them of their agreement if the problem comes up again. Ask if the agreement is working. Let them know you will *mediate*, but *they* are responsible for solving *their own* problems. Encourage them to try resolving problems on their own, *before* bringing them to you.

It may seem like the mediation process has too many steps, but each step teaches important skills and has specific benefits. As we mediate more often, the process flows more quickly and smoothly and children come up with more ideas. As we see their skills increasing, we can stay more on the fringes of their conflicts. We need to be patient as they move from where they are now to being independent problem-solvers. After awhile, we can streamline the process for younger children, more skilled children, or when we need to solve problems on-the-run. Our ultimate goal is to say "I have confidence the two of you can work this out," believe it, and walk away. When children know we will not take sides and referee fights, but put the responsibility back in their court, they are less likely to use us in inappropriate ways.

## COMMON SIBLING ISSUES

Many parenting resources offer helpful suggestions for dealing with sibling conflicts. Few actually tell parents specifically *what* to say, because there are so many issues siblings fight over. While the following suggestions still might not cover every possible sibling issue, we can apply these basic suggestions in similar situations.

## Personal Space

Most of the time, *my children's sibling conflicts* boil down to this issue, but rarely do they realize this is the core of their problem. I will use a problem-solving session with my children to show how sibling mediation actually sounds as the discussion flows through the nine steps.

1. Set a time to discuss the problem.

*My kids had been arguing more than usual. When this fight occurred, it was more aggressive and hurtful and I could no longer ignore it. Both children were so angry they couldn't think, speak, or listen. I told them both to go somewhere alone to calm down and meet me in the living room when they were ready to resolve the problem. Amber, four, was ready within several minutes and sat with me in the living room. We waited for Chris, who was eight, and took much longer to calm down. When I heard him playing, I said that if he was calm enough to play in his room, he was ready to join us.*

*Me: The two of you have been fighting a lot more lately and it seems you can't work things out on your own. I want you both to have a chance to explain what is going on and see if you two can agree on a solution.*

2. Allow each child a turn to share his or her feelings and side of the conflict.

*Me: I can tell you are both very angry. Amber, can you tell me your side of what happened.*

*Amber: Chris pushed me . . .*

*Chris: (interrupting) No I didn't! (I realized I had neglected to set the ground rules.)*

*Me: Chris, you'll get a chance to tell me your side next. Let Amber finish and you'll have a chance to say whatever you want, too.*

*Amber: . . . and he called me a baby.*

*Me: (I wrote all this down.) Anything else? (Amber shook her head, "No." I turned to Chris.) Okay. Chris? What about you?*

*Chris: I did push her, but only after she tried to grab the remote control while I was watching TV. I only called her a baby because she made me mad. (I asked him, "What else bothers you?") She bites me and doesn't stop when I tell her to. She calls me names, sticks her tongue out, screams in my face, and goes in my room without permission. (I quickly wrote each complaint as he spoke.)*

3. Allow each child to respond to the other child's comments.

*Me: Amber is there anything you want to say about what Chris said?*

*Amber: Yeah, I want to play with him but he pushes me away! (She got teary-eyed again.)*

*Chris: I don't mind playing sometimes. It's just that she mostly bothers me when I first come home from school.*

*Me: Okay. (I wrote down their comments.)*

4. Summarize the problem in your own words, trying to focus on the *real* issue of the conflict.

*Me: So Chris, it sounds like you want to be left alone and have Amber respect your privacy. And Amber, you want to play with Chris. When he won't, it hurts your feelings and you want to hurt him back. Does that sound right to both of you?*

*Both: Yeah.*

*Me: Amber, do you miss Chris when he's gone at school all day? (She nodded her head.) Are you happy to have him home to play with? (She again nodded and I turned to Chris.) And Chris, do you want to be alone for a while when you get home?*

*Chris: (insistently) Yes!*

## 5. Brainstorm solutions to their problem.

*Me:* So, what can you two do when Amber wants to play but Chris wants privacy?

*Amber:* We could make a deal!

*Me:* What kind of deal?

*Chris:* When we feel like hurting we could use **words!** (He looked at Amber as he stressed this last word.)

*Me:* (I didn't want them to start blaming again, so I refocused on solutions.) What else?

*Chris:* I could go to my room and close my door.

*Me:* Okay. I'll add that and "walk away." (I wrote down their ideas.)

## 6. Evaluate ideas.

*Me:* (Reading back their list of ideas.) Okay I have "make a deal, when you feel like hurting use words, go to room, or walk away." How do you both feel about those ideas? (They nodded their heads in agreement. Since they agreed with all the ideas, I confirmed each child's willingness to abide by the solutions.) Amber, if you want to play, are you willing to use words to ask Chris? (She said, "Yes.") And, Chris, if you want to be alone, will you use words to tell her you want privacy?

*Chris:* I do use words, but she won't listen!

*Me:* (I moved back to exploring alternatives.) So what can you do if words don't work?

*Chris:* (in a questioning voice) Walk away and go to my room?

*Me:* That's right, and Amber, when Chris wants to be alone, what can you do?

*Amber:* (in an "I know" tone of voice) Go play somewhere else.

*Me:* (Knowing Chris could play in his room all day just to be alone, I thought we'd better have some time limits on this idea.) Amber, how much time would you be willing to give Chris to be alone when he comes home? (She shrugged her shoulders, "I don't know.") Chris, knowing that Amber has been home alone all day long, what's the smallest amount of time you need to be alone before you would be willing to play?

*Chris:* An hour?

*Me:* I think a four-year-old would have a hard time waiting an hour. If you played with her for a bit, she might be more willing to leave you alone. Would you be willing to settle for 15 minutes, play for a while, then ask for more time alone?

*Chris:* I guess.

## 7. Decide on the solutions you can all live with.

*We seemed to have a plan, all we needed was a final summary of their decision.*

*Me:* So Amber, are you willing to give Chris 15 minutes alone when he first comes home and find something else to do?

*Amber:* Yeah, but what will I do?

*Me:* I'd be willing to help you make a list when we are done here, okay? (She agreed.) And Chris, will you play with Amber if she leaves you alone for a while when you first come home? (He agreed.) Are you **both** willing to make a deal that when you feel angry and like hurting each other you will use words or walk away? (They agreed in unison.)

## 8. Encourage them to try the solution for a trial period.

*Me:* Okay, you have a deal. Try your plan. If there is a problem later, we can always sit and work things out some more. Okay? (Both agreed.) Are you willing to shake on your deal or sign the agreement I wrote here on my notes? (They chose to do both.)

9. Follow-up later or remind them of their agreement if the problem comes up again. *After this session, I only needed to remind them about their agreement a few times. I explained recharge styles to Amber (which we learn in Chapter 9, Keep Your Cool Toolset) and her activity list helped her stay busy when Chris needed privacy.*

## Property Disputes and Sharing

When we resolve fights over property, someone usually loses. If the property owners win, they are less likely to share because they know they don't have to. If we force them to share, they resent the other child and the parent. They are less likely to share because it is something the parent is *making* them do. There are some universal rules about property disputes.

In the following examples, notice how the parent's responses teach values or suggest options without taking over.

- **Personal property:** The owner has the right to decide whether to share. Others must ask first. Back up the owner's decision and teach others to ask first. Acknowledge the nonowner's disappointment if the owner chooses not to share the item and redirect them to another activity.

*A Personal Story.* Amber, age 3, took her water toys to the baby pool. I knew if she saw another child playing with her toys, she would think the child was taking her toy home and get very upset. When children asked permission first, she almost always said "Yes." I saw a little boy playing with one of her toys and said, "That toy belongs to the little redheaded girl over there. I bet if you ask her, she'll say you can play with it for a while." He asked her and she said "Yes." This suggestion usually prevents an unnecessary conflict and teaches other children to ask before using others' belongings. No parent has ever gotten upset with me when I say this to their child. I am polite, respectful, and encouraging to both children.

- **Community property:** Whoever has possession first has the right to decide whether to share. Others must ask for a turn instead of grabbing the item. State this rule without actually taking sides, "Janet had it first, so she can decide whether to share it now or tell you when she will give you a turn to play with it." By offering these two choices, we make it clear that "hogging it" is not one of the options.

In either case, suggest that sharing would be the respectful and kind action, but don't force the decision.

### Steps in responding to property disputes:

1. **Acknowledge both children's feelings.** "You don't want to share it because (it's special to you or you had it first) and you really want to borrow it because \_\_\_\_\_."
2. **State the rule about property rights.** You can support one side, but leave final decision up to the children. "Well it's your (item) and your decision, but if you want to work something out with your brother/sister, I'm sure it would mean a lot to him/her."
3. **Put the ball in their court and see what happens.** It could go in a dozen different directions, depending on the children, who we'll call Jan and John:
  - a. *The property owner chooses not to share.* To the child who wants to borrow, we can say, "I know you're disappointed and upset. Maybe next time she'll decide differently. John, have you ever had a toy first and Jan wanted to play with it, but you didn't want to share it?"

Remember that young children have difficulty considering another person's feelings. They can't imagine being in that person's shoes or simply don't care. Don't say "How do you think Jan feels when . . ." Instead, describe the problem and put them in the owner's position. "Can you remember a time when . . . ?" "I remember when \_\_\_\_ happened to you."

- b. *The other child asks nicely, but the child with possession still doesn't share.* To the child who asked nicely, we can say, "You asked very politely. I guess right now Jan is not ready to share. It can be disappointing to try to be nice and still not have things work out your way."

Often, by simply validating the owner or possessor's rights and not forcing them to share, they change their minds and decide to share. If they don't change their minds and it's personal property, ask John, "Can you think of something else you can play with in the meantime?" If it's community property, say, "John, can you ask Jan *when* you can have a turn?" While redirecting John to another activity, say, "I'm sure Jan won't be playing with it all day. Why don't you wait awhile and see if she puts it down. Then you can have a turn and it will be your turn to decide if you want to show Jan how good it feels to share."

- c. *The child is not using the item but doesn't want anyone to play with it either.* If it's personal property, ask the owner, "If you don't want to share it, where could you keep it so John can't see it?" If it's community property, acknowledge each child's feelings, negotiate agreements for the item's use, and teach children how to negotiate, ask to share, and take turns.
- d. *The property owner says "I'm afraid he's going to break it!"* We can say to the property owner, "Would you be willing to let him use it if he promises to take good care of it or replaces it if it breaks?" If the borrower has a record of breaking borrowed items, be careful not to reinforce a negative label. This might be an opportunity for the borrower to show he can be more careful this time. Don't force the other child to share. Explain to the borrower that her unwillingness is the natural effect of having her property broken. "Maybe you can show her how well you take care of *your* belongings so she might decide differently another time."
- e. *Tug-of-wars and broken property:* Don't fall into the referee trap, trying to figure out who is doing the most grabbing or who should get their way. If one child damages the item, that child is responsible for fixing or replacing it. If the property owner cries or is aggressive because the toy is broken, acknowledge the owner's feelings and give the child some space. Sit with each child and work through feelings individually before coming together in joint mediation. To the one whose toy was broken, say "You have a right to be upset. You trusted your brother to take care of your toy." To the one who broke it, say "I know you feel bad and surprised that it actually broke! What do you think you two could have done instead of tugging? (Pause.) What needs to happen now?" If the "breaker" is defensive and blames the owner, "It's not my fault because she \_\_\_\_\_," you can ask "Does that make it okay to break the toy?"

Say this last statement as a question. Lecturing, "Well that doesn't make it okay to . . ." makes them feel worse. Ask other questions, waiting for a response to each: "So when you're hurt one day, is it okay to hurt him the next? How does that help? Do you think now that he's mad at you he might do something to one of your toys later? So when does all this end?" Take them by steps through the logic so they can see the answer on their own and choose more helpful responses.

If we can't tell who broke the item, the bottom line is, "The \_\_\_\_\_ got (broken, ripped) because two people were fighting over it instead of using words. One person lost a \_\_\_\_\_ and the other person lost a chance to use it. What can you do next time to prevent this from happening?" Use children's poor decisions to help them learn how to make better decisions in the future.

**Ownership issues are greatly affected by developmental stages.** Children who are three and younger won't understand ownership, sharing, and taking turns very well or follow-through consistently. We need to repeat ourselves often and consistently. We can help them move through these difficult stages by carefully choosing the messages we're sending and skills we're teaching. As they logically understand the concepts, they will master the skills. By age four, children better understand sharing.



**Beyond age, however, skills have a greater impact on property disputes.** We could have a 15-year-old who has no respect for property owners' rights and a 3-year-old who is verbal enough to ask permission. It depends on their life experience and what they have been taught. When we intervene, we want to teach these skills, so we can eventually get to the point of saying, "Gee, I bet if you two put your heads together you can come up with a plan that is respectful and fair to both of you"—and they will!

## Territory

Territory issues involve people's physical space and their right to have others respect it. Handle these issues using the same steps described for property disputes and personal space.

**If children share a room,** it can be particularly difficult to reach agreements that are respectful to both children. It is important to make sure each child has some personal space in the room—an area that belongs only to that child to have some privacy or personal space. Allow them to decorate or use this personal territory as they choose, as long as their choices don't interfere with others' rights or personal space. Let each child choose another location, besides the room they share, where they can go if they want privacy or space. Then encourage others to respect the child's need to be alone when he or she is in that space. Crowded quarters are never ideal; just try to work out the best possible solution.

## Tattling

**There is a difference between *tattling* and *telling*:**

- Children *tattle* when they are trying to get another child in trouble or to get unnecessary attention from the parent.
- Children *tell* an adult when another child is doing something that is dangerous or someone is hurt and an adult needs to know.

Tattling can destroy sibling and parent/child relationships, so parents need to decide if learning the truth is important enough to undermine the siblings' loyalty to each other. Make it clear that children can bring complaints to you but you will not take sides. We never know if the version we hear is accurate and could make an unfair decision. Also, don't play the "who did it" game. What *is* important is that the two of them resolve it respectfully. You can say, "I don't listen to tattling" or "I can see you're (feeling) about (event). What do you think *you* can do about it?" Don't bite the bait—put the ball back in the child's court.

*A Graduate's Story.* We were late for the bus and I ran into the house to get something while the kids waited at the curb. When I came out, T.J. said, "Mommy, Tony stepped on my foot!" I said, "Gosh! I bet that hurt!" He said, "Yeah," with a shocked look on his face, because he's not used to my acknowledging his feelings. I said "I hope you have a better day at school!" He looked back at me like I was an alien mother and then called out, "Love you mom!" I was shocked! He rarely says this, 'cause it's not cool anymore. That's when I realized that sometimes just acknowledging their feelings is enough and I don't have to go any further trying to solve the problem **for** them.

## Bickering

***Bickering* is when people argue about petty issues and no physical or emotional harm is occurring. These disagreements can serve the positive purpose of practicing conflict-resolution skills.**



Anyone in a relationship, living in the same space, will have petty arguments now and then. We've all had this experience with a spouse or friend. To us, children's issues seem petty because they are issues we've grown out of, but to our children, these issues are very important. They have not yet resolved the issue nor learned and refined their verbal negotiation skills. Their bickering doesn't always sound like negotiation, just a round robin disagreement. As long as no one is getting physically or emotionally hurt, allow them time to work things out on their own.

If one sibling responds respectfully and assertively and the other doesn't, use descriptive encouragement to notice the child using respectful words. Restate your expectation that family members treat each other with respect. Offer the other child the choice of acting respectfully or leaving. If you are in the car, the respectful child can move to the front seat. Don't move the disrespectful child to this honorary position. If changing seats is not an option, the child can remain silent rather than move. It's like the old saying, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all."

**If we do get involved, we want to mediate in a way that teaches children the basics of respectful communication** (the universal PASRR formula and problem-solving steps): Listen to the other person's feelings and opinions before you offer yours. State your feelings and opinions respectfully. Brainstorm ideas for what you can each do differently. Make an agreement for how you will both handle the situation in the future.

**When we are not available to mediate, children need to know the following nonviolent options for resolving conflicts with siblings or peers:**

- ignore the comment
- walk away
- do something else
- apologize
- tell them to stop
- count to ten
- talk it over respectfully
- agree on a win/win compromise
- try again
- listen to the other person
- make an agreement for handling the situation in the future.
- ask for help from a mediator

## Teasing/Taunting

***Teasing is meanspirited and hurtful. It often involves put-downs or name-calling.***

To tell the difference between bickering and teasing, ask yourself, "Are they dealing with the issue or just being hurtful?" Comment if they start calling each other names or are disrespectful. We can do this with one sentence, "I hear name-calling" or "Use respectful words." They know we are listening but often appreciate the fact that we didn't take over or lecture.

If children are being teased by a sibling or peer, acknowledge their hurt feelings. It helps to explain the teaser's motive. There are several reasons children tease:

- Children make rhymes at another's expense, as in "Billy, Billy, so Silly."
- Children find something different about a child and use teasing to establish their membership in a peer group. "You don't have brown eyes, so you can't play with us."
- Children tease just to see if they can get a rise out of the victim.
- Children put others down to make themselves feel more important.

Sometimes there is a reason the child is being teased. If the child has a loud voice and is very talkative, they might invite the name "Big Mouth." If children have a personality trait that might offend others, be cautious pointing it out. Describe the behavior in general terms. "When someone interrupts others, people can get angry and not want to be around that person. Do you think there are ever times you might do this?" We might know the child does this, but we want to word the statement carefully so the

child doesn't feel like we are joining the crowd. If children aren't doing anything to bring on the teasing, they can use one of the ideas in the list of nonviolent options in the bickering section or the bully/victim section below.

## Roughhousing

***Roughhousing is when both children want to play rough and no one is getting hurt. It is different from real fighting.***

1. Teach children the difference between roughhousing and real fighting.
2. Have children agree on a code word like "Ouch" "Stop" "Uncle" or "Pickles" that means, "I'm not having fun anymore" or "I'm getting hurt." Both children must agree to stop if either child says the code word. If one or both children still need to get out their energy, brainstorm less hurtful ways.
3. If you are unsure whether they are really fighting, ask, "Are you both having fun?" or "Are you playing or fighting?" To roughhouse, both children must agree to play fair and safe.
4. Use environmental engineering (Chapter 11, "PU Toolset"). Let them wrestle on a mattress or pull cushions off an old couch so they can roughhouse without anyone getting hurt.

## Physical Fights

If the situation is dangerous, physically intervene. Dive into the action, block blows with your body or hands, stand between them, or place a hand on their arms. Take these actions *while* you say the following statements.

1. **A**cknowledge feelings. "I can tell both of you are really angry . . ."
2. **S**et limits. ". . . but fighting hurts feelings and bodies." Teach them the proper words if they don't have good verbal skills.
3. If this de-escalates the situation, continue mediating. If the situation is still hot, everyone (including you) separates for a cooling off period (see Chapter 9, "Keep Your Cool Toolset" and self-control timeouts in Chapter 13, "Discipline Toolset"). Make it clear that whenever conflicts come to the point of separation, mediation is automatic. During the cooling-off period, review your plan (see the Problem-Solving Worksheet on page 205).

## Bullies and Victims

The most common roles that children adopt, especially siblings, are the bully and victim roles. When bullying starts, try this time-tested (and parent-tested) process<sup>2</sup>:

1. **Avoid giving bullies extra attention, which gives them a payoff for their aggression.** When bullies are scolded, labeled, and punished, it proves to them that they really are mean people and deserve to suffer. Discouraged and angry, they get revenge on their favorite victim for getting them in trouble. (Bullies usually don't accept personal responsibility for their actions, they justify them with excuses. "She made me . . .") Don't confuse an unwillingness to give *immediate* attention with ignoring the bully's behavior. We *will* make it clear, as we move through the steps, that bullying is unacceptable, *without* giving the bully a payoff.
2. **Tend to the injured victim first.** This shows that meanness does not get attention. Be careful not to overreact to victims, coddling or rescuing them. Just tend to their needs and acknowledge their hurt. As we talk to the child who was hurt say, "Ow! That really hurt, didn't it? People are not

for hitting! Your brother (or sister) needs to use words to get what he wants, even when he's angry." The bully hears this statement, although we don't say it directly to the bully, which would give the bully extra attention.

3. **When we shift the focus back to the bully,** we say, "I can tell you are really angry. Hitting hurts and there are ways to tell your brother (or sister) how angry you are without hurting him (or her). You can say (give the exact words to say, if you know what the conflict was about). Your brother (or sister) is hurt. What can you do to help him (or her) feel better?" *Do not* force children to say they're sorry. "Sorry" is a word that people can say insincerely to erase their responsibility and guilt. Instead, encourage children to *show* they're sorry by taking responsibility for any harm they caused. They can get ice, look at the wound, say they're sorry, or do nothing—and live with whatever self-imposed guilt they might have.
4. **Later, talk with the bully.** Teach anger management skills (from Chapter 9, "Keep Your Cool Toolset") and use problem solving to brainstorm other options for resolving conflict.
5. **Also, problem-solve with the victim.** We often reinforce victim roles by rescuing them, reinforcing their belief that they can't handle their own problems. We confront the bully on the victims' behalf, which tells bullies the victims need their parents to fight their battles for them. Instead, help victims brainstorm options for handling bullies. Teach them how to stand up for themselves, using assertive verbal and nonverbal skills and the following defensive (not aggressive) physical moves:

### *Nonverbal responses*

Teach children to carry themselves confidently and walk with bold steps. They don't have to walk like pompous bullies themselves, but they want to send the message that "I can take care of myself. Don't mess with me."

Parents often tell victims to ignore bullies. Children, however, often think this means they should be passive, which creates a more wimpy attitude. To ignore effectively, they need to use strong body language. Stand up straight and look the person in the nose (it's too scary to look them in the eyes), smile, shrug the shoulders and walk (or run) away. This response tells bullies, "What you said didn't affect me in the least. You are not worth my time." Children don't have to say this, their attitude says it for them.

It is also helpful for victims to keep their distance from bullies by avoiding situations that will bring them into unnecessary contact with the bully. If they can't avoid the bully, they could stay in a group of friends or in view of (but not clinging to) an adult, since the bully is less likely to pick on them.

### *Verbal responses*

Most children spend so much time defending or explaining themselves that they only reinforce the power of bullies' words. If they insult bullies, the bullies get ticked off more and seek revenge. Instead, children can use self-directed humor. For example, if someone calls them a chicken, they can pretend to be a chicken. This tells bullies they know the comment is ridiculous. Others who are watching will usually laugh with the "victims" and join their side.

Victims can also exaggerate their responses, which also uses humor. If the bully says, "Your Mama wears army boots" the victim can add, "Yeah! And she wears a helmet and wakes me up with a reveille each morning." This tactic not only defuses, but helps victims take control of the situation.

If children have time to plan ahead, they can think of nice, honest things to say to the bully. They don't want to kiss up to bullies, which keeps bullies in power. They can, however, say sincere, true,

flattering statements. “That was a great touchdown you made at the game last night. You really saved the day!”

### *Physical defense moves*

- *Windmills.* When children are grabbed, they rotate their arm from the elbow to wrist in a “windmill” motion. (Down, in toward the other shoulder, up, and out away from the body.) They do this in the direction that goes against the thumb that’s grabbing them. If they are grabbed from behind, they move both arms, fully extended—down, cross, up, out, and away—to break the grip. If someone starts to push them from the front, they can use this motion to deflect the arm.
- *The bite defense.* If a child is coming toward them to bite, they can extend their hand an arm’s length in front and put the palm of their hand on the biter’s forehead, locking their elbow. This gives them time to free their legs and make a getaway.
- They can *block* punches by bending their arm at the elbow and placing it in front of their face, or other target-area.

These are temporary, self-protective moves that buy time for victims to either get away or use verbal conflict resolution skills. These moves are not aggressive, but will protect children in nonviolent ways. It is better to teach children these skills instead of encouraging them to return punches. This usually escalates the revenge cycle and sends the message that violence is okay.

If you live in a high crime area or there’s a lot of gang harassment, it is tempting to teach violent responses. In this day and age, you never know who might have a hidden weapon. Violence needs to be a last resort, used only to *defend* ourselves, when leaving the scene and other options are impossible, or in life and death situations.

We may have to get involved, after trying these other responses first. We can volunteer on the school playground or wherever bullies usually attack. Other adults might not believe our children, but if we say we witnessed it, they are more likely to take our concerns seriously.

*A Personal Story.* When Chris was in the fourth grade, he and his friend, a fifth-grader, had a problem with a bully on the bus—a second-grade girl. The bus driver would not believe their complaints of her kicking, taunting, and tripping them as they walked through the bus, because she was a younger girl. When they came home from school, they’d tell me what happened, and we’d do problem solving. Eventually, they tried every idea the three of us had. I was considering writing a letter when I happened to be in my car behind the bus one day and witnessed her behavior first-hand. In my letter to the transportation director, I simply described the girl’s behavior and the boys’ attempts to resolve the problem respectfully. I didn’t tell the director what to do, but wanted him to be aware of the problem. I only mentioned my eyewitness account at the end as a side-note. The bus driver changed the seating arrangement—moving the **boys** to the front of the bus instead of the bully.

Whenever possible, we want our intervention to empower victims and teach bullies better ways to handle conflicts. This helps free them both from unhelpful roles and boost their self-esteem and skills. Since victims feel incapable and helpless, assertiveness skills help them feel more capable. Since bullies are often stuck in a negative role, nonviolent alternatives give them a way out.

## School Problems

School problems are touchy issues. Often, parents are more concerned than children and it’s hard to get involved without taking over or exerting too much control, either of which can backfire.

## HOMework

Homework is a child's responsibility—we need to be careful how much we help. We need to be aware of what our children are doing and be involved in helpful ways, but not help too much. Keep the ball in the child's court. Avoid the word “we”—it implies that school issues are partly our responsibility. Say, “When are *you* going to do *your* homework?” If they require assistance, say “I am willing to look at what *you* are doing.” If they are having problems with their homework, use listening skills to figure out *why*. We don't want to assume the child is lazy or incompetent.

- **If children have a time management problem**, have *them* schedule their time, instead of telling children when to do homework. Ask questions such as, “How much time do you need for homework each night? Would you like to play after school and study after dinner? Or study after school and play until dark? How can you remember when it is time to stop playing and do your homework?”

*A Personal Story.* One of Amber's teachers required the children in her class to use a homework journal that was so complicated it took **me** three weeks to learn! Amber and I did some problem solving and found a way to use the school's basic system with symbols Amber chose and could more easily follow.

- **If children don't understand the homework**, ask questions that help *them* figure out the answer. “What are you supposed to do here? How can you find the answer? Where in the book does it talk about this? What does it say?” If the information is there, but children don't understand it, we can try to explain it. We do not have to understand what children are learning to be helpful. All we really need to know are the skills for helping our children figure it out for themselves. If children seem to need daily help, they may benefit more from a tutor than from our taking so much responsibility for helping them. It's a delicate balance to help, without fostering dependency, rescuing, or helping too much.

*A Personal Story.* In high school, my husband took honors calculus. When he was stuck on a problem, he'd ask his mom for help. She didn't have the slightest clue about calculus, so she'd say, “Show me what you are working on.” As he explained the problem, the answer would suddenly come to him. He'd say “Thanks Mom!”

Instead of taking on children's responsibilities . . .



. . . guide them to their own solution.





**Children who have given up on school** are experiencing a deeper problem. Use the Child Problem Toolbox to find out the real issue. *This* is the issue that needs to be resolved. You may want to enlist professional guidance, if indicated. The “real issue” and improving poor school performance will take longer to improve than other school problems.

**If children forget a book, lunch, or homework**, teach skills (Chapter 6, “Independence Toolset.”) and use problem solving to have children chose self-reminders. Children are responsible for getting themselves off to school, so avoid being their reminder or rescuer. If the problem occurs often, it usually affects parents, so we cover these issues in more detail in Chapter 13, “Discipline Toolset.”

## PROBLEMS WITH SCHOOL PERSONNEL

When children have a problem with a teacher or principal, it is a Child/Teacher problem. We can offer support to either party and do problem solving with children to see if they can resolve the problem directly with the teacher. Brainstorm ideas and help children practice what to say to the teacher. Try to anticipate the various responses the teacher might have, positive or negative, and how children can respond. Emphasize that it is *their* problem and we want them to give it their best shot before we get involved.

***A Personal Story.** When Chris was in fourth grade, his teacher outlined the rules for turning in schoolwork. She said they had until recess to finish their work. If it was not done by then, they had to stay inside for recess. Recess was a top priority to Chris.*

*One day, he waited to turn in a paper until right before recess. The teacher told him it was late and he'd have to stay inside for recess, even though the work was already done. She said the paper was due an hour before recess and this had always been the rule. Chris thought the teacher had changed the rules without telling him. He didn't see the logic of staying inside to work on a paper that was finished.*

*When he told me about the situation after school, I acknowledged his feelings. I could see how the teacher's actions would seem unfair if the rules had actually changed. I encouraged him to double-check the rule with the teacher, but he didn't want to talk to her directly. I told him it wasn't my place to step in, if he hadn't talked to her first. He was afraid of how she might react, so we role-played the possibilities. He agreed to follow whatever rule the teacher set, even if it wasn't what he thought it should be.*

*The next day, he asked the teacher to clarify the rule. She said the deadline was one hour before recess. He wasn't happy, but at least he knew which rule to follow. He had also taken a giant step forward by having the courage to talk to the teacher directly. He never missed the deadline again.*

When we meet with teachers to discuss problems and children are present, don't talk about them like they aren't there. Involve the children and serve as a mediator between them and the teacher. Use problem solving to address the teacher and child's feelings, ideas, and needs. Only make commitments to be responsible for tasks that are truly a parent's responsibility. We *can* agree to teach the child skills or use problem solving to develop plans. We need to maintain a balance; we want to be responsible, supportive parents, without overstepping boundaries and solving the problem for children or teachers.

## Peers/Friends

In most situations, we use the same skills with our children's peers and friends that we would if the other children were their siblings. If other children do not have the skills our children have, we can coach them through the problem-solving process.



## PARENTAL CONCERNS ABOUT A CHILD'S FRIENDS

*When children are young*, through early elementary school, we have more influence over their choice of friends. If we don't like a friend's influence, we can invite the friend to play at *our* house, where our rules apply, and keep an eye on their interactions. If the friend's behavior is unintentional, for example not sharing or being bossy, we can redirect the behavior by offering helpful suggestions for positive behavior. When conflicts arise, we can handle the problem as we would any other parenting problem. If we use a balanced, respectful approach, other parents will not object to anything we do. If the friend's behavior is detrimental to our children, either physically or by exposing them to values and behaviors we cannot tolerate, we need to set more firm limits. The friend can choose to abide by the rules in our house or choose not to play there.

As children get older, *junior high through teens*, parents have less influence over their decisions. If we don't like a teen's friends, we can first try the approach described above. Usually, though, teens socialize away from home. If we forbid our teens from seeing particular friends, they will usually rebel. They may defend the friend more strongly and make an extra effort to keep the friend, just to prove we can't control them and our opinions about their friends are wrong.

*A Parenting Class Experience.* Toni, age 15, and her father were angry when they arrived at the *Teen and Parents—Together* class. They had gotten in a huge argument because Toni knew her father had to meet her friends before she could go out with them and intentionally defied this rule.

*Toni told the group that she was willing to bring her friends to the house but her father was always rude to them. He criticized the way they dressed and "gave them the third degree." She was so embarrassed and angry she decided she'd rather be disciplined for breaking the rule than put herself and her friends through that humiliation.*

*All Toni's father could hear was "I am willing to do it but won't." The group helped the father focus on what Toni meant. I mediated, helping them listen to each other, state their needs, and negotiate an agreement. They agreed that if Toni brought her friends home, her father would treat them with respect. Because the father had broken this promise in the past, they agreed to practice specific questions he could ask to address his concerns respectfully. It was a temporary role reversal, but Toni had a better grasp of respectful communication and her father was willing to improve his skills by listening to her suggestions.*

Instead of lecturing, accusing, and restricting children from seeing their friends, use F-A-X communication. The goal is to help children see *for themselves* that this friend might not be a good influence. We can ask questions now and then, not all at once like an interrogation. For example, "Have you noticed John sometimes \_\_\_? Has he ever done this to you? How did you feel? What did you do?" After one of these discussions, back off for a bit and give children time to think about the points they realized through our questions. Often, if we express our concerns respectfully, listen to their concerns, and express trust in their judgment, children realize on their own that this friend may not be a good influence. This process may not be quick. While we wait, we need to trust our child's judgment and pray—for guidance, patience, and for our child's protection.

If our children's friends are involved in dangerous or extremely inappropriate behavior, we need to take a stand and risk a power struggle—but we must carefully plan our strategy. Our concerns are Parent problems, while peer relationships are Child problems. We can use the Clear Communication Toolset to describe what we've seen, instead of judging or labeling their friends. Instead of singling out one friend, we set bottom-line limits with general rules, "You can only go to someone's house if a parent is there and I have met the friend." Once we set limits, we need to listen to and acknowledge our child's feelings of frustration, resentment or anger toward us. If we use F-A-X communication, we can usually get agreements that address our concerns *and* teach teens the skills they need to handle more

freedom responsibly. We discuss this type of parent/child problem solving in Chapter 10, "Clear Communication Toolset" and appropriate disciplines for breaking agreements in Chapter 13, "Discipline Toolset."

***A Personal Story.** I've never had a serious concern about any of Chris' friends, but Amber has had problems with other girls' being bossy, rejecting, lying and trying to take advantage of her since she entered preschool. (Imagine trying to explain cliques to a four-year-old!)*

*When problems arise with Amber's friends, I first do problem solving to see if there is anything Amber can do to resolve the problem herself. I teach her the language skills she needs to stand up for herself respectfully and to offer win/win choices to the other child. Sometimes, the problem continues. If Amber has tried every reasonable option, I ask her whether playing with this friend is worth being mistreated. Amber usually has enough self-respect that she says she would rather not play with the child. I back up her decision and we brainstorm other options for playmates.*

*There have been only two friends that I have had to restrict her from seeing. One girl was a chronic liar and Amber was picking up the habit. The girl also engaged in sexually inappropriate activities that made Amber feel uncomfortable and shameful. Another girl repeatedly teased, criticized, and humiliated Amber. I also had intuitive gut feelings that Amber might not be safe at this girl's house. Only in these two cases have I felt strongly enough about the emotional, physical, moral risks to my daughter to put my foot down and forbid Amber from being friends. In one case, Amber agrees and is grateful I've given her an "easy out" for not playing with the girl. The other girl, however, lives close by and Amber wishes she could still play with her. She disagrees that there is a continued risk. At these times, we have another discussion, in which I acknowledge her feelings of disappointment and disagreement. I ask questions instead of lecturing, to help Amber see why I still have concerns and what her other options are.*

The most extreme case of choosing bad friends is joining a gang. The most common reasons teens join gangs are to gain acceptance, have a sense of identity, feel secure (protected), and have more power and control. These are all age-appropriate teen issues, but gang membership is a very negative way to meet these needs. Because gangs require a strong commitment, their members develop intense loyalty; the gang then becomes their new "family." When we look at the gang member's real family, we often find it lacks many of the qualities the teen is seeking. When the teen's only obvious choices are to have the needs go unfulfilled or to meet the needs in negative ways, some teens will choose the latter.

If you live in a gang-infested community, prevention is the key. Give children love and acceptance, emotional support, loving protection (setting reasonable limits in respectful ways), and offer appropriate ways to develop independence and a positive identity. Develop healthy listening and communication skills. If children grow up in a healthy, loving family, there is less chance they will seek a substitute "family"—a gang.

If your teen is already in a gang or deeply involved with extremely negative friends, you'll need to work even harder to develop the personal skills and family qualities that will encourage the teen to "come home." Trying to separate teens and their friends is always difficult, no matter what you try, but there are several options. Involve the teen in meaningful activities (youth groups, sports teams, volunteer work, summer camps). When teens are involved in purposeful activities, they have less time, desire, and opportunity to get into trouble. Have the teen spend the summer with relatives. The change can offer the break the teen needs to make a fresh start. Change schools. This option may not be financially feasible, but don't automatically rule it out. It may be worth the financial sacrifice to give your teen the chance to see that there *are* teens who enjoy life without engaging in antisocial behavior. If all the above fail, don't give up. Be firm and keep open lines of communication. If we alienate teens in the process of protecting them, we may win a few battles but lose the "war," which is our desire to reach our healthy long-term parenting goals.

It's hard to trust teens who are exposed to negative influences (they *all* are). Things are so different and more dangerous than when we were teens. Parents have to do what is best for their children and their family. Most teens can be trusted more than their parents think they can. If teens respect themselves and have the courage, determination, and *skills* to resist peer pressure, other teens will not necessarily influence them. If parents express unconditional love, show trust and keep the lines of communication open, their teens are more likely to conduct themselves in trustworthy ways. As teens mature and come into their own identity, negative friends usually have less influence on them.

## FINAL COMMENTS

### Trouble-Shooting Guide

**If you try F-A-X Listening and things don't go well, ask yourself the following questions:**

- Did I focus on facts *or* did I acknowledge their feelings?
- Did I minimize or overreact to the problem *or* did I respond appropriately?
- Did I interrupt or talk about myself *or* did I give them a chance to talk freely?
- Did I tell them they were interpreting the situation wrong or did I ask questions so they would figure this out on their own?
- Did I give advice or did I ask what *they* could do?
- Did I criticize their ideas or ask "What would happen if . . . ?"

When we have faith in our children, it is easier to support them in respectful, empowering ways. The F-A-X process teaches children valuable skills they need when they have problems and we aren't there.

***A Personal Story.** My mother, in her parenting class, used to tell a story that I had forgotten. She reminded me of it and we compared notes on our perspectives of the situation.*

*When I was 16, my mother found me at the kitchen table at three in the morning. I told her that my boyfriend (who was 19 and traveled for his job) had invited me to visit him in California. I hadn't decided whether I was going to go and was writing down the pros and cons of my options.*

*Inside, my mother thought, "You'll go over my dead body!" To me, she said, "Well, I know you'll think through all the things that could happen if you go, good or bad, both there and here. I'm sure you'll make a responsible decision." She went back to bed and stayed awake for some time, praying. The next morning, she asked me what I had decided. I told her I had decided not to go.*

*Now a parent myself, I asked her, "What would you have said if I had decided to go?" Inside, she would have said, "Over my dead body!" To me, she probably would have said, "I have some serious concerns about you going and want to discuss them before you make a final decision." She would have asked me questions that would have led me to decide, on my own, that I shouldn't go.*

*Looking back, I have even greater appreciation for my mother's parenting skills. Had she **told** me I couldn't go, I might have been tempted to rebel and go anyway. (Although I doubt I would have followed through.) She was wise to keep the ball in my court and give me a chance to make my own decision. I also realized how my problem-solving skills helped me make a responsible independent decision instead of an impulsive one.*

**The process of solving a problem  
is often more important than the solution we reach.**

Whenever your kids are out of control, you can take comfort from the thought that even God's omnipotence did not extend to God's kids.

After creating heaven and earth, God created Adam and Eve. And the first thing He said to them was: "Don't."

"Don't what?" Adam replied.

"Don't eat the forbidden fruit," God said.

"Forbidden fruit? We got forbidden fruit? Hey, Eve . . . we got Forbidden Fruit."

"No way!" she replied.

"Yes, WAY!"

"Don't eat that fruit!" said God.

"Why?"

"Because I'm your Father and I said so!" said God, wondering why he hadn't stopped after making the elephants.

A few minutes later, God saw the kids having an apple break and was angry.

"Didn't I tell you not to eat that fruit?" the First Parent asked.

"Uh huh," Adam replied.

"Then why did you eat it?"

"I dunno," Eve answered.

"She started it!" Adam said.

"Did not!"

"Did so!"

"DID NOT!"

Having had it with the two of them,

God's punishment was that Adam and Eve should have children of their own.

Thus the pattern was set and it has never changed.

But there is a reassurance in this story.

If you have persistently and lovingly tried to give your children wisdom and they haven't taken it, don't be hard on yourself. If God had trouble handling children, what makes you think it would be a piece of cake for you?

- - From the Internet, Author Unknown

## SUMMARY SHEET

### PROBLEM-SOLVING TOOLSET

#### F-A-X COMMUNICATION

##### **B1: Focus on feelings**

- a. Identify the feeling (in your mind).
- b. Identify the thought or event (in your mind).
- c. Summarize in your own words what you think they mean.

If the child is confused or misinterpreting the situation, move to next step.

##### **B2: Ask helpful questions ☆☆☆☆**

- Ask open-ended questions to invite sharing, avoid yes/no answers.
- Clarify details so others understand why something happened.
- Restate possible mistaken beliefs so others can gain insight to the lessons involved.
- Give pearls of wisdom, not lectures.
- Guide others through their logic, to consider important points—without giving advice

If you and the child understand the problem, but need a solution or plan, move to the next step.

##### **B3: X-amine possible solutions ☆☆☆☆**

- a. Brainstorm ideas. All ideas are okay. Simply list them.
- b. Evaluate each idea. “What would happen if you did this?”
- c. Choose a solution.

## PRACTICE EXERCISES

Take the response you gave to the practice situations in the F-A-X Listening Toolset and continue the conversation. Practice the back and forth flow of listening, asking helpful questions, and moving into problem solving. In real life, the other person does not respond according to a script; each person will have different feelings or reasons that are hiding beneath the surface. So the best way to practice conversational problem solving is to find someone to role-play the child. Role playing also helps us practice reading nonverbal clues such as body language and tone of voice.

1. "Emily is spending the summer at her grandmothers! She's my best friend!"
2. "I'm scared to go to bed. There's a monster under my bed that comes out in the dark!"
3. "I don't feel like cleaning the toilets! I'll do it after I play."
4. "I played soccer at recess. Brandon and Chris were the captains and I was the last one to get picked."
5. "I can't believe I missed that catch. We lost the game because of me."
6. "Why do I have to get my picture taken? I hate to smile with these braces on."
7. Your preteen daughter says, "I'm not sure if I'm going to Tom's party. John will be there."
8. "Finals are next week and I've got to work every single night!"

## Possible Answers

I am not going to detail an entire conversation for any of the situations. I have, however, done dozens of role-plays in my parenting class and have seen the variety of directions they can go. Here are some suggestions for common communication barriers you want to avoid and important points to remember.

1. *Child:* "Emily is spending the summer at her grandmothers! She's my best friend!"  
*Parent:* "You're really going to miss her, aren't you? (pause) All summer sounds like a long time, doesn't it?"

*Ask helpful questions.* Don't rescue the child by offering suggestions, "We could . . ." Use helpful questions and *problem solving* to allow your child to come up with the ideas. "Can you think of a way you could keep in touch while she's gone?" "Would you like to do something special with her before she leaves?" The child might think of ideas like a calendar to count the days until Emily returns, writing letters, and planning a going-away party. If not, the parent can offer these suggestions and see if the child wants to use any of them.

2. *Child:* "I'm scared to go to bed. There's a monster under my bed that comes out in the dark!"  
*Parent:* "It must be scary to think there is a monster there."

*Ask helpful questions.* Sit together in the dark and ask the child to point to the things that scare them when you aren't there. Then turn on the light and ask what the shape really is. Teach them how to talk themselves through their fear, "That's really my coat rack." *X-amine possible options.* Give them a flashlight or night light. If children refuse to believe the monsters aren't real, tell them that any monsters that enter their room have to obey their orders. They can talk to the monsters, make friends with them and ask them to play. They can tell the monsters to get out and leave them alone. Since their imagination is creating the problem, use their imagination to solve the problem. For example, give them some magic monster spray (a water spritzer) that scares monsters. Have them draw a picture of the monster and then change the picture to control the outcome. This is especially helpful with nightmares. As we tuck them in at night, we can describe a



peaceful scene they can visualize. We can also pray with them, asking guardian angels to watch over them.

3. *Child*: “I don’t feel like cleaning the toilets! I’ll do it after I play.”

*Parent*: “I know it’s hard to work when you’d rather be playing.”

*Ask helpful questions* that maintain your bottom-line limits. For example, you could offer choices, such as “Do you want to clean the toilet before you play and stay out until dinner? Or go play and come inside a half-hour earlier to clean the toilet?” *X-amine possible options* for a win/win solution. For example, the child might be willing to trade a job with the parent. These are not the only skills available to parents. In Chapter 10, “Clear Communication Toolset,” we learn some quick and effective responses we can also use.

4. *Child*: “I played soccer at recess. Brandon and Chris were the captains and I was the last one to get picked.”

*Parent: Listening response*: “It hurts to be rejected like that.” Or “It’s discouraging to be the last one picked for a team.”

*Ask questions* that help children realize *on their own* that people have different reasons for making choices and we can get our feelings hurt when we incorrectly assume someone’s motives. In this situation, here are some possible questions to ask: “If you were the captain, how would you decide who to pick?” “How do you think Brandon and Chris decided?” “Do you think that not picking you means they don’t like you or that they just wanted to win?” If the child continued to play soccer, but was feeling discouraged, you can probably stop at this step. If the child quit when he was rejected, use *problem solving* to help the child consider other possible responses. “What else could you have done? What do you think would have happened?”

5. *Child*: “I can’t believe I missed that catch. We lost the game because of me.”

*Parent*: “I can tell you’re really disappointed you missed that catch. It’s hard to make a mistake at such an important time.”

If we have discussed children’s feelings and shown we understand, but they are wallowing in self-pity, we can *ask helpful questions*. “Is it possible your team might have lost the game anyway?” “Has anyone else missed a catch like that? How did you feel about the person? How did the other teammates treat the person? What did the person do?” Timing is everything, here. If the child is still caught up in his feelings, he will get more frustrated with these kinds of logical questions. If he has released most of those feelings, however, this will help reveal any unhelpful or inaccurate beliefs and can lead to *problem solving*. “What do you think you’ll do at practice tomorrow?”

6. *Child*: “Why do I have to get my picture taken? I hate to smile with these braces on.”

*Parent*: “Are you feeling self-conscious about your braces?”

*Ask helpful questions* to help children consider different viewpoints. Here are some possible questions: “Are there other students who have braces? How do you think they feel when they get their picture taken? Have you noticed how they smile in their pictures?” Use *problem solving* to help children plan a solution that meets their (and your) needs. Here are some possible options: children can practice smiling in a mirror, they can not get pictures taken that year, or, if parents want the pictures, they could agree to only give the pictures to relatives.

7. *Child*: Your preteen daughter says, “I’m not sure if I’m going to Tom’s party. John will be there.”

*Parent*: “You sound like you aren’t sure you want to see John. Any particular reasons?”

If we have listened effectively, the daughter has probably revealed the *real* reason she doesn’t want to see John (he’s mean to her, she has a crush on him, or another reason). Depending on her reasons, it might be helpful to offer a few small pearls of wisdom about people’s defensive

reactions when they are mad or how people can act uninterested even if they have a crush on someone. If we *tell* someone, “don’t let it bother you,” we are minimizing the problem. We also need to be careful not to offer advice unless she asks. We can use helpful questions to clarify the problem and evaluate possible solutions, “What would happen if you . . . ?” “What do you think John would do?” “If you didn’t go to the party, how would you feel? If you go and John (possible behavior), what could you do?” Practice any communication or anger management skills that would help her when she carries out her plan.

8. *Child*: “Finals are next week and I’ve got to work every single night!”  
*Parent*: “Wow, you’re under a lot of pressure right now. You have extra studying you need to do, but they need you at work, too.”

*Ask helpful questions* that can help the teen *X-amine possible options*, “What do you plan to do?” “Would you get in trouble at work if you asked for one night off?” “Do you have any extra time you can spend studying for finals?” If the teen gets defensive with these questions, stop. Show respect for the teen’s ability to work out a plan.

## WHAT’S NEXT?

We have completed our tour of the Child Problem Toolbox. Practice the F-A-X process daily. When we take the time and make the effort to *really* listen and understand others, we accomplish so much: We open the lines of communication and build trust. Others learn problem-solving skills through first-hand experience. We also discover just how capable our children (and others) are of solving their *own* problems.

Chapter 9, “Keep Your Cool Toolset,” is the first stop on our tour of the Parent Problem Toolbox (Step C of the Universal Blueprint). We review the process of identifying Parent problems and the toolsets we use to resolve problems that affect us. In the Keep Your Cool Toolset, we discuss healthy anger and stress management skills we can use every day in any setting—at home, work, or social settings—and can teach these skills to our children. It is critical to manage our anger before using any of the other tools in the Parent Problem Toolbox or it turns the tools into destructive weapons.

## REFERENCES

1. For more information about fostering healthy sibling relationships and dealing with bullies and victims, read *Siblings Without Rivalry*, by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish (Norton Books, 1987).