Early Childhood Building Blocks
Social Problem Solving in Early Childhood Education

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INTRODUCTION

Picture this true-to-life scenario:

Toby and Chase are playing with blocks and are working together to build a series of roads for toy cars. Ayden walks to the toy shelf and selects the bin that has 20 or more tiny toy cars inside it. He carries the bin to a corner of the carpet and begins to remove the cars one by one, putting them in groups by color. Toby walks over to where Ayden is sitting and takes the bin to the block area, pulls out two cars, and races them along the block roads he and Chase made just moments before. Ayden squawks loudly, “Ms. Artis, Toby tooook mmmYYYY carssss!” as he gets up, stalks over to the block area, and tries to grab the bin back.

Ms. Artis walks over to the boys. The teacher and the children apply some social problem-solving strategies and come up with a solution that pleases everyone. It wasn’t the first time and it won’t be the last time that a developmentally appropriate conflict resolution approach has been used. Fifteen minutes later she is pleased to see Toby, Chase, and Ayden have added a bridge to their city of roads and are playing cooperatively with the cars.

Social conflict among young students in the classroom is inevitable, but it does not need to lead to strife and emotional crisis. In fact, these experiences can be opportunities for learning and social development when teachers help children develop the communication and problem-solving skills to deal with conflict in peaceful and productive ways.
RATIONALE

In this age of accountability, how can we justify time spent playing in the sandbox learning how to share a favorite scoop? Are our culture, media, and stressed-out teachers paying enough attention to kindness, respect, and productive social problem solving? Maybe, maybe not, but the Ohio social studies citizenship content standards, early learning program guidelines, and national guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) say that we should be.

The Ohio Early Learning Content Standards and the Ohio K–12 Social Studies Academic Content Standards have indicators relating to government and to citizenship rights and responsibilities. Government indicators include participation in creating and abiding by classroom rules and routines. Citizenship indicators include cooperation, problem solving, and choice making. These are clearly important areas of development that need to be addressed by those who interact with young children.

In regard to DAP—now a widely accepted practice—the term *developmentally appropriate practice* was first used in a position statement by the National Association for the Education of Young Children in 1986 to refer to the age and individual appropriateness of content, instructional strategies, and relationship building in the field of early childhood. In the NAEYC’s newest iteration of the position statement on DAP (2009), many pages are still devoted to explaining the need for teachers to support children in developing social behaviors, conflict management, and emotional well-being.
THE BASICS

To provide children with the social and emotional environment they need to develop strong and beneficial social skills for a lifetime, there are some basic guidelines for teachers to follow:

• State clear and positive expectations.

• Use active and reflective listening.

• Help children participate in making and following classroom rules.

• Let children practice making appropriate choices.

• Remind children of appropriate behavior.

• Encourage children to be cooperative and helpful.

• Support children in learning and using social conflict and conflict resolution strategies such as those mentioned in this brief.

If children can talk and they agree to be fair, they can be taught to solve their own social problems. *Conflict management* (or *social problem solving*—we use the terms interchangeably in this Building Blocks brief) is not rocket science. It boils down to serving as positive role models for children, teaching children good communication skills, and helping children understand another person’s perspective and follow the golden rule (see Sidebar A). This might actually be more important than rocket science.

**Two on a Trike**

*Video Example of Basic Teacher Support for Children Learning to Solve Their Social Problems.*

In this short video clip from the Illinois Early Learning Project, two young boys want to ride the same tricycle. The teacher helps the boys resolve the possible conflict by giving them the words they need to communicate and solve the problem before it becomes a big issue.
TEACHING CITIZENSHIP AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Here are some key points regarding citizenship and social development—and why they are important.

**Social development is an ideal complement and avenue to support cognitive content learning in the early childhood curriculum**

It could be argued that all learning depends on relationships, but this is especially true for young children. Whether in conjunction with teaching language, science, mathematics, or other curriculum content, trustworthy adults who model social problem solving while thinking out loud about the consequences of possible actions are teaching invaluable social problem-solving skills. Children also learn much from lessons shared by role models about how they have identified and addressed problems that have occurred in their everyday lives. Besides modeling, “teachable moments” are also created from the content itself.

Take, for example, our fictitious Ms. Artis. She often takes the time to reflect on social situations and to have the children share in discussions while she reads favorite stories aloud to the children. Reading *The Hiccupotamus* (by Aaron Zenz) for the zillionth time, she helps the children strengthen their phonemic awareness and rhyming skills by having them fill in the words from the story that she leaves out; to support their social development, she mentions the angry feelings that she sees on the characters’ faces and asks the children how the frustrated friends deal with their hiccupping friend as the story progresses. She helps the children talk about the friends working together to find a solution “to stop this long

nightmareapy.” Therefore, in addition to repeating some very nonsensical rhymes, the children also learn how more solutions are found to problems when friends work together to find solutions than when they chase after each other in anger.

**Young children need the attention of caring, competent adults to maximize positive social learning potential and to help them make the connection to cognitive content**

To make this point, let’s use another “Ms. Artis” example.

It is 11:45 in the morning, and three minutes ago Mrs. Artis informed the children that in five minutes the class will be ending the classroom activities to prepare for lunch. She is now giving the children a second reminder that it is almost time to clean up for lunch. She walks over to Rosa, who is painting, and tells her that she will have to stop painting very soon. Rosa tells the teacher in anger, “You are not invited to my birthday party!” In reacting to Rosa’s angry comment, Ms. Artis uses active and reflective listening to understand the meaning beneath the child’s words, and so she responds, “You sound angry and disappointed that we have to stop playing now. I’m sorry too. But we can paint again after lunch.”
Periodically revisiting key decision-making concepts at teachable moments is even more effective instruction for life. For instance, the next time a similar transition from one activity to another occurs, the teacher can revisit the earlier scene and help the child understand, maybe even by using a pictorial schedule, that by budgeting time for different purposes everyone gets to eat and paint. Ms. Artis might want to remind Rosa at various times during the activity that the next activity is coming. Otherwise, Rosa might merely repeat the same angry scene with growing resentment at what seems to the child to be an arbitrary decision by the teacher to interrupt play by imposing mealtime.

**Child guidance is about allowing consequences of choices and about teaching children to reflect on their own actions**

The Ohio early childhood social studies skills and methods standard involves helping children to find, organize, and apply information to inform good decision making. Teachers need to help children reflect on and communicate behavioral and social interaction lessons so that better choices are made in the future. It has been said that we study history so that we avoid making the same old mistakes. Social problem solving guides learners through the steps of reflection so that future choices are made based on past personal experiences and not solely in compliance to adult authority.

Suppose, for example, Ms. Artis sat near Rosa at lunch after her angry outburst at the painting easel and spoke with her about the experience, helping her to remember the pre-lunch routines, the feelings Rosa had, and how Rosa missed the opportunity to help pass out the milk because she was still washing her hands after everyone else was already seated and ready to eat. In this way, children experience the costs and benefits of their actions.

**Social problem solving is a prototype for future cognitive problem solving**

Conflict resolution strategies learned early pave the way for future problem solving regardless of the nature of the problem. Young children learn both physics fundamentals and cooperation when they play with cars together in the block area, and this prepares them for future coursework and team participation in school and beyond. If Toby, Chase, and Ayden, who are arguing over toy cars and block roads, can learn to identify the problem, brainstorm solutions, and then agree on one solution that will let them all share the toy cars in the classroom, then it will pave the way for them to use the same skills later in life to find solutions for other problems.
HELPING CHILDREN DEVELOP SOCIAL PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS

Lillian Katz and D. E. McClellan (Mill, 1999) have recommended that we ask even a very young child who might be having trouble with sharing, “What have you tried?” This simple little question confers responsibility and implies that with social problems we try alternative solutions much like we do with fixing stuck zippers or having too many things to carry with just two hands.

There are many things teachers can do to help their children become better social problem solvers. Here are a few steps and one or two hints to help teachers lead their youngsters to solve problems.

Step 1. Get commitment from the children involved.

- Sit with children. Listen and give words to the situation. Help the children talk about what has happened and what the consequences and effects have been. (“We have had to stop playing. No one has the cars. Everyone is upset.”)
- Ask children if these consequences make them happy. Are things going along well?
- Ask each child if he or she would like to make the situation better, to continue to play or carry on the day’s routines in a more pleasant manner, to be happy again, or not have this situation occur again.
- Talk with the children involved to get everyone on board.

Step 2. Identify the problem.

- Have children talk about the event and help them put their feelings into words. Perhaps they can exchange pictures or written notes (with the teacher’s help) to express their feelings, or they might draw pictures in a journal to capture and later recall what happened in a particular situation and how they worked it out. If we can make social problem-solving solutions concrete through words or pictures, then the participants will be more likely to build a repertoire of social problem-solving skills that they can use in future problems. (It often proves helpful to keep a record of problems. Then you can use a recurring problem as the basis for a lesson or unit—for example, one on turn taking or jealousy.)
Step 3. Brainstorm possible solutions and the consequences of each, including how various participants are likely to feel about each alternative.

- Ask the children, “What ideas do you have for fixing the problem or for next time?” Accept all ideas during the brainstorming session. Since most preschoolers are pre-writers, you can write the ideas on a chart or help the children use pictures and journals.

- After brainstorming, help the children talk about the consequences and feelings that the participants may encounter for each of the ideas the team came up with.

Step 4. Mutually agree on one solution, perhaps even a hybrid solution that involves a few ideas. Ideally the plan is written (or drawn) and signed by all participants.

Step 5. Try out the agreed-upon solution for a predetermined time (usually a short time stated in terms relevant to children, for example, “until snack”).

Step 6. After the determined time has passed, engage all the participants in an evaluation of the outcome.

- There are a number of options here. For example, you can have the students revisit their journals and make more notes or pictures. Or you can make a list of the children’s reflections.

Children will need a teacher or other person (one committed to fairness) to guide them through the steps at first. This help will not be as necessary as children gain experience practicing their newly learned skills. The ability to communicate is a prerequisite skill for social problem solving, but children as young as three years of age have been weaned away from needing a mediator most of the time. Teachers should also work with parents and care givers to encourage them to model problem solving for children and to encourage and support children’s efforts to practice problem solving at home.
CONCLUSION

As children venture further from the world of home and family and enter the social world of child care, preschool, elementary school, and beyond, there is no doubt that they will encounter new and varied groups and challenging individual personalities, turn-taking and sharing situations, personal disappointments, and other possible conflict issues. Learning to cope with the social world and its demands is not an easy task, and so their first teachers must model and provide experiences that will guide them in the most effective and positive directions possible.

Bettye Caldwell (1992) points out that there is no distinction between caring for and educating infants—and we can certainly extend this “lack of distinction” to preschoolers. We do a disservice to young children, who are building the foundation for a lifetime of learning, unless we show them the connection between social learning and intellectual challenge and we give them the skills to be successful in these areas. They are both hard work but well worth the effort.
### Citizenship Rights and Responsibilities Standard

**Pre-K–2 Benchmark**
A. Describe the results of cooperation in group settings and demonstrate the necessary skills.

- Demonstrate cooperative behaviors, such as helping, turn taking, sharing, comforting, and compromising.
- Engage in problem solving behavior with diminishing support from adults (e.g., negotiating roles in play, turn taking).
- Participate and cooperate in classroom activities.
- Demonstrate the importance of fair play, good sportsmanship, respect for the rights and opinions of others and the idea of treating others the way you want to be treated.
- Demonstrate skills and explain the benefits of cooperation when working in group settings:
  a. Manage conflict peacefully;
  b. Display courtesy;
  c. Respect others.

### Social Studies Skills and Methods Standard

**Pre-K–2 Benchmark**
D. Identify a problem and work in groups to solve it.

- Demonstrate cooperative behaviors, such as helping, turn taking, sharing, comforting, and compromising.
- Work with others by sharing, taking turns and raising hand to speak.
- Display courtesy and respect for others in group settings including:
  a. Staying on the topic;
  b. Focusing attention on the speaker.
- Use problem solving/decision making skills to identify a problem and gather information while working independently and in groups.
REFERENCES


ORGANIZATIONS OF INTEREST


Wilmington College Peace Resource Center, http://www2.wilmington.edu/prc/index.cfm
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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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