

Working Things Out Together: Supported Problem Solving Guide

What is supported problem solving?

Problem solving is hard work for a young brain. It works best when a child feels calm, safe, and ready to think, and when adults provide suggestions and ideas. Many of the skills needed for problem solving are still developing in the early years.

Young children learn by watching and practising with adults. They need more support while these skills are developing.

Supported problem solving means working together. First the adult helps the child feel calm and ready to think. Then, they work together to understand what is happening and what might help.

Three things to keep in mind

Match the support to the child

Every child develops differently. As a rough guide:

0-18 months: Mostly co-regulation.

Adults do most of the thinking while responding to the child's cues, preferences and emerging communication.



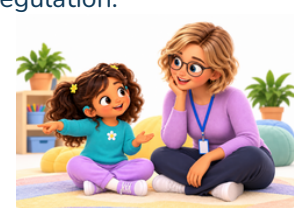
18 months-3 years: Beginning to join in.

Adults provide lots of support and ideas. Children contribute through their preferences, choices, and responses.



3-5 years: More active participation.

Children can contribute more ideas and choices but still need lots of adult support, scaffolding, and co-regulation.



Know when to step in

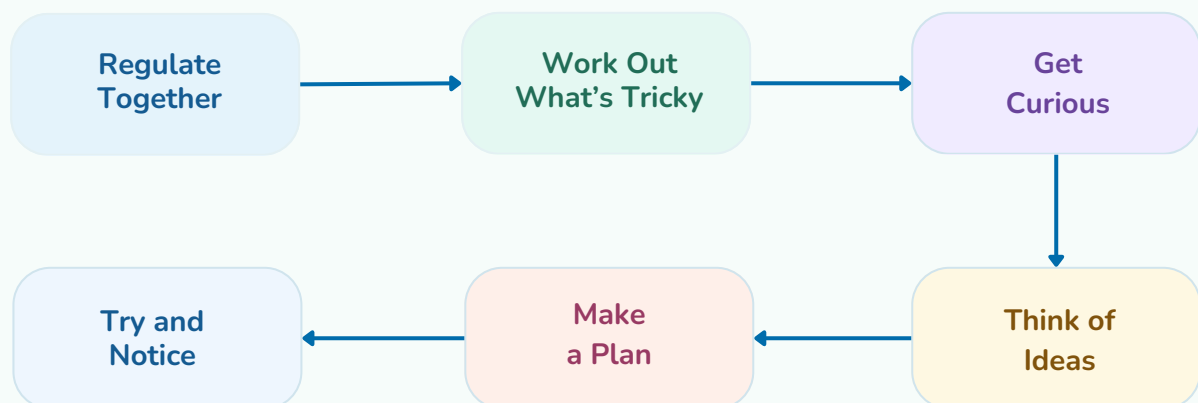
Not every problem needs solving. Ask yourself, “Does this need solving now?” Adjusting expectations, changing the environment, or providing more support is often the best solution. Other times, you may decide to watch, wait, and wonder, and then act when you’ve had more time to think about it yourself.

Stay flexible

Notice how regulated you and the child are. Slow down, provide more support, or come back to it later if needed.

A six-step process.

Supported problem solving helps children work through problems and build skills, with support to match their developmental needs.



1. Regulate together

Are we both calm and ready to think?

Before solving the problem, use co-regulation to help yourself and the child feel calm and safe.

Try:

- Staying calm and connected
- Reducing what is being asked and giving time
- Offering what helps the child regulate - movement, quiet, sensory supports, closeness or space

If either of you is overwhelmed, pause and come back to it later.



2. Work out what's tricky

What is the problem or challenge?

Describe the difficulty **without blaming the child.**

Instead of: "The child won't join the group."

Try: "Joining the group is tricky right now."

Think about what might be making things difficult for **the child, the adult or both.**



3. Get curious

What might be making this hard for the child?

Look beyond what the child is doing and think about what might be contributing.

Think about:

- What happened before and afterwards
- What the child says, does or communicates
- Their strengths, communication and support needs
- Their family, culture, relationships and community

You don't need to get it right. Stay curious and check your ideas with the child where you can.



4. Think of ideas

What could we try?

Think of different things that might help. **Include the child's ideas and take them seriously.**

Ideas might include:

- Change the environment
- Adjust expectations
- Change how or when something happens
- Add support or scaffolding
- Offer a choice
- Practise a skill together
- Get help from someone else



There doesn't have to be one "right" answer.

5. Make a plan

What will we try?

Choose **one simple thing to try together.**

Where possible, give the child a choice:

“Would you like to try this way or this way?”

The adult may need to make most of the plan. It is OK for adults to scaffold and make suggestions about what to try.

Look for ways the child can still participate in small ways they can manage.



6. Try and notice

Did it help?

Notice what happened **without treating it as success or failure.**

Consider:

- What helped?
- What was still tricky?
- What could we change?
- Do we need to try something different?

If it didn't work, **try again with a different idea, more support or a different approach.**

The goal is not to get it right the first time. The goal is to practise problem solving together.

