# **Problem-solving with teenagers: steps and tips**

As children become teenagers, they’ll come across problems they need to sort out themselves. You won’t always be there to give your children advice, but you can help them develop problem-solving skills and strategies that they can use on their own.

**Why problem-solving skills are important?**

Everybody needs to solve problems every day. But we’re not born with the skills we need to do this – we have to develop them. When solving problems, it’s good to be able to:

* Listen and think calmly.
* Consider options and respect other people’s opinions and needs.
* Find constructive solutions, and sometimes work towards compromises.

These abilities are highly valued in both social and work situations – they’re skills for life.

When teenagers learn skills and strategies for problem-solving and sorting out conflicts by themselves, they feel better about themselves. They’re more independent and better placed to make good decisions on their own.

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### **Problem-solving: six steps**

Often you can solve problems by talking and compromising. The following six steps for problem-solving are useful when you can’t find a solution. You can use them to work on most problems – both yours and your children’s.

When you’re working on a problem with your children, it’s a good idea to do it when everyone is calm and can think clearly – this way, your children will be more likely to want to find a solution. Arrange a time when you won’t be interrupted, and thank your children for joining in to solve the problem.

1. Identify the problem

The first step in problem-solving is working out exactly what the problem is. Then put it into words that make it solvable. For example:

* ‘You’ve been using other people’s things a lot without asking first.’
* ‘I noticed that the last two Saturdays when you went out, you didn’t call us to let us know where you were.’

Focus on the issue, not on the emotion or the person. For example, try to avoid saying things like, ‘Why don’t you remember to call when you’re late? Don’t you care enough to let me know?’ Your children could feel attacked and get defensive, or feel frustrated because they don’t know how to fix the problem.

You can also head off defensiveness in your children by being reassuring. Perhaps say something like, ‘It’s important that you go out with your friends. We just need to find a way for you to go out and for us to feel you’re safe. I know we’ll be able to sort it out together’.

2. Think about why it’s a problem

Help your children describe what’s causing the problem and where it’s coming from. It might help to consider the answers to questions like these:

* Why is this so important to you?
* Why do you need this?
* What do you think might happen?
* What’s the worst thing that could happen?
* What’s upsetting you?

Try to listen without arguing or debating – this is your chance to really hear what’s going on with your children. Encourage them to use statements such as ‘I need … I want … I feel …’, and try using these phrases yourself. Be open about the reasons for your concerns.

3. Brainstorm possible solutions

Make a list of all the possible ways you could solve the problem. You’re looking for a range of possibilities, both sensible and not so sensible. Try to avoid judging or debating these yet.

If your children have trouble coming up with some, start them off with some suggestions of your own. You could set the tone by making a crazy suggestion first – funny or extreme solutions can end up provoking a more serious or feasible option. Try to come up with at least eight possible solutions together.

Write down all the possibilities.

4. Evaluate the solutions

Look at the solutions in turn, talking about positives and negatives of each one. Consider the pros before the cons – this way, no-one will feel that their suggestions are being criticised.

After making a list of the pros and cons, cross off the options where the negatives clearly outweigh the positives. Now rate each solution from 0 (not good) to 10 (very good). This will help you sort out the most promising solutions.

The solution you choose should be one that you can put into practice and that will solve the problem.

If you haven’t been able to find one, go back to step 3 and look for some different solutions. It might help to talk to other people, such as other family members, to get a fresh range of ideas.

Sometimes you might not be able to find a solution that makes you both happy. But by compromising, you should be able to find a solution you can both live with.

5. Put the solution into action

Once you’ve agreed on a solution, plan exactly how it will work. It can help to do this in writing, and to include the following points:

* Who will do what?
* When will they do it?
* What’s needed to put the solution into action?

You could also talk about when you’ll meet again to look at how the solution is working. Your children might need some role-playing or coaching to feel confident with his/her solution. For example, if they are going to try to resolve a fight with a friend, they might find it helpful to practise with you what they are going to say.

6. Evaluate the outcome

Once your children have put the plan into action, you need to check how it went. There might be hiccups or obstacles along the way, so you’ll need to give the solution time to work. Also note that not all solutions will work. Sometimes you’ll need to try more than one solution. Part of effective problem-solving is being able to adapt when things don’t go as well as expected.

Ask your children the following questions:

* What has worked well?
* What hasn’t worked so well?
* What could you or we do differently to make the solution work more smoothly?

If the solution hasn’t worked, go back to step 1 of this problem-solving strategy and start again. Perhaps the problem wasn’t what you thought it was, or the solutions weren’t quite right.

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### **When conflict is the problem**

During adolescence, you might clash with your children more often than you did in the past. You might disagree about a range of issues, especially your children’s need to develop independence. It can be hard to let go of your authority and let your children have more say in decision-making. But they need to do this as part of their journey towards being a responsible young adult.

For example: Let’s imagine that you and your children are in conflict over a party at the weekend.

You want to:

* take and pick up your children
* check that an adult will be supervising
* have your children home by 11pm.

Your child wants to:

* go with friends
* come home in a taxi
* come home when she’s ready.

How do you reach an agreement that allows both of you to get some of what you want?

The problem-solving strategy described above can be used for these types of conflicts. It follows these steps:

1. Identify the problem

Put the problem into words that make it workable. For example:

* ‘You want to go to a party with your friends and come home in a taxi.’
* ‘I’m worried there will be a lot of kids drinking at the party, and you don’t know whether any adults will be present.’
* ‘When you’re out, I worry about where you are and want to know you’re OK. But we need to work out a way for you to be able to go out with your friends, and for me to feel comfortable that you’re safe.’

2. Think about why it’s a problem

Find out what’s important for your children and explain what’s important from your perspective. For example, you might ask, ‘Why don’t you want to agree on a specific time to be home?’ Then listen to your children’s point of view.

3. Brainstorm possible solutions

Be creative and aim for at least four solutions each. For example, you might suggest picking your children up, but they can suggest what time it will happen. Or your children might say, ‘How about I share a taxi home with two friends who live nearby?’

4. Evaluate the solutions

Look at the pros and cons of each solution, starting with the pros. It might be helpful to start by crossing off any solutions that aren’t acceptable to either of you. For example, you might agree that your children taking a taxi home alone is not a good idea.

You might prefer to have some clear rules about time – for example, your children must be home by 11pm unless otherwise negotiated. Be prepared with a back-up plan in case something goes wrong, such as if the designated driver is drunk or not ready to leave. Discuss the back-up plan with your children.

5. Put the solution into action

Once you’ve reached a compromise and have a plan of action, you need to make the terms of the agreement clear. It can help to do this in writing, including notes on who will do what, when and how.

6. Evaluate the outcome

After trying the solution, make time to ask yourselves whether it worked and whether the agreement was fair. By putting time and energy into developing your children’s problem-solving skills, you’re sending the message that you value your children’s input into decisions that affect their lives. This can enhance your relationship with your children.

**Source:** http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/problem\_solving\_teenagers.html