

# *Enriching* foster family relationships through



## Guidelines for foster parents

R. Ozretich, S. Vuchinich, C. Pratt, and S. Bowman

**F**oster families provide care and support for more than 500,000 foster children in the United States. Foster families, like all families, face conflicts and stresses that demand effective problem solving. This guide outlines some simple ideas for effective problem solving in foster families.

### What is problem solving?

Problem solving is a way to resolve a particular issue, problem, or conflict.

Problem solving may take place in an informal way during everyday family activities (interpersonal problem solving), or may be conducted more formally during a family meeting (family problem solving). Interpersonal and family problem solving involve similar, easy-to-learn steps.

**Interpersonal problem solving** is usually used for issues that involve only two or three people and a simple, temporary dispute. For example, a parent and two children may use interpersonal problem solving to resolve quarrels over toys or teasing (see page 3).

**Family problem solving** involves the entire family. It is most useful for bigger issues and for issues that involve a number of family members. Examples include developing plans for sharing chores or taking a family vacation, revising family rules about going places, and allocating personal space (see page 4).

Family problem solving is most effective when it is part of regular family meetings.

### Problem solving enriches family relationships

Foster families often face more challenges than other families. Foster parents will find that interpersonal and family problem solving are useful tools for helping birth and foster children make necessary adjustments more easily and successfully.

Family problem solving does *not* mean that parents resign their authority over children, nor is it simply an opportunity for parents to lecture children about their obligations in the family.

Problem solving helps parents and children listen to each other's feelings and ideas about important issues. It enables families to find solutions that are agreeable to all, within the limits set by family rules and parental expectations.

### Sitting down together

Begin problem solving by sitting down together and listening carefully.

Make sure everyone is sitting together comfortably before you start problem solving. Even in simple interpersonal problem solving, sitting down together will help everyone focus on the process.

Family problem solving works best as a part of family meetings that are held regularly. Such family meetings provide the opportunity for positive interactions and fun activities as well as problem solving (see "For further information," page 6).



---

## Careful listening

Careful listening is perhaps the most important—and difficult—part of problem solving. Careful listening is important for several reasons.

First, it provides information that is essential to finding a good solution for any problem.

Second, careful listening helps each family member become more aware of how others in the family are viewing an issue. This can increase feelings of empathy and caring which, in turn, may motivate family members to accommodate one another.

Third, and most important, all family members with a stake in a problem need a chance to state their feelings within a *climate of acceptance*. A climate of acceptance creates a sense of safety and belonging and also leads to the participants' feeling a greater sense of "buy-in" on the problem solving process and its outcome.

A good rule is that everyone, including parents, should spend more time listening than talking. Also,

parents should avoid lecturing and criticizing. People don't think well when they are feeling defensive.

Family members often find it difficult not to interrupt during a problem solving discussion. Assuring everyone that there will be several opportunities for each person to share his or her ideas can reduce interrupting.

Children as young as 3 can participate in short problem solving discussions. With young children, parents may need to help explain to one child what another is trying to say.

No one should ridicule others or their ideas. Anger and put-downs interfere with the problem solving process. If tempers flare, call the meeting to a halt and designate a time to continue after tempers have cooled down.

More positive interactions and fewer negative interactions are linked to better family problem solving and fewer psychological problems among foster children (see "Research results," in box).

### Research results

Our study of family problem solving interactions compared three groups: Oregon foster families, birth families whose children were at risk for psychological problems, and birth families with children who were lower risk. We found that:

- Foster children and at-risk children had similar levels of psychological problems
- Foster family interactions were similar to birth families with lower risk children
- Both foster and lower risk birth families showed more positive and fewer negative interactions than the birth families with at-risk children

Across all three family groups, families who were more skilled at problem solving reported fewer psychological problems among their children.

Research was conducted by the Family Policy Program at Oregon State University and funded by the Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, DC, Grant No. 90-CW-1090. We are grateful to the foster families who opened their homes to us, and we hope this information will be helpful to all foster families in the very important work they do.

## Basic steps

Expect problem solving to take about 5 to 15 minutes for a fairly simple issue or 45 to 60 minutes for a more complex or emotional issue.

Problem solving usually requires that a parent act as a facilitator to guide everyone through the process. In the following description of the problem solving steps, it is assumed that you are the facilitator.

**1. Define the problem.** Often, the real problem that needs to be solved is hidden beneath the first issues that are raised. You will need to listen carefully to figure out the real problem. Pay attention to body language and behavior, not only words.

For example, a birth child may say she "can't stand" a particular foster child and wants him to leave. After asking her for more information and listening carefully, you may find that the real problem is your birth child misses having time alone with you.

It helps to ask each person to describe what he or she believes the problem is, and then you restate the problem yourself in words that are simple and clear. Ask the others whether this description is accurate and revise it as needed until all agree that the problem has been correctly defined.

**2. List possible solutions.** After the problem is defined, ask everyone for ideas about resolving it. List all the solutions the group can think of at the time.

Encourage creativity. Even outlandish ideas can lead to others that may be very good. Again, no one's idea should be ridiculed.

## Interpersonal Problem Solving: *An Example*

Jenny and Jake are arguing about sharing a set of Lego blocks. They are starting to yell loudly.

PARENT: What's the problem?

JAKE: I hate Jenny!

PARENT: You are mad at your foster sister.

JAKE: She keeps grabbing all the blue Legos!

PARENT: You don't want her to take so many blue Legos. (Jenny has wandered over to another play area. Parent goes over to her and leads her back, saying...)

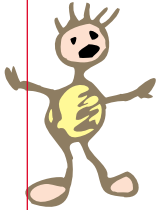
Jenny, please come sit down so that we can talk about this.

JENNY: I didn't do anything wrong.

PARENT: Jake is upset and wants to talk about this problem. What's going on?

JENNY: I just wanted Jake to play with me.

PARENT (Defines the problem): Jake, Jenny wants



you to play with her, but you don't want to share the blue Legos. (Asks for possible solutions) Jenny and Jake, what could you do so you can both be happy?

JAKE: I could give her all the yellow Legos.

JENNY: He could help me put my Legos together, but I still want the blue ones.

JAKE: I could help her but keep half the blue Legos.

PARENT: Are you ready to choose a solution?

JENNY: Yeah! Jake can keep half the blue Legos, and he'll help me.

PARENT: Do you both agree? You did a good job of problem solving!



Only after you list a number of solutions should you begin to discuss the value of each one. Sometimes, a workable solution comes up immediately, especially when resolving fairly simple issues such as how to share sports equipment.

At other times, families may need to work hard to compose a list of possible solutions to a more complex problem. In some cases, several problem solving sessions may be needed.

When the family is trying to solve more difficult or complex problems, it is especially important that the facilitator or someone else write down all ideas without judgment.

**3. Decide on the best solution.** Look at the list of possible solutions and discuss each one, at least briefly. Be gentle, and remember that each solution was someone's idea.

If any solution is completely unacceptable to parents, clearly state the reasons early in the discussion. Then for each solution ask, "What do you think might happen if we tried this solution?" Help children think realistically about the probable consequences of each solution.

Give acceptable ideas a "plus" and unacceptable ideas a "minus." If no idea is rated "plus" by everyone, parts of two or more solutions may be combined to form one that is acceptable.

When a solution is selected, ask all participants whether the solution is acceptable and whether they are willing to give it a try. Tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions can provide clues about an individual's level of agreement with the proposed solution. For example, a child who says she agrees, but speaks with downcast eyes and in a very quiet voice, probably has reservations. In that case, a parent could say, "It looks like you're not very happy with this solution. Let's talk some more."

Remember that discussing possible solutions and deciding which one to try will take flexibility and patience.

**4. Make a plan.** Write down a plan for putting the solution into practice. Decide who will do what, where, and how. Ask whether everyone agrees to the plan. Decide on a trial period—generally, 1 to 2 weeks—and write down the date for checking to see whether the plan is working.

Post the plan where everyone can easily refer to it during the trial period. Put the plan into action.

**5. Evaluate the plan.** The solution should be implemented exactly as it was planned. If anyone wants to make changes, check with the other family members first.

After giving a solution enough time for everyone to have experience with it, hold a family meeting to

## Family Problem Solving: An Example

The Jones family has a teenage daughter and two younger foster sons. They hold weekly family meetings during which they have a special snack, plan fun activities, bring up current family issues, and problem solve. Issues for problem solving often are identified during the week before the family meeting and are posted on the refrigerator.

PARENT (Beginning the process of defining the problem): Now it's time for problem solving. Sarah has brought up a problem, and it's about noise and getting homework done, is that right, Sarah?

SARAH: Yeah! I can't concentrate when the kids are always running around yelling and joking and playing loud music!

GREG: And Sarah yells at us and calls us bad names!

PARENT (Defining the problem and helping each family member to actively listen to the others): So when Sarah is doing homework at the kitchen

table, she needs quiet. She feels angry when Greg and Matt are being noisy. Greg and Matt don't like being called bad names.

MATT: And being yelled at!

PARENT: Anything else? OK, what are some ideas for solving this problem? I'll write them down. Remember, it's OK to have some crazy ideas, but no criticizing now!

SARAH: The boys could stay in their room while I do homework.

MATT: Sarah could do homework in her room.

PARENT (Introducing a crazy idea): We could hope the tooth fairy might give us a desk for Sarah.

GREG: Sarah could wear earplugs.

PARENT (Noticing Sarah rolling her eyes): Sarah, you look like you're getting angry. Shall we take a break so you can cool off? No? OK, remember these are just ideas at this point, and they can be crazy.

SARAH: Greg and Matt could do homework at the same time as I do. Then they'd have to be quiet.

PARENT: We could schedule a quiet time for homework and resting.

MATT: Sarah could pay a fine every time she calls us a bad name.

SARAH: I could do homework in the kitchen after Greg and Matt go to bed.

PARENT: Greg and Matt could go to bed right after dinner to give Sarah time to do homework.

GREG: If we all did homework at the kitchen table after dinner, Sarah could help me with math.

MATT: And she could help me with vocabulary.

PARENT: Perhaps I could help you while I am working on paying bills or working in the kitchen. Any other ideas? Are we ready to discuss our list?

SARAH: Put a big minus by Sarah wears earplugs.

MATT: Put a minus by us staying in our rooms—and the going to bed right after dinner.

PARENT: Minus the tooth fairy idea, too. I don't think it will happen, and we can't afford to buy a desk. Are there any pluses?

GREG: I like the idea of all doing homework at the same time. Give it a plus!

SARAH: You would have to be quiet!

PARENT: Do you think you and Matt could do homework quietly?

MATT: Yeah, but we don't have as much homework as Sarah does.

GREG: But we could sit and read afterwards until she's finished.

PARENT: I think that's a wonderful idea. What do you think, Matt?

MATT: OK, I guess. What about the bad names?

SARAH: I'll agree to pay Matt and Greg a dime if I call them a bad name.

PARENT: Is that agreeable? (Summarizing) I'm going to write down our plan and put it on the refrigerator. How long shall we give the plan before we check on how well it's working?

SARAH: A week.

PARENT: Is that agreeable? OK. I think we've done a great job!

After 1 week, the family discussed the solution at the family meeting. Sarah had been fined twice for name-calling. Greg and Matt found they needed to get more books to read after they finished their homework. The parent decided she needed to help Matt with his reading during this time. The family agreed the overall solution was working and that they would continue to use it.



evaluate it. Someone in the family may think that it isn't working out. In that case, the solution may need to be revised in another problem solving session.

If a good revision isn't obvious, family members should reexamine the original list of possible solutions. Decide on another solution that is agreeable to everyone, or think of additional solutions.

### It's worth the effort!

Problem solving is worth the effort. It resolves family conflicts that otherwise would continue to detract from the quality of family life.

It also develops skills that children and parents can apply in other situations and times in their lives. These skills include planning, listening, and looking at something from another person's point of view.

In addition, effective problem solving increases the quality of communication among family members. It also increases feelings of caring and warmth.

Overall, effective problem solving is a valuable tool for enriching family life in foster families.



## Problem Solving

### A summary of the basic steps

#### 1. Define the problem.

- Describe your own perception of the problem
- Ask for other ideas about the problem.
- Listen carefully and help each child "hear" what the others are saying.
- Agree on a definition.

#### 2. List possible solutions.

- Take turns contributing many ideas.
- List all ideas and don't evaluate them until later.
- Be creative and include crazy ideas.
- Listen carefully without judging or lecturing.

#### 3. Decide on the best solution.

- Take turns evaluating each idea.
- Talk about what might happen if the family followed the idea.
- Give each idea a "plus" or "minus" accordingly.
- Select one idea that everyone rated a "plus." If no idea is rated "plus" by everyone, combine several ideas or return to Step 2.

#### 4. Make a plan.

- Write down exactly how the solution should work. Decide who will do what, where, and how.
- Ask whether everyone agrees to the plan.
- Decide how long to give the plan a try.
- Put the plan into action.

#### 5. Evaluate the plan.

- Meet again and ask each person how well the plan is working.
- Decide whether the plan needs revision or will be continued.

## For further information

*Communication through Family Meetings*, EC 1436.

May 1994. Corvallis: Oregon State University Extension Service. 50¢

*You, Your Child, and Problem Solving*, EC 1451. March 1995. Corvallis: Oregon State University Extension Service. 50¢

Faber, Adele and Elaine Mazlish. 1999. *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk*. New York: Avon Books.

Crary, Elizabeth. 1984. *Kids Can Cooperate*. Seattle: Parenting Press, Inc.

Gordon, Thomas. 2000. *Parent Effectiveness Training: A Proven Program for Raising Responsible Children*. New York: New American Library.

Vuchinich, Samuel. 1999. *Problem Solving in Families: Research and Practice*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Steinberg, Laurence and Ann Levine. 1989. *You and Your Adolescent: A Parent's Guide for Ages 10–20*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.

To order OSU Extension publications, send the complete title and amount indicated to:

Publication Orders  
Extension & Station Communications  
Oregon State University  
422 Kerr Administration  
Corvallis, OR 97331-2119  
Fax 541-737-0817

We offer a 25-percent discount on orders of 100 copies or more of a single title.

Many of our publications are accessible via our Web site at <http://eesc.orst.edu>

© 2001 Oregon State University.

---

This publication was produced and distributed in furtherance of the Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914. Extension work is a cooperative program of Oregon State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Oregon counties.

Oregon State University Extension Service offers educational programs, activities, and materials—*without discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, national origin, age, marital status, disability, or disabled veteran or Vietnam-era veteran status*. Oregon State University Extension Service is an Equal Opportunity Employer.

---

Published January 2001.