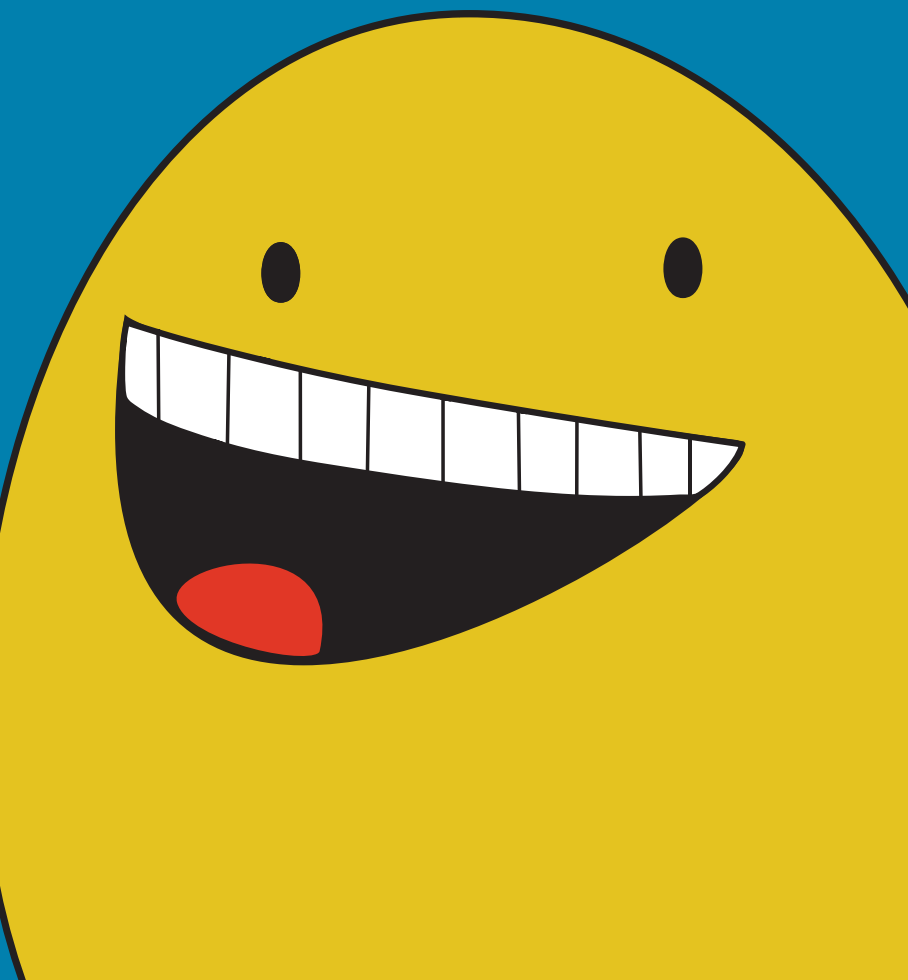




# **Problem-Solving Together**

COPA's Tool for Empowerment



# Empowerment Listening and Problem-Solving

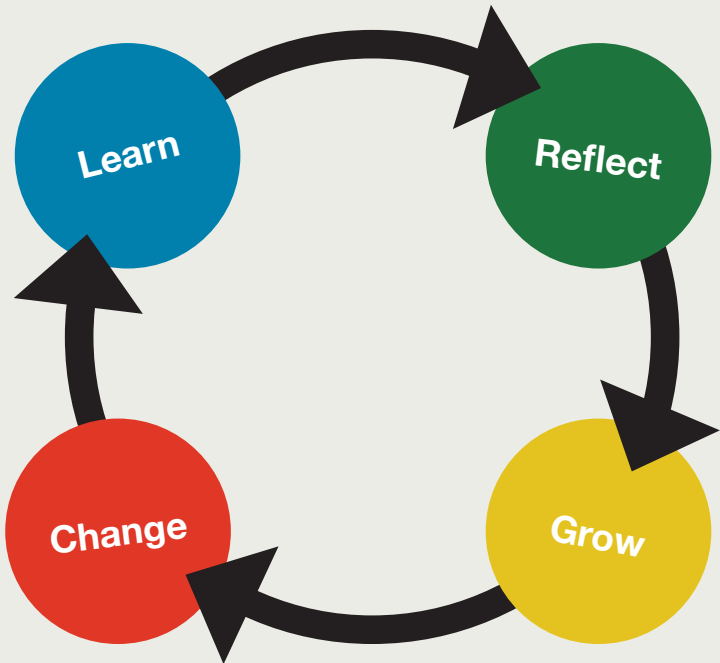
We can offer support to children who are struggling with a problem, and help them become effective at solving problems, by being fully present and listening very carefully. When we allow children to share their concerns as they see them, and to be key players in addressing them, we create space to become empowered and meet life's many challenges.

Conversely, stepping in to fix children's problems can undermine their ability to manage difficulties. It may seem easier, in the short run, for us to come up with strategies we think are appropriate; in the long term we short-change our children, and in so doing are likely to reduce the likelihood of improving the situation. Also, children are more likely to follow through on an action plan when they are meaningfully involved in creating it.

Furthermore, if we are striving to shift unequal power relations when someone is being bullied or experiencing abuse, it is very important that we allow them to have as much say as possible, while providing adult guidance, support and follow-up.

Children who are feeling powerless need opportunities to have a say and to take charge—especially of their own life. This builds self-esteem and self-confidence, while interrupting the cycle of abuse.

## COPA's Cycle of Positive Change



## COPA'S Empowerment-Based Problem-Solving Approach

Bringing empowerment-based listening and problem-solving into our interactions with young people can be challenging, especially when we are faced with a worrisome or frightening situation. COPA has developed practical guidelines to help us be supportive and effective.

# Learning about the Problem

Be sure to tell your child right away how glad you are that they have approached you. Recognize their courage in doing so. Thanking children goes a long way.

Give your child a real opportunity to explain what is bothering them. Describing the situation may evoke painful feelings, and it is important to validate these to help ensure that your child feels understood and supported.

It is important to give children ample space and time to describe the situation, to let them move at their own pace, and to avoid pressuring them for details.

In the course of this process, your child may share information about steps they have already undertaken. This information will be useful later on, when working together to develop ideas for an action plan.

Remember, your child may feel embarrassed that they have a problem and that they have not dealt with it adequately. Our culture is filled with victim-blaming messages that many of us have absorbed.

Tell them clearly **they are never to blame, no matter what they have done or not done to stop it.**

## General Suggestions

- Thank your child for having the courage to express their concerns and for talking to you. Recognize that it may have been difficult or frightening for them to do so. *It's not easy to ask for help in a situation like this. I'm really glad you talked to me—it was really brave of you.*
- Tell them clearly that it is not their fault (if they have been bullied or experienced an assault).
- Make a clear statement that assigns responsibility to those who are doing the hurting and makes it clear that the behaviour is unacceptable. For example, *That's not OK. No one has the right to treat someone else like that or You don't deserve to be treated like that. No one does.*
- Reinforce their capacity to reflect, learn, grow and change (if they have been involved in hurting others).
- Believe your child. If there are inconsistencies in their account, trust that these details will become clear as the story unfolds.
- Respect their rhythm as they talk to you. Try to avoid interrogating by asking too many questions. Allow for moments of silence.
- Try to stay calm and present. Steady, deep breathing can help.

## Clarify Your Role and Its Limits

It is important to avoid making assumptions about what your child is looking for when they confide in you. They may be simply seeking a place to find relief from mounting pressure by expressing their fears. Older children have often told us that all they want is someone to talk to and someone to listen to them, and nothing else.

Or, they may hope that you will be able to step in to fix the problem, in a way that may not be realistic or possible.

### Ways to Say It

- *Can you tell me what you're hoping for from me?*
- *How would you like me to help you?*

Try to keep your questions open-ended (questions which do not require yes/no answers). *How long has this been going on?* may be more effective than *Has this been going on for a long time?*

# Brainstorming

Brainstorming is an open and creative process where all suggestions are accepted and noted without discussion or judgment. Our own ideas may be helpful, but ideally we will wait until the young person has shared theirs.

It is particularly important that your child be encouraged to participate actively in brainstorming—this will have a real effect on their commitment to follow through on the action plan. If the plan is based on someone else's ideas, they are less likely to do so.

## Ways to Say It

- *Would you like us to talk about some strategies that might work?*
- *What do you think you could do?*
- Avoid making assumptions or projecting your own feelings onto your child. Check your understanding of the situation. You might paraphrase what you think you have heard: *So you're saying that this all started last year, but that it's gotten worse this year?*, or ask for clarification: *It sounds as though you're feeling pretty lonely, and that you wish you'd never changed schools. Have I got that right?*



- Help your child name their feelings: *You look like you're feeling pretty sad right now, or That must be so scary.*
- Make sure that your child's needs and feelings take priority over your own even if they triggering difficult feelings for you. It is important that these feelings do not become the focus of the discussion, although this may be very difficult.
- Avoid making promises, such as saying that everything will be fine, that the bullying will never happen again, or that you won't tell anyone. (You may need to talk to someone to get help and support.)
- And for the child who is bullying others: *How do you think you can improve/resolve/repair the situation?*

## **Reviewing Strategies**

Now is the time for some collaborative thinking. While your child should be encouraged to take the lead at this stage, your input can be helpful, too. Start by asking questions that allow your child to express themselves, to reflect and to consider options.

### **Ways to Say It**

- *What might happen if you decide to...?*
- *How might they react if you...?*
- *What if we cannot pick you up after school?*

Our attitude is very important during this process. We need to use age-appropriate ways to communicate that we respect them and have confidence in their abilities and choices, and in their capacity to reflect, learn, grow and change.

This can be communicated in many ways—through words, tone of voice, body language, facial expression and more.

### **Ways to Say It**

- *What are the advantages/risks of this option?*  
(Repeat for each option)
- *What do you think of this approach?*

## **Choosing Strategies**

Following a thorough discussion of the risks and benefits of the ideas on the list, it is crucial that your child makes their decision without feeling forced into it, if at all possible.

It is important for both you and your child to remember that if the chosen strategy is proven unsuccessful, it is always possible to try other options.

### **Ways to Say It**

- *Which one would you like to try?*
- *What other ideas have you thought of?*

# Creating an Action Plan

Encourage your child to be as concrete and detailed as possible when developing an action plan.

Again, we can help to develop this process through the use of gentle and respectful questions with the goal of exploring the situation more fully.

## Ways to Say It

- *When do you think is the best time to try it?*
- *How can I help you figure that out?*

We often believe that confronting the person who is doing the hurting is the best thing to do and you might encourage your child to do so.

It is important to be aware that this is not necessarily the best strategy for each person. There are many ways of responding assertively and with dignity and self-respect that do not involve confrontation.

It is logical that the person who is experiencing the problem is in the best position to assess the strategies that are the most comfortable and appropriate. With guidance from caring and supporting adults, young people can create an action plan that is positive and practical, and that they are comfortable putting in place.

## When you create the action plan, COPA suggests:

- Involving your child closely in developing it, ensuring that they feel seen and heard, and an important part of the process.
- Encouraging your child to make choices, to think of strategies, and to make as many decisions as possible, within appropriate limits.
- Helping them assess whether the strategies they have in mind are passive, aggressive or (ideally) assertive. (See COPA's Guide to Bullying for Parents: *Fostering Safe, Inclusive and Accepting Schools*)
- Helping your child create a list of assertive statements and then practising together—if your child decides to say something assertive to the child who is hurting him or her.
- If your child and a friend are going to do this together, suggest practice time with both of them (with permission from the other child's parents).

## Carrying out the Action Plan

Try to ensure that your child has support when moving forward. Getting help from you or a friend, or another family member can be part of the action plan.

## **Ways to Say It**

- *Thanks for talking to me about this. Let's see how your plan works.*
- *When would be a good time for you to check in again? Later? Tomorrow?*

## **Following up on the Action Plan**

This is a crucial step, as it is easy for your child to become discouraged and give up if the initial attempt to carry out the action plan has not been successful. Your child is more likely to have confidence in taking that first step, if they can imagine you supporting them and checking in with them later to find out how it went. It is important to let them know ahead of time that you will be doing so. Our continued support is important, especially if the first attempt has not gone as hoped.

It is important to maintain an attitude of optimism and confidence and to frame the experience as a natural part of the problem-solving process.

## **Ways to Say It**

- *How did it go?*
- *How do you feel about how it went?*
- *What is the second choice in your action plan we can review together?*
- *What could we have done differently?*

# Additional Strategies

Problem-solving is an ongoing process, and often involves a great deal of trial and error. It is important to review other options if more steps need to be taken. At the same time, we can help our children understand that if a part of the plan doesn't work out, we don't have to give up; we can still work together to deal with the problem. We can state this clearly.

## Ways to Say it

- *How about if we talk about another strategy that might help you?*
- *I really believe you can do this. Let's figure out another way to improve the situation.*
- *I am here for you. Now and later on.*

**At the core of COPA's problem-solving tool, and all of our resources, is the belief that everyone has the right to be *safe, strong and free*. We all belong.**





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