

Thinking It Through: A Parent Guide to a Mindful Approach for Solving Problems

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Introduction

Mindfulness means paying full attention to something. It means slowing down to really notice what you're doing. Being mindful is the opposite of rushing or multitasking. When you're mindful, you're taking your time. When confronted by a problem, mindful, thoughtful behavior is often abandoned. Adults and children seek quick fixes without fully defining the problem to be solved or the work needed to reach a solution.

Everyone has problems. Sometimes they are life-changing, important issues like illness or family decisions. More often, they are the everyday problems of life — what to make for dinner, how to juggle the family schedule, where are the sneakers that your 4-year-old insists on wearing today?

Children have problems, too. Often, they are associated with the requirements of school. Though in the eyes of adults, the problems faced by children may seem trivial, for youngsters, making decisions, resolving conflicts, discovering new approaches for play or recreation are important, and finding solutions to those problems may sometimes be overwhelming. As a parent, the first step is to take a breath, attempt to defuse conflicts, and restore calm to the situation. But what to do next? *Thinking It Through* provides that answer. It is a mindful, purposeful approach for parents to empower their children to solve the problems they encounter for themselves.

Though usually considered as a negative experience, problems can be very positive; think of them as challenges, decisions, opportunities and the means for seeking mental and physical health.

The *Thinking It Through Cycle of Problem-Solving* gives structure, language, skills and evaluative tools to a way of thinking a problem through to a solution. The graphic design of the Cycle can lead a youngster both literally and figuratively through the mindful, purposeful exercise of solving a problem. Parents using this approach can incorporate their own meditative and mindful behavior skills to provide calm for youngsters who often see problems as chaotic and solutions as unattainable.

Goals of the Parent Guide

Goals of the Parent Guide to a Mindful Approach for Solving Problems

Children will:

- Learn to slow down, breathe deeply, think, and work out the problem
- Use the "language of problem-solving" to talk and solve problems with others
- Learn the Cycle of Problem-Solving, which can be used by everyone in all situations in need of a solution
- Have fun learning to be better problem solvers

Parents will:

- Learn and share vocabulary for problem-solving with their children
- Incorporate the problem-solving process in the mindful behaviors used to diminish stress and anxiety
- Help children use the Cycle of Problem-Solving independently
- Learn a thoughtful approach to solving problems applicable to their lives at home, at work, and in their community



The Cycle of Problem Solving

There are six phases to the Cycle of Problem-Solving, which at first parents and children complete together. Later, with practice, children can learn to use the cycle more independently. There are guiding questions to help children at each phase.



Cycle of Problem Solving

The 6-Phase Process to Solve the Problem

Phase 1: The child describes the problem in his or her own words. Often the problem is something the child wants or needs.

Phase 2: The child talks about what caused the problem and how it makes him or her feel. Adults help children describe the behaviors that happened in the incident. Older children might research the problem to have more information to use when solving it.

Phase 3: The child considers as many ideas as possible to solve the problem. This is called brainstorming. Adults help children "think of just one more idea" and all ideas are recorded.

Phase 4: The child picks one recorded idea to try and with the help of the adult plans how to use that idea.

Phase 5: The child carries out the plan.

Phase 6: After the child has tried the plan which is the solution to the problem, he or she talks about how well the plan worked and how it might be used in the future

What is Creative Thinking?

Creative thinking is an important part of problem-solving; you can see it together with critical thinking in the center of the Cycle. A child uses creative thinking when he or she thinks "outside the box" to try to think of different ways to solve the problem. The more ideas "created," the more chance there is to find the best one. Creative thinking is a skill that empowers children to consider many possibilities, options, and opportunities.

Children use creative thinking to think of as many ideas as possible by using strategies such as brainstorming. When brainstorming, all ideas for solving the problem — even crazy ones — are welcome! You and your youngster can each make a list of five ideas for example, share them and then try for three more. When using brainstorming in Phase 3 of the problem-solving process, ideas can be recorded on Post-It notes or paper to organize, discuss and help make the selection of an idea to try as a solution.

There are other tools to use with your child to promote creative thinking. In all cases, no judgements are made, and all ideas are accepted as possible solutions to the problem.

Creative thinking tools include:

Question Storming: Generating many "I wonder who, what, when, where, why, and how" questions to answer

Walking in another person's shoes: Asking a child to consider how other people would feel, what they might do, and what they might say "What if....?": Asking questions that can generate new ideas such as "What would happen if? What if I did.....?"

Be a Clever Detective: Discover what others might have overlooked or didn't look hard enough to find when thinking about a problem

Build a Better Mousetrap: Encourage wild, crazy and original ideas for creating something new from something that already exists

Remember that creative thinking does not work alone; it is connected to critical thinking. Critical thinking is when the child considers the effects of each of the many possible solutions and selects one — or more — to try as the actual solution to the problem. Critical thinking, where the child is helped to understand the consequences of the creative thinking ideas, brings the problem to a solution.

Let's solve some problems!

Two children erupt in a conflict when there is disagreement about playing with toys; in this case the babysitter helps them solve the problem of who should play with the magnetic blocks. With the children she has drawn the Cycle of Problem Solving on the driveway with chalk. The children move to each spot on the Cycle while "solving" the problem. Here are the questions the babysitter asked the children:



The children complain that the conflict is that both want to use the blocks (Phase 1). After they list four ideas for solving the problem such as play with another toy, build something smaller, wait until one is done and build something together (Phase 2), the babysitter helps them consider the different suggestions and to select one (Phase 3). After the children shared the blocks and built a fort together (Phase 4) the babysitter asked them to think about how the idea worked and what they learned (Phases 5 and 6).

Of course, helping children resolve their differences is not always as easy as this! But the problem-solving thinking process can be introduced at a very young age in an authentic way. Paying close attention to what was accomplished — in this case, the details of the fort — also shows that their work was appreciated.

The Cycle of Problem Solving

Here's another example for an older child trying to decide what to wear to school.



Cycle of Problem Solving

The cycle and the questions are problem solving at work. This child has identified her problem. She is doing research about her day and the condition of her clothes to help make some choices of what to try. She makes her choice and gets some feedback from her friends. Finally, at the end of the process, she considers how best to decide what to wear to school in the future. Who knows, maybe she will conclude she should do her own laundry!

Let's Play a Game!

These are simple games for you to play with your child to introduce the concept of problem-solving, apply problem-solving strategies, and help your youngster learn a process that he or she can use to solve problems independently.

Game #1: Brainstorming

The object of this cooperative game is to create as many solutions to the problems listed below as possible.

For each problem, each player individually writes three possible solutions. After three minutes, each player reads one of their listed solutions. Players add any new solutions that are shared to their list. Players continue to share their solutions without repeating any previously shared. When all solutions have been shared, players have three minutes to write three new more solutions.

Play continues by encouraging funny, crazy and "out-of-the-box" solutions until everyone's brain hurts!

Problems to Solve

The dog ate my homework! How do I keep the dog from eating my homework?

What are the best excuses for not doing my homework? I'm hungry, and there are no more cookies!

I want to go outside, but I'm supposed to put my toys away!

I like fishing, but ugh! I don't want to touch the worms!

How can I keep my fishing worms warm when I am fishing in cold weather? How can I make a great home for worms?

How could I make a way for squirrels/birds to have fun getting food? How could I make a maze for ants to go through outside?

I don't have any money! How can I give my friend a present?

How can I get more time on my phone?

How can I make one more friend?

How can I get what I want for dinner?

What excuses can I make for not doing a chore I don't want to do?

What can I create so the members of my family can show all the kind things they do in one week?

What acts of kindness can I do?

How can I get more sleep?

How can I help my family use less electricity and water?

How can I help my family recycle?

How can I help my family waste less food?

What are creative ways I could have fun getting more exercise?

If I could design my own clothes what would they look like?

How can we have more fun at home?

When I feel lazy, sad, mad, bored, etc., what could I do to snap myself out of it?

Modifications to the Game

- Adults and/or children write the problems to reflect their home and interests.
- Draw pictures of the created solutions. Players have to name the solution by looking at the picture.
- Organize teams of adults and children to solve the problems.
 - Play competitively. The team or individual with the most solutions is the winner.

Game #2: Become a problem-solving artist

The Cycle can be a physical tool for younger children. Using chalk on the driveway (be sure to take a picture when complete) or large poster paper ask your youngster to design his or her own Cycle of Problem-Solving. See the babysitter story for an example. The only requirement is there are six phases in the circle.



To help children understand that they are making a mindful decision about how to solve their problem, ask them to literally walk through the phases as they talk to you about the steps they are taking to come to a solution. Children can display their own rendition of the Cycle in their rooms to use when tackling a problem on their own!

Game #3: Problem-solving matching

Use the Cycle created in Becoming a Problem-Solving Artist or print the Cycle of Problem Solving template; a larger version of the template to print is on the next page. Print and cut out the yellow and green playing cards and you are ready to play! First, match the yellow Phase Cards with the appropriate numbered phase on the Cycle of Problem Solving. Next, use the green Guiding Question Cards to match each guiding question with the correct phase on the Cycle.



CYCLE OF PROBLEM SOLVING

Generating ideas for a solution	Problem finding	Creative and critical thinking
Reflecting and setting goals	Researching	Selecting a solution and designing a plan
Implementing a plan		



What is the problem?	How did the solution work? What will you do if the problem happens again?	Use that solution.
What are your ideas for how to solve the problem?	Tell me about what happens to cause the problem.	Pick a solution to try.
How good are you in thinking of ideas to solve this problem? Each of you think of at least two ideas to solve the problem about who will play with the blocks.	How did your idea work out?	Use your idea to build together.
Tell me what the problem is.	Pick a solution that will make you happy.	What did you learn about solving problems?
How successful was I in getting my work done on time? What are the positive points of my preparation? How can I improve?	I often do not get my work done on time. What can I do to get my work done on time?	What are the reasons I am not getting my work done on time?
What is my detailed action plan to use my idea(s)? How will I judge how successful I was?	What are some actions I can take to get my work done on time?	Which idea or ideas shall I use to solve my problem? Pick one or two to start with to experi- ence success. I may need to go back through Phases 1, 2, and 3 for other ideas.
How many outfits should I try on?	What do I have to know to pick out something to wear? Is it a gym day? What's the weather? What's clean in my closet? Will my mother iron for me?	How good was my choice about what to wear? What information will I need to make a better choice tomorrow?
How much time do I have to get dressed? I'll pick these clothes to wear.	I don't have anything to wear! What am I going to wear to school today?	Get dressed in time to make the bus. How do I look? What do my friends think about my choice?

Helpful Hints for Parents

The Cycle of Problem-Solving can be used by parents as a tool for promoting mindful behavior.

Print or draw an enlarged version of the Cycle (See "Become a Problem Solving Artist") to place on the floor. When a child needs time to calm down when facing a difficult situation (Time-Out) ask him or her to stand in the phase of the Cycle that represents his or her feelings. Use that as an opportunity to help your child gain control of his or her emotions and then "walk" through the Cycle to solve the problem.

Using the Cycle, ask your child to identify the problem and what steps they have taken to solve it independently before asking for help. Talk with your youngsters about what he or she can do at each phase to solve the problem.

When children are arguing, use the Cycle to help them resolve their conflict cooperatively. By asking guiding questions at each phase of the Cycle, parents can help children find the resources and strategies (only one person speaks at a time, there will be no name calling, each child lists their ideas about how to resolve their conflict and shares them without interruption, etc.) to end the dispute. The Cycle provides structure for the discussion between the children.

The Cycle of Problem-Solving gives parents an opportunity for authentic encouragement rather than rewards. No gold stars, candy or points! Instead, use your child's successful use of each phase of the Cycle to solve his or her problems as the reason to encourage additional efforts to use the Cycle. For example, young children can choose to ring a bell, bang on a pan or clap hands when successful in a phase of the Cycle or when the problem is solved.

The Cycle of Problem-Solving template including notes about the work completed in each phase of the Cycle and the solution to the problem can be displayed on the refrigerator or family bulletin board along with the child's celebrated art work!

Helpful Hints for Parents

Provide your child with special recognition for evidence of improvement in using the Cycle to solve problems or in a specific area set as a goal in phase 6 of the Cycle.

Most importantly, show your youngster that mindful, purposeful behavior yields positive results. Model problem-solving thinking by using the language of problem solving with your youngster and demonstrating how you solve problems using the Cycle of Problem-Solving.

In our very busy, stress-filled world, we often rush to solve a problem so we can move on to other things, and often that's the next problem. We hope showing your child how to more independently solve problems in a structured, purposeful way using the Cycle of Problem-Solving enhances mindful behavior and calm, and supports the accomplishment of goals for you and your child. We hope, too, that this thoughtful approach to solving problems will be helpful to you as well as you solve the problems you encounter at home, at work and in your community.

We are here to help.

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