

# Cooperative Extension Service



Department of Home Economics  
College of Agriculture



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## FAMILIES AS PROBLEM SOLVERS

It was grandma's best recipe: Twelve inches across, three inches deep, oozing with sweet, thick cinnamon-apple syrup. Wide slices vanished under greedy eyes soon after the warm pie emerged to top off Sunday dinner. Dad got a cold but savory remnant in Monday's lunch. Mom and Sis snacked on all but the last 2 inches after school. Darren ogled it after baseball practice, but mom said it was too close to dinner. Yet by mealtime it seemed absurd to divide and unfair for three to watch the lucky one. Tuesday, dad was out of town, mom and the kids were busy. Two of them considered it as a late-night snack, but by then the pie was a sacred icon. Darren drove to the mini-mart in a pouring rain to get some other snack. On the weekend, dad took his turn removing lab samples from an overstuffed icebox; but the slice stayed, cool and dark, against the wall. A week later, mom slid the soured treat into the trash with its gooey plastic-wrap cover. Guilt and self-righteous propriety anointed its bacterial skin.

Family life is piecrust-lattice of menial and momentous decisions which shape its shell and substance. Some problems, like the one above, are "solved" by a conspiracy of silence. More often, don't-talk-about-it, one-solution-fits-all, don't-rock-the-boat strategies set the stage for bigger problems to come. So what is effective problem solving?

Problem-solving is the daily work of negotiating with challenges...and with

each other. On the practical side, managing time, space, energy, and finances efficiently is critical for meeting needs of one and all. Therapist Nathan Epstein found that families disrupted by practical concerns rarely dealt effectively with affective, caring and feeling, issues. Family management information and skills provides a valuable resource to handle these practical concerns.

Understanding and coping with the tides of ego and emotion which wash the beaches of everyday life requires affective problem solving skills: empathic listening, anger control, respect for individual views, teamwork, and other skills. Researcher David Olson and his colleagues found that emotionally enmeshed and rigid styles forced conformity, while individualistic and overly-flexible problem-solving failed to achieve consensus. Communication extremes rarely result in effective, creative, or equitable solutions for families. Poor listening, emotional control, and critical thinking skills--especially in a stressful climate--fosters extremes.

Practical and social problem solving skills are teachable ingredients of individual and family coping and growth. Hopefully the research reviews, teaching ideas, and other insights on these critical processes will be useful for your own family and those with whom you work.

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***Problems are only opportunities in  
work clothes.--Henry J. Kaiser***  
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## FAMILY LIFE SPECIALIST ADVENTURES

- 5/3 **Resiliency, Wyoming CARE Conference, Laramie.**  
*WY CARE serves schools statewide with information about substance abuse and violence prevention.*
- 5/8-9 **College of Ag Strategic Planning, Laramie.**
- 5/11 "Resiliency," **TOOLS Conference, Rock Springs.**
- 5/22-23 **RETHINK & Resiliency presentations, DFS Statewide Training Conference, Casper.**
- 6/3-7 **Vacation/Research Break**
- 6/13-14 **College of Ag Strategic Planning, Laramie.**
- 6/18-19 **Parent Share Mentor Training, Laramie.**  
*Volunteer Parent Coordinators working with WY Developmental Disabilities & Children's Health will learn this parent-to-parent program developed by KSU Ext. Specialist Charles Smith.*
- 4/24-25 **RETHINK Training, Rock Springs.**
- 6/27-28 **NNFR Coord.Committee Conference, Chicago.**

## WEB WALKER

World Wide Web provides access to text and graphics on topics A-to-Z internationally. UW-CES staff can access through Netscape and UW Home Page, <http://uwyo.edu>.



Home Address  
<http://uwyo.edu/ag/ces/newltrs/chinook.htm>

## YAHOO RECREATION & REGIONAL SITES

<http://www.yahoo.com>

Vacation planning is one of the most important problem solving and decision-making opportunities of the summer. Several WY communities and businesses feature descriptions of facilities and activities listed on the World Wide Web --urge local tourism businesses to think about it-- As more families go "online" (often thanks to kids' skills), searching for adventures and experiencing places through virtual reality, home-based or public (school, library, Extension office) computers can become valuable resources.

Yahoo (a net-linked provider) offers the following menus on

**Recreation:** with menu items including Amusement/Theme Parks, Fishing, Games, Hobbies & Crafts, Motorcycles, Outdoors, Sports, and Travel

**Regional:** featuring alpha or geographic (via Virtual Tourist sites) menus with information from Countries, Regions, and all fifty U.S. States

In addition, users can search using specific topics like "family vacation," "waterskiing," or "backpacking" to explore their favorite pursuit.

## "Cut to the Chase"

## PROGRAM PRIORITIES FOR PROBLEM SOLVING

**Model Problem Solving Skills:** Use meetings and informal contacts to model good communication, brainstorming, critical evaluation...and allow for learners to participate.

**Empower Parents and Kids:** Schools and community organizations can help families problem solve by:

- \*Providing early and repeated notice of events, assignments;
- \*Offering a convenient training or a resource person;
- \*Including guidelines for completing projects (i.e., scientific method for science fair projects, homework helping aids);
- \*Foster communication with parents (i.e., club leader checking w/parents) and between parents and children (i.e., tips for improving family communication)

**Strengthen Support Networks:** Social support strengthens family competence and family friends may provide problem solving models.

## TheoryBase: Effective Problem Solvers

Problem solving is one of six key family functions in the McMaster Model (Epstein, Bishop, & Levin, 1978). Families addressing instrumental (money, housing, etc) and affective (intimacy) issues openly and systematically (with a sequence of 7 steps cited on p. 5) as well as those with clear, direct communication, clear and constructive roles, a broad range of emotional responses, empathic involvement, and flexible behavioral control.

Family Paradigms (mental models for perceiving and problem solving life experience) are centerpieces of David Reiss' (1981) Family Construction of Reality. Noting that problem solving styles identified in his lab and interview studies did not parallel social class, family structure, race, religion, intelligence, or skill mastery, Reiss contrasts effective problem-solvers on three dimensions:

Configuration: family perceptions of the world as ordered, understandable vs. chaotic and chance

-High configuration families notice subtle clues, allow more autonomy, appreciate rituals, focus on the present

Coordination: synchronizing of member views, goals, pursuits

-High coordination families tune in to member needs, views, events; integrate activities with extended family, community

Closure: willingness to collect data, delay decision-making

-High closure families show interest in novel experiences or settings; learn from the past; invest in family members

A problem well stated  
is a problem half solved.

--Charles F. Kettering

## STATS AND FACTS

### *Family Problem Solving*

#### **STATS: Family Problems and Decisions**

##### **Decisions in 1995**

	<u>WY</u>	<u>USA</u>
<b>-House purchase</b>	<b>11,000</b>	<b>3,946,000</b>
1994 data, <i>Statistical Abstract, 1995</i> , p. 731		
<b>-Automobile purchase</b>		<b>14,199,000</b>
1993 data, <i>Statistical Abstract, 1995</i> , p. 632		
<b>-Moving: Net inflow of migrants to WY: 2,288</b>		
1992 data, <i>The Equality State Almanac, 1994</i> , p. 9		

##### **Frequency of Problems (indexed to Holmes & Rahe's [1967])**

##### **Social Readjustment Rating Scale--stressor checklist**

	<u>WY</u>	<u>USA</u>
<b>-Deaths</b>	<b>3,295 (1992)</b>	<b>2,268,000 (1993)</b>
<b>-Divorces</b>	<b>3,200 (1992)</b>	<b>1,187,000 (1993)</b>
<b>-Jail Term</b>	<b>1,129 (1992)</b>	<b>490,442 (1993)</b>
<b>-Personal Injury/Illness</b>		<b>62,100,000 ('93)</b>
<b>-Marriages</b>	<b>4,859 (1992)</b>	<b>2,334,000 (1993)</b>
<b>-Unemployment</b>	<b>13,000 (1993)</b>	<b>6.8% workforce</b>
state data: <i>The Equality State Almanac, 1994</i>		
national data: <i>Statistical Abstract, 1995</i>		
<b>-Persons Turning 65:</b>	<b>52,635 (1994)</b>	<b>2,118,000 (1995)</b>
(proxy for Retirement: <i>Social Security Bulletin, F'95</i> , <u>58</u> (3))		
<b>-Hospitalization</b>	<b>19,260 (1993)</b>	<b>119,000,000 ('93)</b>
(proxy for Change in Health of Family Member)		
<b>-Pregnancy/Births</b>	<b>6,720 (1992)</b>	<b>4,065,014 (1992)</b>
state and national sources same as above		
<b>-Bankruptcies</b>	<b>12,000 (1992)</b>	<b>8,453,000 (1992)</b>
(proxy for Business Readjustment)		

##### **Daily Hassles and Uplifts** (Lazarus & Folkman, 1989)

The ten most frequent daily troubles listed by

- 1) Concerns about weight; 2) Health of a family member;
- 3) Rising prices of common goods; 4) Home maintenance, inside;
- 5) Too many things to do; 6) Misplacing or losing things;
- 7) Yardwork or outside home maintenance;
- 8) Property; 9) Crime; 10) Physical appearance

The ten most frequent daily uplifts which reduce problems:

- 1) Relating well with your spouse or lover; 2) Relating well with friends; 3) Completing a task; 4) Feeling healthy;
- 5) Getting enough sleep; 6) Eating out; 7) Meeting your responsibilities; 8) Visiting, phoning, or writing someone;
- 9) Spending time with family; 10) Home (inside) pleasing.

##### **What's Not Measured:**

- Number of stressors per family (cumulative and interactive effects of death, divorce, unemployment, etc.)
- Stressfulness of the "solution" (How escaping, dictating, or mutual discussion and assistance contribute to problems or solutions of their own)

## FACTS: Predictable Problem Areas by Stage

Therapists note that family problems tend to cluster around these particular issues at each stage of the life cycle:

### \***Leaving Home/Singlehood**

- Individual identity apart from family-of-origin
- Development of intimate peer relations
- Establishment of self in work and financial independence

### \***New Couples**

- Formation of a priority relationship bond
- Realigning relationships with extended families

### \***Families with Young Children**

- Making space in the marriage for children
- Mutuality in childrearing, work, household tasks
- Relining relations with extended family, grandparents

### \***Families with Adolescents**

- Openness to greater autonomy by child
- Refocusing on marital/midlife issues
- Joint caring for the older generation

### \***Launching Children & Moving On**

- Renegotiation of family system to dyadic system
- Developing adult-adult relations with children
- Realigning relations with in-laws, grandchildren
- Dealing with disabilities, death of parents

### \***Families in Later Life**

- Maintaining own/couple functioning, interests
- Support for children's leadership, parents' wisdom
- Dealing with loss of spouse, siblings; own death

Variety in individual, gender, class, ethnic, and family structure experiences requires flexibility in defining tasks.

Source: Betty Carter & Monica McGoldrick (Eds., 1988). *The Changing Family Life Cycle: A Framework for Family Therapy*. NY: Gardner, p.15.

## FACTS: Family Rules for Decision-Making

Therapist Carlfried Broderick identified several patterns of daily interaction critical to problem solving outcomes:

**Zero-Sum Decisions:** Families which maximize win-win (vs. win-lose or lose-lose) strategies tend to function best.

-ex: Enabling a third grader to manage her own space and time to achieve rewards she wants can benefit all members.

**Decisions Based on Rules** relates to creating and enforcing patterns of interaction which seek to anticipate member needs, avoiding confrontation; Define authority and freedom in places and events; and outline means for negotiating conflicts of need, issues discussed or approaches to be used.

**Decisions Based on Principle** represent governance by higher order values of altruism, cooperation, and fairness.

Source: Kathleen M. Galvin & Bernard J. Brommell. (1991). *Family Communication: Cohesion and Change*. NY: HarperCollins, p. 160-162.

**What concerns everyone can only be resolved by everyone.**

--Friedrich Durrenmatt

## ***It is Your Business***

### **TEAMWORK: PROBLEM SOLVING ON THE JOB**

Tom Peters' "Characteristics of Professional Service Organizations" provide guidelines for effective teams...with a few notes on its impact and applicability to families.

\***Project/deal/"horizontal axis":** Adjusting to rapid-changing marketplace requires intense focus on one project, decisions by project team (vs. constant approvals from hierarchy).

--> Family services (child care, homework hotlines, shopping services) might ease coping w/ intense work times

--> Intense focus, member decision-making works for some school or home projects if kids are developmentally capable

\***Adhocracy as norm.** Changing shape, perpetual fluidity in vacillating market, maintaining core mission, values as focus --

--> Mission must be defined by team members for success

--> Healthy families generally have high flexibility around a few rules of nurture and discipline; chaos produces anxiety

\***Interests/Opportunity/Innovation.** Intuition, local events can guide program; weed the portfolio from time to time

--> Firms can focus interests, but must trust employees

--> Trusting children's interests, abilities makes for more effective parenting than dictating or setting child's goals

\***Reorganize.** Shifting opportunities require roles which fit the client and the task, not organizational structure chart

--> Employer and employee must be flexible about roles

--> Healthy families have androgenous, non-rigid roles, rules

\*\***All report to all.**" Collaborating professionals, volunteers, and clients provide valuable input to make programs work

--> Incorporate users and collaborators in program creation

--> Teach/allow children to lead family activities

\***Specialization is critical.** Expertise (for market niche and team role vs. job title) key for leader, team members.

--> Investment in continuous education, application is a must for competitive businesses...learners need rewards

--> Parents need to model lifelong learning, including learning new things (like computers) from children

\***Client relationships can be problematic.** Organizations want to project a "professional" image as well as inspire the client's imagination...sometimes it's difficult to do both.

--> Combining the programmer and marketer roles (as CES does) and enhancing both sets of skills may enhance

--> Children's self-confidence, creativity, and ability to listen to others' feedback are as important as performance

\***The client is king...maybe.** Blending client insights/wants with professional expertise is ideal, but tough to achieve.

--> Firms which include education and visioning with needs assessment and marketing are likely to expand client wisdom

--> Family rules and boundaries aid members' adjustment

\***Methodology is philosophy.** Professional service firms' core technology is its distinct approach to problem solving.

--> Corporate projects and training should reinforce and expand the organization's unique approach

--> A few simple tools (such as "I Can Problem Solve," p. 8) can be applied to a wide variety of stages and situations

Adapted from Tom Peters. (1993). Liberation Management. NY: Knopf, pp. 185-188.

## ***4-H Families***

### **CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVERS: THE WORLD IS THEIR OYSTER**

America is a land of innovators. Finding new ways to see the world around--or inside--or strategies to face challenges make life more interesting and productive for everyone. Like Ford or Edison, innovators begin as children, wondering and experimenting with the world. Parents can help cultivate creative thinking by noticing interests or supporting curiosity in school or club projects or practical needs around the house (such as organizing places to put those projects). Here's how to understand and encourage creativity:

\*Creative people "fall in love" with their special interests, pursuing them intensely--sometimes forgetting all else

--> Support interests and link them to practical concerns

\*Discover, understand, take pride in, practice, develop, use, exploit, and enjoy personal strengths

--> Celebrate growth without dwelling on weaknesses

\*Free themselves from others' expectations and "games"

--> Accept uniqueness; support self-confidence

\*Seek good teacher/mentors to cultivate their gifts

--> Help kids find resource people who challenge, support

\*Don't try to be well-rounded or good at everything

--> Accept performance inconsistencies so long as they satisfy minimum standards

\*Enjoy interdependence--give and take with others

--> Accept friends, teachers, etc. who are good for the child's esteem and self-expression

Adapted from Paul Torrence. (1983).

### **Non-verbals: Reading Between the Lines**

Family members who discern non-verbal cues more often identify problems, notice needs to offer social support, and contribute appropriately to problem solving by tuning to:

*Sight:* context (location, who's present), time (of day, speed of response), space (arrangements of people, furniture), paper, props, clothing, body language (posture, eye contact, facial expressions, hand or arm gestures), energy level (alertness, involvement)

*Sound:* background noise, speech rate/pace, pitch and tone, loudness, diction and clarity

*Touch:* hard/soft, hot/cold, rigid/flexible, smooth/scratchy, smell, taste

Adapted from Sherrod Miller, et al. (1988). Connecting with Self and Others. Littleton, CO: Interpersonal Communications, p. 82.

**Teaching Tools**  
**FAMILY PROBLEM SOLVING**

### Coping Compass

Families can find their direction through difficult times by turning to a **variety** of strategies:

#### EFFECTIVE COPING

##### **Cognitive Activities: Think it Through**

- Accept the situation and others
- \*Quickly accept and confront the situation
- \*Accept differences in family members' responses
- \*Accept limitations without trying to do everything
- Gain useful knowledge
  - \*Find information about the situation
  - \*Understand the nature of the situation
- Change how the situation is viewed or defined
- \*Separate stress into manageable parts
- \*View situation realistically
- \*Maintain optimism about self, others, life
- \*Avoid blame by being solution-oriented

##### **Individual Development: Investing in Members**

- Develop autonomy, independence, self-sufficiency:
- \*Be involved in self-development activities
- Keep active in hobbies and activities

##### **Spiritual Activities**

- Be more involved in religious activities
- Increase faith or seek help from God

##### **Community Activities**

- Seek help and support from others
- Fulfill expectations in organizations

##### **Emotional Activities: Express and Empathize**

- Express feelings and affection
- \*Express positive and negative feelings openly
- \*Express affection honestly, clearly, directly
- Avoid or resolve disabling expressions of emotion
- \*Reduce anxiety with relaxing activities
- \*Avoid or reduce self-punishment, alcohol abuse, smoking, crying, withdrawing
- Be aware and sensitive to each other's needs
- \*Be passive about the situation

##### **Relationship Activities: Strengthen Connections**

- Develop family cohesion and togetherness
- \*Do things together to promote family integration
- \*Do things with children and maintain stability
- Maintain family adaptability and flexibility
- \*Be willing to alter roles, behaviors, attitudes
- Cooperate as a family
- \*Be unified and committed to cooperating
- \*Offer mutual support, share experiences
- Build and improve trusting relationships with others
- \*Develop trust with friends, informal supports, professionals
- Increase tolerance of one another

##### **Communication Activities: Talking and Listening**

- Be open and honest
- \*Disclose openly to family, others
- Listen to each other
- Be more sensitive to nonverbal communication

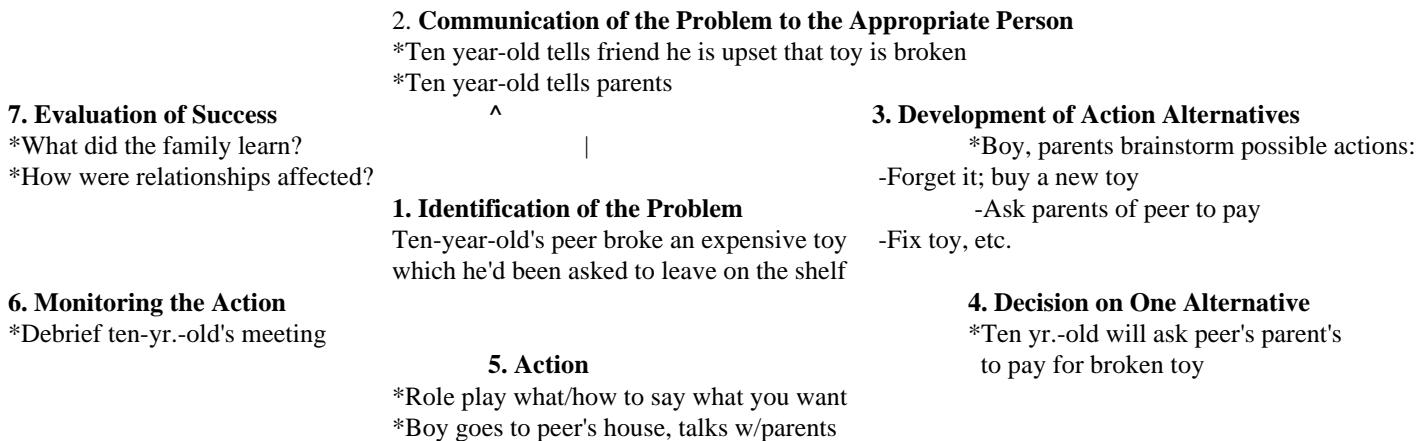
##### **Learning Activities**

1. Use the list above as an inventory of your own family's strengths during extended stress or crisis.
2. Interview other families and compose stories of adaptation and coping.
3. Discuss in small groups and role play solutions to the following scenarios, using strategies noted above:
  - a) Joe owns a plumbing business which is barely paying the bills in the current economic recession. His two teenage children want to dress well at school, continue to be involved in recreation and clubs. Mildred, Joe's wife, feels they should put aside money for college, a new car, and emergencies. Joe feels responsible for keeping everyone happy, but is frustrated with a declining bank account which seems to concern nobody else in the family.
  - b) Tina and Tommy are 20 year-old parents of Sarah, a 3-mo.-old with spina bifida. Tommy holds down three jobs, all at minimum wage and Tina has had to quit her job as an executive secretary to care for Sarah. Tommy's parents live in the same town, but have drawn away since the birth. The nearest hospital with specialized care is 250 mi. away.
4. Research popular songs and movies for examples of the strategies cited above. Note how often each is mentioned, how specific the reference is (i.e., does it just say "listen" or give specific examples which might teach how). Then write your own adaptation of the song/movie or write an original which is both entertaining and educational.

**Teaching Tools**  
**FAMILY PROBLEM SOLVING**

### **Leadership School**

Using the McMaster Model recommended steps in problem solving, develop a thinking web to teach children how to work out concerns and challenges on their own (start in the middle, move to the top, and proceed clockwise)



*"...left to their own ways, most families do not solve their problems in an organized way."*

### **Reflecting on Experience**

1. Which types of problems can members (or the family) handle and which require additional resources/support?
2. Construct a journal (including several thinking webs) which documents problem-solving accomplishments.

### **Family Values**

Contributed by PACT Coordinator Curtis Hobbs

Values represent those things which are important to us, giving direction to our lives. Transmission of values to guide behavior is extremely important to parenting. Children assimilate beliefs about what is important in life as they hear and observe parents. Parents can communicate about values in sexual, drug, and career choices by:

1. Focusing on what they do believe (what they do and how they talk/avoid talking) about these topics...and why they believe it.
2. Talking to each other (in two-parent families), relatives, and other parents to compare, rehearse, and simplify explanations.
3. Listening (either openly or allowing children to give them typed questions) to children's views and questions
4. Exploring options and consequences--abstractly, or via concrete examples and familiar cases
5. Encouraging trusted family friends (aunt, neighbor, coach, youth leader) to talk and listen to ideas which might make them as parents too defensive, embarrassed, or emotionally reactive

### **Every One Counts**

Families who are good problem solvers use the special gifts of every member to meet the challenges of life.

*To acknowledge these gifts and reinforce the spirit of family togetherness:*

- \*Craft a family quilt or banner with individually-chosen fabrics and room for symbols and pictures selected by members and siblings, parents, friends, etc. (accomplishments, talents, personality traits)
- \*Make a photo enlargement of a family adventure (special trip, skit night, barbecue, building project) which shows how each contributed, faced a challenge, or cooperated.

*To encourage self-sufficiency and contributions to family well-being:*

- \*Construct a wish list every 3-6 mo. to identify skills, roles, or responsibilities which each member wants to try (drinking milk in an open cup, riding a bike, mowing the lawn, staying up late). Parents may help kids try at any time wishes are expressed. In some cases, family rules (safety, cost, morals, etc.) may limit wish fulfillment; in other cases, doing the activity may be satisfaction/lesson enough; in many cases, opportunities will help the child do for self or contribute to family more than anyone guessed possible.

*To affirm family members for who they are apart from anything they can do:*

- \*Use sticky notes on bedroom doors, a moment during dinner or bedtime, or "time outs" in TV commercials to share the day's activities or plans and to tell each other what you appreciate about them.

## PROBLEM SOLVING BEGINS AT HOME

### *Raising a Thinking Child*

Family life is the most obvious yet the most difficult setting to teach problem solving. Membership stretches from birth to death, with a multitude of individual and collective goals sometimes at odds with each other. Today's parents may fantasize on the authority of past generations, yet their best hope for managing the vicissitudes of daily life and to preparing children for a lifetime of critical and creative thinking, is to practice problem solving every day.

George Spivack and Myrna Shure's 25 years of research and training in Cognitive Problem Solving provides perceptive views and useable skills for parents and children. In her latest book, Raising a Thinking Child (Henry Holt, 1994), Myrna Shure asserts that children who learn "how to think," "not what to think," who go on to work out their own dilemmas confidently. Since thinking is the seed for behavior, framing positive approaches to people and resource decisions works best to help kids decide for themselves. Parents who coach (vs. solve for or judge) find children quite capable themselves.

**Vocabulary:** *Problem-Solving word games introduce concepts which help identify problems, options, and consequences*

**IS/IS NOT:**

"I am a girl...a sister...a first grader" creates categories and definitions for self, others, and the world

**AND/OR:**

"Pick up apples and oranges...You may have an apple or an orange" highlights both open and limited choices

**SOME/ALL:**

"Some kids want a snack." "All the doors are closed" describe facts and options vs. generalizations

**BEFORE/AFTER:**

"What did we do before planting our seeds?" (make a hole or furrow) "What did we do after planting our seeds? (water) helps children sequence two or more events and see their relationship

**NOW/LATER:**

"Sally is talking now...You'll be able to share later" organizes events respectfully, reducing frustration

**SAME/DIFFERENT:**

"These two things are both square....You can solve the same problem two different ways" help a child make needed distinctions, but also begin to see options for approaching problems

*The ICPS (Interpersonal Cognitive Problem Solving/"I Can Problem Solve") method is recommended as a game for mealtimes, grocery store visits, TV watching, car trips, dressing, or other routines as activity or response in order to get a child used to a language/thinking style which can be used under pressure or in crisis situations.*

**Talking About Feelings:** *Reading inner states (own and others) and outward signs helps kids respond insightfully.*

*Describing, picturing, or discussing feeling words during story time, drawings, puppet play, listing experiences, TV games, and pretend play are all settings in which children become more aware and capable, over-learning so awareness and empathy come more naturally at stress points (although some suggestions for using the method under stress are also offered).*

**More Vocabulary:** *Additional skills may assist parents and children to negotiate more complex situations*

**GOOD TIME/NOT A GOOD TIME:**

"Is this a good time to play/read/fix snack? tunes children to others' needs/views

**IF/THEN:**

"If you gas up the car, you can take it out" stipulates conditions or consequences for action

**MIGHT/MAYBE:**

"The dog might eat potatoes...Maybe you can try a spoonful" attunes a child to other preferences

**WHY/BECAUSE:**

"Why do we need a napkin...because we need to keep our faces/clothes clean" helps children see the connection between actions and consequences; the rationale behind the directions

**FAIR/NOT FAIR:**

"Is it fair for each of you to have one cookie?" helps children see the rights of others and self

Subsequent chapters how to Generate Alternatives, Consider Consequences, and Put All the Pieces Together in everyday and special problem situation.

## ***Research on Child and Family Problem Solving***

### **Effective Family Problem Solving**

Source: Elaine A. Blechman & Michael J. McEnroe. (1985). Effective Family Problem Solving. *Child Development*, 56, (2), 429-437.

Cites research linking family effectiveness with involvement of children in definition of problems, generation of alternative solutions, selection and testing of solutions, but notes critical role of children's cognitive abilities for socialization problems. Adds that findings on family problem solving vary widely depending on method of study, type of family, and context.

Examined problem solving with 97 non-clinical school-agers on definite-solution tasks (tower building, 20 questions), finding solo performance more efficient than family on such simple and concrete tasks. On a more complex plan-something-together task, effective families took longer, tending to reach more effective solutions satisfying to all members.

Results supported Weick's (1971) hypotheses that families that strive for deferred gratification tend to consider more issues, construct a more detailed plan, and anticipate more contingencies; that individual attention span and tolerance for ambiguity limit family effectiveness.

### **Family Social Support Aids Children's Problem Solving**

Julie Perkins Quamma & Mark T. Greenberg. (1994). Children's Experience of Life Stress: The Role of Famikly Social Support and Social Problem Solving Skills as Protective Factors. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 23, (3), 295-305.

A study of 322 regular (RE) and special education (SE) 4/5th graders in Seattle found low family support (attachment, expressiveness, consistency of discipline, freq.of praise) and poor problem solving (anticipation, initiative, confidence) linked to child maladjustment at high and low levels of stress. Family Support moderated negative stress for Internalizing Problems in RE students

(implying import of Environmental Resources); Social problem solving reduced Conduct Problems for both groups (more for SE), stressing role of Personal Resources. Stress related to school and peers best predicted Conduct Problems and Anxiety (child report) and Externalizing Problems (teacher-report).

### **Problem Solving and Child Abuse**

David J. Hansen, Gina M. Pallotta, Amy C. Tishelman, Loren P. Conway, and Virginia M. MacMillan. (1989). Parental Problem-Solving Skills and Child Behavior Problems: A Comparison of Physically Abusive, Neglectful, Clinic, and Community Families. *Journal of Family Violence*, 4, (4), 353-368.

Reviews the complex nature of child abuse and neglect: skill deficits in anger and stress control, unrealistic expectations, distorted perceptions of child behavior, negative labeling, high stress/low coping, isolation, difficulty child traits.

Compares 40 parents (w/at least 1 child ages 3-12) from Physically Abusive, Neglectful, Clinic (non- non-abusing/info-seeking), and Community (non-abusing/non-seeking) groups (mostly married white females) on number and effectiveness of solutions to typical (behavior mgt., anger and stress control, financial, child-care resource, interpersonal) problems. Clinic (info-seekers) typically showed highest levels of skills and with Community group scored significantly higher on quantity and workability of solutions.

All groups reported similar child behavior problems, but instances of maltreatment were higher among Abusive and Neglectful parents.

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*It's a good thing to have all the props pulled out from under us occasionally. It gives us some sense of what is rock under our feet, and what is sand.*

--Madeleine L'Engle

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### **Parent Closeness and Preadolescent Problems**

Samuel Vuchinich, Barbara Wood, & Regina Vuchinich. (1994). Coalitions and Family Problem Solving with Preadolescents in Referred, at-Risk, and Comparison Families. *Family Process*, 33, (4), 409-424.

Reviews research showing troubled families often struggle solving even minor problems of family life and indicating effectiveness of problem solving training (open dialogue, multiple alternatives, compromise, others' needs). Notes strong parent bond (coalitions) may overwhelm preteen and inhibit problem solving by scapegoating (lack of openness to teen's views, coldness & withdrawal) just as too-weak bonds result in conflict and inconsistent discipline.

A survey/simulation study with 188 family groups found a link between strong parental coalitions and lower family problem solving with preadolescents in at-risk and referred groups. Conflicted families used scapegoating and blaming, rigid rules, repetitive negative interaction, detour, and quick decisions more often. Coalitions seen as parent response to challenging child OR product of child's acting-out to bring parents together.

### **Interaction style & Problem-solving**

Martha A. Rueter & Rand D. Conger. (1995). Interaction style, problem-solving behavoir, and family problem-solving effectiveness. *Child Development*, 66, 98-115.

Videotape observations of family interaction (w/431 rural families w/ adolescents) found that hostile interaction style directly predicted destructive problem-solving behavior (impatience, impertinence, unco-operativeness, blaming, anger) and indirectly predicted effectiveness. Similar effects were found for father and mother hostility. A warm style promoted constructive problem-solving, greater effectiveness, especially for those with teen girls.

## RESOURCES FOR PROGRAMMING

**Financial problem solving** can be made easier with the use of these resources:

**Estimating the Amount to Save for College**

-workshop and publication

**Financing a College Education:**

**Investment Alternatives** publication

-available through UW Ag Communications Resource Center, P.O. Box 3313, Laramie 82071 (307-766-2115)

**Bernard E. Poduska.** (1993). **For Love and Money: A Guide to Finances and Relationships.** Belmont, CA: Brooks-Cole.

-Addresses a variety of issues (financial principles, values, feelings and communication, planning and debt management for all family types and lifestyles) and provides practical tools for families to manage resources and teach children responsible management skills.

**Rose Ford & Barbara O'Neill.** (1993). **Separation and Divorce: A Guide for Decision-Making.** Rutgers Cooperative Extension, P.O. Box 231, New Brunswick, NJ 08903. (\$4) Provides resources on legal, financial, and emotional aspects of divorce for professionals and citizens.



The 1996 Crime Bill signed by President Clinton in late March contained \$174.5 million for a variety of programs and research directed toward prevention of Violence Against Women. Much of the funding, appropriated through the Justice Department, will go to law enforcement and prosecution. Additional categories of funding include victims' counselors, probation and parole sex offender treatment training, child abuse advocates, training, and testimony, efforts to encourage arrest policies, rural domestic violence, anti-stalker programs, and statewide studies of domestic assaults to establish databases. Funding for training judges in the nature of domestic violence and handling of such cases was cut by the House from the original 1996 authorization.

Source: Nancy Dawson, Program Manager, Family Violence and Sexual Assault, WY State Dept. of Health, and information in the January 1996 edition of the National Victim Center, 2111 Wilson Blvd., Suite 300, Arlington, VA 22201. For more information on the Center or this topic, call InfoLink, 1-800-394-2255.

## RESOURCES FOR CONTINUING EDUCATION

**Augustus Napier.** (1978). **The Family Crucible.** New York: Bantam Books is still one of the most readable texts on the nature of family systems--how we work well in families and how we get stuck by outdated or ill-chosen strategies.

**Rand D. Conger & Glen H. Elder, Jr.** (1994). **Families in Troubled Times: Adapting to Change in Rural America.** New York: Aldine de Gruyter documents individual and family coping in the decade of the farm crisis in mid-America, with recommendations for cultivating social support, retraining, financial and stress management skills, marital and parent problem-solving in prevention and intervention settings.

**Hendrie D. Weisinger.** (1985). **Dr. Weisinger's Anger Work-Out Book** New York: Quill offers practical tools for thinking and behaving positively in the face of frustrations at home, at work, in intimate and anonymous settings.

**Teresa M. Schmidt & Thelma W. Spencer.** (1991) **Della the Dinosaur Talks About Violence and Anger Management.** Minneapolis: Johnson Institute, is a K-6 hands-on curriculum addressing feelings, violence in the family, dealing with anger, and caring for self.

## It's the Law PUBLIC POLICY ISSUES VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ACT

*Many of the problems the world faces today  
are the eventual result of short-term measures  
taken last century.  
--Jay W. Forester--*

## PARADOXES: A PARTING THOUGHT *I've Never Met a Problem I Didn't...*

Some families struggle with seeming simple problems, never managing to resolve them. Others master insurmountable circumstances for which they have no experience. This enigma stirs the plots of great literature, which offers some insight on why some families get "stuck" while others sail through perils unshaken.

**"Your daddy beats you...because he loves you"** a Harlem mother tells her recalcitrant son in Part 1 of James Baldwin's Go Tell it On the Mountain (Dial, 1952). Chronic conflicts spring from and reinforce parents' needs to care or control...and in turn teens' needs to understand and assert themselves. Every incident becomes an event, replaying the same plot. In small flats along mean streets, motivations gain sharper intensity.

**"See, the dumb dog knows what's good to eat"** shrimper Henry Wingo asserts as his pet responds to the hash prepared (unbeknownst to him, with Alpo) as substitute to wife Lila's gourmet sweetmeats (which he disparaged). Parents' delusions of grandeur, put-downs, defensiveness, and cynicism, distorted and dishonest dialogue, as well as community stigma trap the Prince of Tides (Pat Conroy, Houghton-Mifflin, 1986) family in interlocking chains of negative thinking and toxic acting.

**"I don't want a change! I want Swiss cheese. Why am I always being contra-dicted?"** Willie Lowman's nostalgic and reactionary preoccupation with what's lost and what's wrong, even in the most trivial of issues, is evident in these lines from early in Act 1 of Death of a Salesman (Arthur Miller, Viking, 1957). Unrealistic expectations, secret peccadillos, and ill-fated control efforts push and pull the Lowmans into familiar problems, away from honest and supportive dialogue.

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**"And the worlds were built in the evening. The people moving in from the highways made them with their tents and their hearts and their brains."** So wrote John Steinbeck of Okie migrants in The Grapes of Wrath (Viking, 1937). Simple people disenfranchised and uprooted amidlife, nevertheless tamed the wilderness trail with their personal integrity and mutual cooperation. Compassion and responsibility, reasonable-ness and hard work by which their parents tamed the last frontier became the tenets of family and community problem solving by which they survived the Great Depression.

**"And they both began to laugh over nothings as children will when they are happy together"** captures the simple, yet remarkable effect of schoolgirl Mary's discovery and vivifying her whining invalid cousin Colin. Capturing his imagination, then engaging his participation, she transforms Colin in ways adults would never have dreamed possible. Read more in The Secret Garden (Frances Hodgson Burnett, 1911).

**"The sticks of hay that Laura had made gave him time enough to get thoroughly warm before they must go into the cold and twist more hay."** Resourcefulness evident in using hay as home insulation and firewood was at the root of practical and relational problem-solving through The Long Winter (Laura Ingalls Wilder, Harper & Row, 1940) for families who survived homesteading on the high plains.

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ORGANIZING'S NEW PARADOXES

*On the one hand, we're going beyond hierarchy, and trying to liberate almost everyone in the organization. Yet that liberation leads to many a sleepless night--the result of membership in a project team with sky-high standards, imposed mostly by oneself, but by demanding peers as well. This paradox, one of several, is the heart and soul of the bold new journey on which we've embarked.*

\* Organizing/focusing and dis-organizing/de-integrating. Our model firms are getting "more organized" and more focused--putting together tightly tied networks and largely self-contained units, from core pairs to multifunction teams to independent business units that take responsibility (with accountability) for a whole task. At the same time, the same firms are dis-organizing (creating passels of very independent subunits, selling off misfitting pieces of business portfolios) and de-integrating (subcontracting this, that, the other and at least part of everything.)

\* "Smaller" and "bigger." The "company," as we have known it, tends to be getting smaller, as it subcontracts more and more tasks, breaks itself up voluntarily, and focuses more on the few tasks at which it can add special value. On the other hand, to execute a particular strategy or develop a particular product/product family, the company is often as not, even if it's not genuinely tiny firm, embedded in an extensive ("big") network. The network, for a while, is the company (no quotes). That is, firms are getting smaller and bigger at once. Or try it this way. "New big" means a small to modest-size unit that's a de facto giant--i.e. best-in-class at a key task... "New big" also means network big--i.e. powerful, temporary collection of potent midgets and potent, autonomous, and accountable bits of larger firms.

\* Accountability and teamwork. With the failure of grotesque overspecialization and the overdetermined, nonaccountable matrix structure mostly behind us, and the need to develop products and bring them to market more quickly before us, all signs are pointing toward more accountability--for the work team, the market-scale business unit. Yet that accountability is embedded within a necessity to support other network partners.

\* Autonomy and partnership. Individuals are becoming more autonomous, with responsibility for creating projects and managing their careers, on or off corporate payrolls. And they are engaged in more partnering activities--depending more on each other as teammates, and on other members of an expansive network that invariably includes numerous "outsiders".

\* More specialty/expertise development and less specialist/expert staffs. Developing value-added skills becomes more important than ever, and each team member and each team/business unit becomes more responsible than ever for developing special knowledge. On the other hand, old-fashioned centers of expertise (which often weren't very expert)--those vast, functional staffs--are going, going, gone.