Virginia Cooperative Extension

Families First: Keys to Successful Family Functioning
Problem-solving

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PROBLEM-SOLVING IS THE FAMILY'S ABILITY TO RESOLVE PROBLEMS ON A LEVEL THAT MAINTAINS EFFECTIVE FAMILY FUNCTIONING (EPSTEIN, BISHOP, RYAN, MILLER, & KEITNER, 1993).

PROBLEM-SOLVING

One of the keys to successful family functioning is the family's ability to solve problems. All families have problems to deal with. However, research indicates that competent families solve problems as they arise; whereas, families that avoid problem-solving, or seem incapable of dealing with many of their problems have more difficulties (Epstein, Bishop, Ryan, Miller, & Keitner, 1993).

TYPES OF FAMILY PROBLEMS OR ISSUES

Problem-solving is the family's ability to resolve problems on a level that maintains effective family functioning (Epstein, Bishop, Ryan, Miller, & Keitner, 1993). Family problems come in all shapes and sizes. Some problems involve everyday decisions about money or transporting the children to and from school. These are called instrumental problems.

Other problems may be concerned with a family member's feelings and emotions and are called affective issues. Some problems may involve both. For example, getting a child to day care for the first time may require dealing with instrumental issues regarding transportation and affective issues regarding the child's fear of being left at a strange place for the first time.

Families with a problem-solving process in place are more likely to resolve both types of issues. It is important for families who become stuck and are unable to resolve an issue to learn and implement a problem- solving process.

THE PROBLEM-SOLVING PROCESS

Families who successfully and quickly resolve problems have developed skills to manage their difficulties. They are aware of the steps in the problem-solving process and they consistently implement them to resolve problems. Problem-solving is a process skill that, like

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other skills, can be learned by the family. The following six steps will assist you in establishing a problem-solving process in your family.

- **PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION AND AGREEMENT**

  The first step in the problem-solving process is problem identification. Knowing the real problem or issue is half the battle. Although this may seem like a simple first step, many families have difficulty with it.   Many families tend to blame someone in the family for the problem.   Instead, families need to define and agree on what type of problem they are dealing with. For example, is it an instrumental issue related to how the family accomplishes a task, or is it an affective (feeling and emotions) issue? In some cases it may be both.

  Families may identify the instrumental problem but miss the affective side and wonder why the issue wasn't resolved. A family member may feel his/her feelings were not heard or addressed and will not agree to go along with the solution until the hurt feelings are dealt with. Therefore, families must practice problem identification and agreement as the first step in problem-solving.

- **CREATING OPTIONS AND ALTERNATIVES**

  The second step in the problem-solving process is creating options.   By brainstorming, the family generates options or alternatives surrounding the identified problem. What are some things the family or family members can do to resolve the issue? What are some of the possible solutions to the problem? Make a list of your alternatives.

  Encourage brainstorming without evaluating the ideas until many options are on the table. The creative options step leads to effective solutions to problems.

  Options should take into account both instrumental and emotional issues and should include all family members who are affected by the issue.

- **EVALUATE ALTERNATIVES**

  Step three is evaluating the alternatives the family has generated. Ask what your family thinks of each of the options. Each family member should give his/her opinion of the idea. Eliminate the alternatives that the family is unwilling to try. The goal

is to find an option that each family member will agree to consider.   Next, decide whether or not the family has the resources to carry out the alternative.

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- **CHOOSE A SOLUTION**

  Once you have evaluated all the alternatives, decide as a family which idea or ideas you are willing to follow. This is known as the action plan. The action plan includes what the family is going to do, which family member is going to do it, and when it will be done. Once you have chosen a solution, write down a summary of it. This will help your family remember what the plan is supposed to do.

  Putting the plan in writing enables everyone to better understand the plan and their part in resolving the problem or issue. A written plan is also helpful for monitoring your family's solution, which is the next step in the problem-solving process.

- **MONITORING THE SOLUTION**

  Monitoring the solution is critical to the problem-solving process. By monitoring the action plan, your family can keep track of their progress. This

will remind you of what the family decided to do, which family member is going to do it, and when it will be done.

• EVALUATING THE SUCCESS OF THE PLAN

The final stage in the problem-solving process is to evaluate the success of the family action plan. This stage involves reviewing what happened in order to learn from the situation. The review helps the family to make adjustments to the plan and to evaluate what worked and what didn't.

Parents who teach problem-solving skills to their children promote resiliency in their children.

FOCUS ON FAMILY STRENGTHS

Problem-solving is a key to successful family functioning. Research indicates that families who practice problem-solving techniques are more likely to pass this skill on to their children.

Research has identified problem-solving as a factor that promotes resiliency in children (National Network for Family Resiliency, 1993). Problem-solving skills among family members will lead to more effective resolution of both instrumental and emotional family problems.

FAMILY ASSESSMENT

Successful Healthy families periodically take inventory of their strengths and weaknesses and take steps to improve their home and family environment. Isn't it time your family took an inventory of how well it is doing?

For more detailed information regarding family functioning in the six key areas, contact your local Extension Office for copies of other publications in this series.

REFERENCES

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