

A NEWSLETTER FOR CHILD CARE PROVIDERS

THE PROBLEM SOLVER

HELP—DON'T RESCUE

A child's cry is the most powerful sound in the world. It evokes a response—of concern, compassion, and responsibility to resentment, frustration, and guilt—from all who hear it. In spite of that power, many of us think young children are weak and helpless. We may not see or understand the inner strength children have, even from the first cry at birth.

If you fail to recognize a child's strength, you may become a "rescuer." You may try to save children from difficult situations. However, rescuing children makes them overdependent, anxious, and inhibited. If children cannot learn through their mistakes, they may remain emotionally immature or lack a sense of responsibility for their actions.

Of course, children must be saved from situations which threaten their physical and mental well-being or self-esteem. But there is a fine line between a situation where adult intervention is required and one in which the child's experience provides the best opportunity for learning.

Why do we have such a strong urge to rescue kids from difficult situations? Perhaps we believe it is our role to shield children from becoming upset. We may underestimate their capabilities, not knowing when they are ready for more self-direction, or see children as potential victims. Maybe we have a low tolerance for children's crying or we may simply want to be needed by a child.

Respect is the key to giving help without rescuing. Respect every child as an individual with his or her own strengths and skills and encourage children. They can succeed if they keep trying. "I'm going to let you do that by yourself,"

shows children you believe in them. Time and patience are also important. It takes time for children to understand their own problems, resolve conflicts, pick themselves up when they fall, or put on their own shoes. You may have to move away and pretend you don't hear the whining, crying, or demanding that will tempt you to do the task for a child. If the child is capable and the task is appropriate, allow for some struggling. Remember, Piaget, the great educator, taught that children learn best through their own mistakes.

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How can you give help when it is really needed without rescuing? Here are some guidelines.

1 Be sure a child is capable of doing the task by himself or herself. Has he or she tried it before, done parts of the task, or performed similar tasks using the same skills?

2 Show a child that you understand his or her frustrations. "Shoes can be hard to put on" or "I know you're disappointed that you didn't get to the toilet soon enough" helps a child understand and accept his or her feelings. This kind of active listening often gets the child through a difficult moment.

3 Give verbal cues whenever possible. For example, "Try using your thumb for that"; "If you wiggle your foot

it will go into your shoe more easily"; or "You can pull yourself up on that chair." Allow the child plenty of time to respond to your help.

4 If verbal assistance doesn't work, give the smallest amount of physical help you can. For example, "Here's my finger to hold," or "I'll open your shoe wider." Your help should get the child over the hurdle, but allow him or her to do most of the work.

5 Show kids how you correct your own mistakes. For example, "Oh, oh, I spilled the milk. I'd better go get the sponge and wipe it up. Do you want to help?"

6 If there is a conflict between two fairly evenly matched kids, act as a facilitator. Help children talk to each other and find their own solutions. Negotiation provides children with the most effective learning experience possible.

7 Give children lots of support for their successes. Comment on the behavior you see. For example, "I appreciate how hard you worked putting on your shoes," or "You can be proud of yourself for climbing to the top of the climber."

Letting kids solve their own problems builds self-esteem, independence, a sense of responsibility, and skill development. A child may not say, "Thank you for letting me do it myself," but someday you'll both be glad you did.

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