Problem-Solving Conferences

Andrew, a verbally articulate special education student with learning disabilities and ADD, fell apart every time he was asked to write.

He sulked, argued with teachers, and sometimes threw full-blown tantrums on the classroom floor. During the daily writers' workshop in our third grade class, he would lie on the floor, kick his feet, and refuse to write. I would sit beside him and offer support in getting started, but that didn't help.

At a time when he was calm, I asked Andrew to a private one-on-one conversation with me to see if we might together figure out a way to make writing go better for him.

I began by affirming his skill in expressing his ideas when speaking, then stated matter-of-factly that I noticed he had trouble getting his good ideas down on paper. Andrew, perhaps relieved by my tone, agreed quickly. "Yep, it's hard for me," he said. I explained why it was important that he learn to write well and invited him to work with me to become a better writer.

Talking together for a few minutes, we identified a likely cause of his difficulty: When I asked whether it's because he never has energy at writing time, he confirmed that he gets "really, really tired."

Together we brainstormed for possible solutions and decided on one to try. Because Andrew was most energetic early in the day, we'd create a time first thing in the morning for him to write. After a conversation with his parents, we decided that three days a week, Andrew's dad would bring him to school before the other children arrived. Andrew would sit at the reading table and write while I prepared for the morning.

We tried this. It didn't solve all of Andrew's writing problems, but for the first time in several years, Andrew did begin to do some productive writing.

This conversation with Andrew took about fifteen minutes and is an example of a problem-solving conference, a strategy for helping individual students overcome a persistent problem they're having at school. It's a private, structured conversation about what's creating the difficulty for the child and what might help him overcome it.

Purpose: Building an Alliance to Solve the Problem

In a problem-solving conference, the teacher builds an alliance with the student to solve a problem. The teacher opens up discussion with the child, listens to her, and makes the problem a mutual issue. The teacher and child then together identify a likely cause of the problem and together decide how to address it.

Problem-solving conferences rest on a foundation of rapport between the teacher and student, a rapport established before any problem-solving is attempted. They build on children's natural desire to belong and to learn. Conducted well, these conferences work because when children feel accepted and trust that their teacher cares about them, they're generally eager to work with their teacher to become more successful in school.

Sometimes these conferences quickly solve the problem—the teacher and student successfully find a solution, and the student's behavior changes. Other times the problem is more complex, perhaps requiring the involvement of colleagues, special educators, or child mental health professionals. The problem-solving conference may then represent the beginning of a conversation, providing helpful information to the teacher and any other adults involved.

While the immediate reason for a problem-solving conference is to address a current difficulty, this strategy can have far-reaching effects. It can enhance the teacher's relationship with the student, helping the student see that the teacher cares about him as a person and about his success in school.

Moreover, in guiding students to think about possible causes of their problem and what they can do to solve it, we teach them to be self-reflective. We teach them to take responsibility for their behavior. These are habits and skills that will serve them well now and in their adult lives.

When to Use Problem-Solving Conferences

A problem-solving conference is a strategy for addressing one persistent problem involving one student.

One persistent problem

Children with challenging behaviors usually act out in multiple ways. But asking them to work on all of their problems at once is likely to overwhelm them. A more productive approach is to choose one problem to address in the conference. This increases the chances that the student will succeed. That success then gives the child the confidence and interest in working on other needed improvements.

It's also important to reserve problem-solving conferences for persistent issues. Many classroom problems are occasional and fleeting. Elizabeth gets

angry at her friend Michaela and tells Michaela she won't spend time with her at recess, but the next day the two fifth graders are back on good terms. Deagan, usually a productive sixth grade writer, today can't figure out how to add details to his reader's notebook entry and sits sucking on his pencil. For these kinds of problems, a reminder about classroom rules or a quick reference to ideas for getting past writer's block, rather than a problem-solving conference, might be an appropriate teacher response.

By contrast, Savannah habitually calls out during Morning Meeting, barely letting her fellow first graders make comments. Reminders, more modeling of raising hands and waiting, redirections, and use of logical consequences have had no effect. Because these routine interventions have not worked to help Savannah gain control of her calling out, a problem-solving conference would be an appropriate strategy to try.

A problem involving one student

Problem-solving conferences are designed to address a difficulty that one child is having rather than a problem involving the interplay between two or more students. Other strategies—possibly conflict resolution (see Chapter Three)—are more suitable for issues that involve more than one student.

Admittedly, classroom problems often fall in a gray area between involving one student and involving several. The teacher's task is to discern whether there is one child whose behavior is essential to the interactions. Christopher often argued with classmates. The arguments would escalate as each student reciprocated with sharper and sharper barbs, but I could see that it was Christopher who initiated them with cutting teasing. "You're a dork," he would whisper to Sean. "Your pants are high-waters." Sean, mortified about the pants that had seemed fine just a few minutes ago, would whisper back, "You're mean," and the argument would be on its way. A problem-solving conference with Christopher thus seemed to be the appropriate response.

Behaviors that might be addressed through problem-solving conferences

Academic problems (Examples: difficulty getting started on or completing assignments, doing careless work, not being thoughtful)

Problem-solving conferences can be a way to explore children's behavior problems around academic work. Silvie rushed through her assignments. Daniel seemed unable to settle down to read. Conferring with each gave me insight into the reasons for the student's academic struggles. Once we had a common understanding of the reasons, we could work together to create a plan that would enable the student to be a more successful learner.

Behaviors that interfere with others' learning (Examples: calling out, demanding constant teacher attention)

Some of the thorniest classroom problems are those that arise from so many people spending all day together in one room. Mitchell talked incessantly during kindergarten group discussions, preventing other children from speaking. Third grader Rachel followed Ms. Harrison around the room, calling "Teacher, Teacher," preventing Ms. Harrison from attending to the other children.

It takes great self-control for children to hold back their impulses so that everyone can learn. For those who consistently have trouble, problem-solving conferences can be a way to heighten awareness of the need for self-control and to set up a structure for the teacher to give reminders and monitor the child's improvements.

Behaviors that alienate other children (Examples: tattling, speaking in a mean way, being a bad sport, initiating exclusive cliques)

Some children, although they desperately wish for friends, are their own worst enemy "in the friends department" as Michelle, a student I taught, used to say. Michelle kept choosing Raven as a partner, even as Raven backed further and further away from her. Ruby was only interested in working with Mia and wanted Mia to work only with her, despite Mia's interest in making new friends in their fifth grade class.

There are many possible causes for such problems, from how a child treats classmates, to children's perceptions of who or what is "cool." A prob-

lem-solving conference can be a vehicle for exploring reasons and solutions and coaching children in mastering more successful social behaviors.

Defiance toward the teacher
(Examples: ignoring directions, arguing with the teacher, rude looks or remarks)

When children, on occasion, choose to ignore or defy teacher directions, logical consequences usually remedy the problem. Some children, however, are chronically oppositional. Lisa was such a student.

On the second day of school Lisa had a tantrum during a math lesson on sorting and categorizing "ways that we use math in the world." For homework the night before, the children were to find examples of math use in objects from their homes. Lisa refused to group her examples with any other student's. On the third day of school she threw some base ten blocks at me when I restricted the number of blocks she could use.

Even though each incident was fleeting, Lisa showed a pattern of defiance. This told me that I needed to have a problem-solving conference with her right away to establish basic classroom expectations. (See "Lisa, defiant toward the teacher" on page 71.)

Steps in a Problem-Solving Conference

A problem-solving conference consists of specific steps that establish a tone of respectful collaboration and ensure clarity about the goals of the meeting. Though there are several steps, some are quite quick, so the entire conference usually takes only ten to twenty minutes. The steps are:

1. Establish the purpose of the conference.

2. Reaffirm teacher–student rapport.

3. Talk about the problem area: what the teacher notices, what the student notices.

4. Name the behavior as a problem and why it's a problem.

5. Invite the student to work with the teacher on the problem.

Teacher Intention in Problem-Solving Conferences

Positive teacher intention is paramount to the success of problem-solving conferences. The effectiveness of this strategy is determined, at least in part, by our open-hearted willingness to collaborate with a student who is exhibiting behaviors that are self-defeating and may be irritating to others. A problem-solving conference will not be effective if we feel blame or anger toward the student, and our feelings will come through even if we think we're masking them.

To make sure I'm on the child's side, I spend time thinking about his behavior before the conference, trying on different perspectives, reflecting about what his point of view might be. A colleague's fresh eyes and ears can be helpful. One day I sat down with another teacher to talk through my plans for a conference with a student who wasn't doing his homework. I thought I was giving a balanced and objective recounting of the child's actions. My colleague listened and said, "It sounds like you're angry at him."

She was right. I realized that my feelings of helplessness about getting the student to do his homework had led me to feel irritated with him. Through talking with her, I was able to reframe my own thoughts and feelings so that I was ready to ally with the student. Only then could he and I work together to make appropriate modifications to his homework and a plan for completing it.

6. Explore the cause of the problem.

7. Articulate a clear, specific goal to work on together.

8. Generate solutions and choose one to try.

9. Set a time for a "How are things going?" check-in.

In the next pages, you'll see what these steps looked like in a conference I had with a third grader named Erica.

The youngest in a family of high achievers, Erica was a happy-go-lucky child who loved to laugh. She arrived at school every morning with a big smile, ready to give school her all. Despite the fact that she was the youngest in our class, with a December birthday, she got along well with classmates and had lots of friends.

Erica's problem was with reading and writing. Choosing a "just-right" book was a struggle for her. She chose thick books with small print and challenging words, and then "read," flipping through the pages rapidly without comprehension. When it came to writing, Erica rushed. She covered many pages with unpunctuated nonsequiturs, her scrawled handwriting wandering all over the paper. She routinely misspelled words that I knew she could spell correctly.

I believed that Erica could do a lot better if she just slowed down. A problem-solving conference seemed like the right strategy to try. Of Erica's two problematic academic areas—reading and writing—I decided to focus on writing for the moment.

One morning as the children were arriving, I quietly asked Erica if she'd like to have lunch with me. I said that I'd like to discuss her writing and it would be nice to do so over lunch. She agreed. At lunchtime, Erica went to get her food, and then arrived in the classroom with her lunch tray. I already had my sandwich out. We sat down together at the reading table.

Step 1. Establish the purpose of the conference

The first step is to establish clearly what the conference will be about. I wanted to reiterate that our conversation would be about her writing,

and I wanted her to know that I cared about what she thought. I began by asking how she felt things were going so far.

Misunderstanding, she launched right into how things were going with friends. "I like to play with Jenny. Trent called me 'dumb face' one day when you were out at a meeting."

Refocusing and clarifying, I asked how she thought things were going with her writing.

She paused and then replied hesitantly, "Okay."

Step 2. Reaffirm teacher-student rapport

It's vitally important that we've already built a positive relationship with the student before attempting a problem-solving conference. Reaffirming this rapport usually helps the student relax and become thoughtful, allowing the teacher and student to collaborate.

I list this as the second step, after establishing the purpose of the conference. But it can just as easily come before establishing the purpose if that feels more natural. That's what I did in the conference with Andrew that opens this chapter.

We can reaffirm rapport in different ways: We can note positive behaviors we've observed in the student, to remind the child that we see her competencies and have faith in her ability to succeed in school. Or we can just chat briefly about something the student likes or is happy about—a hobby, for example—which shows the child that we notice and care about her interests.

With Erica, I noted her positive learning behaviors. "I've been noticing that you listen carefully during lessons and contribute your thoughts during group discussions," I said. I chose these behaviors because they showed that Erica had the motivation to be a good student. I might have simply asked about her birthday party the previous week. Either way, a positive and friendly tone is crucial.

Step 3. Talk about the problem area: What the teacher notices, what the student notices

Now the teacher turns the conversation to the problem area. But this is not the same as saying that the behaviors are a problem and why—that comes next. First, the teacher simply states some specific behaviors she has noticed aren't working. Then she asks what the student has noticed. Before they can solve a problem together, the teacher and child have to establish which behaviors are under question, and the two need to agree that the student is indeed exhibiting those behaviors.

With Erica, I brought up these problem behaviors using an objective tone. I wanted her to see these as problems to solve rather than as an attack from me. "I've noticed that when you write you often forget your punctuation and miss spelling words that I know you know. I'm wondering if you're rushing to finish quickly. What have you noticed?"

My question reflects the fact that this is a collaborative strategy and Erica's views were a key to the collaboration. It was important, therefore, that I ask Erica what she had noticed. Erica readily agreed that she rushed with written work.

Step 4. Name the behavior as a problem and why it's a problem

Only now, when the teacher and student have agreed on the facts, does the teacher assert why the behavior is a problem that needs to be solved.

With Erica, I simply stated, "It's important that we find a way to have you do your best work in school, and that means careful work so that you can learn to be an even better writer."

Step 5. Invite the student to work with the teacher on the problem

In this step, the teacher specifically invites the student into the problem-solving process as a partner. This invitation serves the dual function of guiding the child to take responsibility and allowing the teacher to gauge the student's readiness to confront the issue.

"Would you like to work together on finding ways you can be careful with your written work? I'd like to help you with this, if you'd like to work on it," I said to Erica. I knew that she might or might not want to work with me, but if this problem-solving was to be successful, her cooperation would be important.

By this point in the conversation, Erica trusted that I truly wanted to help her do her best, and she agreed to work with me.

This is a place to abandon the conference and simply state classroom expectations if the student doesn't see her behavior as a problem or doesn't want to collaborate with the teacher. If Erica had said no to my invitation to work together, I would have accepted her answer. I would have simply stated that our class rules say she is to do her best and that I would monitor her writing carefully. If a student isn't ready to take responsibility for her work and learning, the teacher needs to take responsibility for it.

Step 6. Explore the cause of the problem

Part of working together on a problem is coming to a shared understanding of its cause. But simply asking children why they're doing something often gets a shrug or an "I don't know," so prompting them with possible explanations is helpful. To keep my position neutral, I phrase these prompts as questions starting with "Might it be," "Could it be," or "Why do you suppose," rather than as assertions.

"I'm wondering why you rush when you write," I said to Erica. "Could it be that you want to be like your older sister, Melissa, and you think that she writes quickly?" I had thought of this as a possible cause when planning for this conference.

Erica's reply surprised me. "No," she said. "I know that Melissa works carefully. It's just that when I'm working I feel like I'm in a danger zone and I have to work fast to get out of it."

"Hmm, what do you mean by 'danger zone'? What does it feel like?"

With some prompting, Erica explained that by "danger zone," she meant the work is hard and it feels scary. She wants to hurry so that she'll be done as soon as possible.

Then, as children sometimes do in a problem-solving conference, Erica volunteered information that revealed a deeper issue than the specific problem at hand. She said, "I was supposed to be in second grade right now. My mom thought I could work harder so I started kindergarten when I was four. Third grade is pretty hard."

Erica's grade placement wasn't something I could realistically control, so going down this conversational path risked opening a can of worms. Still, for the sake of understanding what she was feeling, I took a chance and asked, "Do you wish you were in second grade?"

"Yes," Erica responded.

Even though we weren't going to put Erica in second grade or retain her for another year in third grade, the conference helped me to realize that Erica, a young third grader, needed a lot more academic support than I was giving her. I made a mental note to talk with the principal about getting some extra help for Erica from a retired teacher who was volunteering in our school.

Step 7. Articulate a clear, specific goal to work on together

For now, I refocused on how to help Erica with her writing. I brought out her writer's notebook and opened it to a rare high-quality entry I had previously identified. It was one with a drawing of Erica and her dad fishing. I thought that looking at this successful entry would motivate her to work toward consistently producing quality pieces.

I asked if the picture had helped her to gather her thoughts.

She responded by saying, "Fishing is one of my favorite things to do. I took the whole thing from my mind and pasted it on the paper."

"I see that you remembered your punctuation and spelled words from our class 'no excuses' list correctly," I said. I pointed out that she'd written in complete sentences and that her sentences made sense. "I see that you can do quality writing in your notebook," I said.

I then made a list that described the quality work I saw in the "fishing" entry:

- Spelled "no excuses" words correctly

- Put end punctuation at the end of each sentence

- Wrote in complete sentences

- Wrote sentences that made sense

I could have suggested that Erica try to accomplish all these things every time she wrote. But now that I knew that writing felt scary to her, I realized it would be overwhelming for her to try to meet all of these goals at once. I had to collaborate with Erica to find a manageable goal and a way to achieve it. She needed success.

"I want to help you do quality writing every time you write in your notebook," I said. "Which of these areas might be a good place to start?"

"I know how to spell lots of words. I think I can remember to spell my 'no excuses' words correctly. I can remember periods and question marks, too," Erica responded.

"Okay, let's start with those. Later on we can work on sentences that make sense," I said.

I wrote down *Erica will check for punctuation and spelling whenever she writes. She will spell "no excuses" words correctly and put end punctuation at the end of each sentence.* She and I both signed the paper, and I wrote the date at the top.

Step 8. Generate solutions and choose one to try

In a problem-solving conference, the student plays a role in coming up with solutions to try. It's helpful, however, for the teacher to be ready to suggest some potential solutions in case the student can't think of any. Chances are if the child knew of a solution, she would have tried it already.

It's also important to be ready to switch to a whole other set of suggestions if the cause of the problem turns out to be something other than what the teacher had guessed. This was the case with Erica. The solutions I had prepared were ones for slowing down, which were no longer applicable. What Erica needed were strategies for feeling safer and more successful when writing.

So I shifted gears in the moment, suggesting some strategies that had helped other struggling writers feel safer. I asked Erica if it would help to use her personal spelling dictionary each time she wrote. And I suggested that she might be able to remember end punctuation if she read her pieces aloud to herself and listened for the pauses.

Erica suggested that if she had a writing buddy, the buddy could help her check for punctuation and correct spelling.

After we generated this list of possible solutions, I invited Erica to choose one to try. She chose her idea: working with a writing buddy. We both agreed that this would be a good start and that we might discuss adding another strategy at a subsequent conference.

Step 9. Set a time for a "How's it going?" check-in

In our busy teaching days, it's easy to feel relieved that a problem is solved and we can cross it off our to-do list. But for problem-solving to be successful, we need to schedule regular check-ins to monitor progress toward the goal. I know that for me, when a problem-solving conference has not been successful, it's often been because I've let the ball drop and haven't kept up the regular check-ins.

"Let's try this strategy and meet again next Monday at lunchtime to see how things are going," I said to Erica.

The conference had taken about twenty minutes, and it was time to pick up the rest of the class from the lunchroom.

During the week I kept a close eye on Erica's writing, and on Monday, she and I compared observations about whether the week's writing had gone better. Together, we decided she should continue working with a writing buddy a little longer.

Meanwhile, I thought about Erica's reading. The problem-solving conference addressed her writing, but her reading was still an issue. How could I help her choose appropriate independent reading books? I decided to talk with my colleague Ms. Reilly to get her opinion. Ms. Reilly taught second grade and was knowledgeable about literacy, often leading staff development sessions for all the second grade teachers in the district.

After hearing my description of Erica, Ms. Reilly said, "It sounds like she wants to look like everyone else when she reads. Maybe you need to limit her choices." At Ms. Reilly's suggestion, I prepared a book basket for Erica, filled with books that Ms. Reilly helped me pick for someone of Erica's age and reading development. When Erica was ready for a new book, she'd choose from her basket.

Erica actually seemed relieved to have her choices limited. Soon she was happily reading, and comprehending, books that were right for her.

Keys to Success in Problem-Solving Conferences

Problem-solving conferences will be most effective if you do the following:

Set a classroom climate of respect and reflection

A problem-solving conference will be most effective if the teacher has already established some rapport with the child. Critical to this rapport is a safe, caring classroom filled with mutual respect between the teacher and students, where the teacher knows and cares about each child. Does the child with whom I want to hold a conference know that I like and respect him? Do I show that I'm happy to see him in the morning? This is the basis for our work together.

Also, a problem-solving conference asks the student to be reflective. Children are more likely to be reflective if we nurture the habit and skills of reflection at other times in the day. I ask myself, "Am I asking open-ended questions in math, reading, and science? Am I honoring children's responses to these questions, whether or not they're the ones that I would give?" If children are expected to think for themselves in math, reading, and science, they will be more likely to be thoughtful and honest when looking at their own behaviors.

Take time to plan before a conference

Teacher planning is a critical part of the conference process. Here are the important areas to think about while planning.

A way to reaffirm our positive relationship with the student

Beginning a conference by reaffirming our positive relationship with the student helps the student relax and get into a constructive problem-solving mode. Before going into a conference, I think about how I might do this. Are there positive behaviors I can point out in the student? How else might I show my faith in his ability to succeed in school? Or should I simply chat a little about the student's favorite baseball team or what he did over the weekend?

There's no one right way to reaffirm rapport. It depends on the student. The important thing is to choose something that the student cares about and to be truthful. If we decide to name a positive behavior, it's important to name only the behaviors the student has truly shown, rather than stretching the truth just to be complimentary. The goal is to remind the child of the genuineness of our relationship with him, of the fact that we notice and value him.

I often redouble my efforts at observing the child when I plan this aspect of the conference. For example, with Erica in the preceding example, I knew there were a lot of positive behaviors that I could name. To refresh my mental list, I spent a day noticing again what she did well. She was friendly and caring to all. She put lots of energy into assignments, getting right to work and producing volumes of writing. She joined group lessons with enthusiasm and contributed her ideas readily. I planned to articulate some of these strengths during the conference.

Which **one** *behavior to focus on*

A successful problem-solving conference focuses on one main behavior. When a child has multiple behavior problems, it's best to start by addressing just one of them.

Often it helps to think about which behavior is predominately interfering with success in school. Seven-year-old Clayton crawled around on the floor during lessons, left mountains of paper scraps all over his work area, and was occasionally defiant of me. I decided that until I could be sure that he would respectfully respond to teacher directions, it would be hard for us to work on anything else. So I chose to focus on the defiance in our first problem-solving conference.

Sometimes it helps to think about which behavior the child is probably most able and motivated to change. Nathan, age nine, argued with teachers, whined, and swept papers and books onto the floor during math, refusing to do the math work. I thought that with targeted support he might become successful at doing at least one problem each math period. The other behaviors seemed less surmountable at the moment. Once he was actually doing some math, I reasoned, the other behaviors might be moderated because he would feel more successful academically and therefore less frustrated.

Once I've chosen a behavior, say "responding respectfully to the teacher" or "do more math," I think about a couple of very specific goals that fit under that category. These are behaviors that both the teacher and child would be able to see or hear. By monitoring these specifics, both would be able to agree easily whether there has been progress. Erica and I could agree whether she included periods and question marks. Clayton and I could agree whether he was going to time-out without arguing. Nathan and I could both see whether he completed at least one problem each day in math.

Here are some questions to consider in choosing which behavior to focus on:

Which behavior is getting in the way of success in school?
Which behavior is most irritating to the other children?
Which behavior is interfering with the feeling of community in the classroom?
Which behavior, left unaddressed, might become entrenched and habitual?
Which behavior is the student most able and motivated to change?

Possible reasons for the student's difficulty

As mentioned previously, it helps to come to a conference ready to suggest some possible causes of the student's difficulty. I begin by thinking about my own teaching. Are my expectations for the child reasonable and developmentally appropriate? For example, am I expecting a seven-year-old to function as part of a small group when she is still in an inward and moody stage of growth?

Next I think about every child's basic human need for a sense of belonging and significance. Might the child be thinking mistakenly that her behavior is a way to achieve these goals? Trish followed me around the classroom, asking me for constant feedback on her work. Was she

feeling that she wouldn't belong without my constant attention? To test this hypothesis I might work on giving her important classroom jobs that could help her feel needed by the community.

Speaking with a colleague helps enormously as well. Often, in the thick of things, I lose perspective. I get stuck in reacting simplistically to students' behaviors or self-concepts. A student feels discouraged, so I feel hopeless. A student becomes mired in the need for power; thus I feel defensive. A student keeps rushing, so I just want her to slow down. A heart to heart with a trusted colleague can move me out of the box.

In the case of Erica, for example, I spoke with her previous teacher. "I feel frustrated," I told Ms. Perham. "Why is Erica's work so lacking? I think I'm making my expectations clear, and I've modeled careful work, but she just rushes through. Did this happen in second grade? How did you handle it?"

"I checked her work pretty carefully, every fifteen minutes," replied Ms. Perham. "Otherwise she'd just start writing anything on the page."

Just talking with Ms. Perham helped me feel less frustrated. I still didn't know for sure the cause of Erica's work style, but I learned that it had a long history. My best guess was that Erica wanted to be a good student and that she hurried because she saw her older brother and sister working quickly and thought that was what good students did. I planned to prompt her with this thought as a possible cause of her rushing.

Sometimes our guess at the cause turns out to be wrong, as was the case with Erica. That's okay. Positing an explanation often helps draw out of students the correct explanation.

Some potential solutions to suggest

In planning potential solutions to suggest, I consider what I know about the child and what has worked and not worked for him in relevant situations, as well as solutions that have helped other children who've had similar difficulties.

Potential solutions might be something that the teacher will do, something that the student will do, or something they'll do together. It's important to be flexible about these potential solutions though. A problem-solving conference

is a collaborative process, and the child may have ideas of his own.

For Erica's conference, I decided that if she needed prompting, I would suggest that I give her a reminder to slow down, that she use her personal spelling dictionary to check her spelling, or that we have a brief check-in during each writing time.

Of course, some of the solutions we plan to suggest may become irrelevant if—as was the case with Erica—our guess at the cause of the problem turns out to be off. During Erica's conference I discarded my idea of reminding her to slow down, for example, once I understood that she hurried because writing felt scary. Rather than being told to slow down, she needed strategies for feeling safer when writing. So I articulated only those strategies that might increase her sense of safety.

Where and when to meet

I always try for a private time and place to meet, away from the listening ears of classmates. Seven-year-olds, for example, can be anxious and moody and need protection, and eight-, nine-, and ten-year-olds are so social and interested in what's going on that they love to listen in on conversations that sound important. Knowing that our conversation is confidential encourages students to lower their guard and be honest, open, and thoughtful.

It's tempting to hold the conference in the classroom while the class is working, since we have so little time alone to plan and prepare as it is. But I've tried that and found that students don't share as honestly with me.

Some kindergarten teachers have told me they're able to hold conferences right in the classroom while classmates are focused on their own play during choice or an activity time. They explain that as long as children are deeply engaged and aren't listening in, the conversation can feel very private. I suggest that you use your own judgment about which setting will feel most private to your student. The important thing is to make sure the conference environment feels safe for the student so that she will be open and honest.

Erica loved to play with her friends at recess, so holding the conference then didn't seem like a good idea. I decided to hold it during lunch because I thought she might enjoy eating in the classroom with me, away from the bustle of the lunchroom.

I invite students to conferences in a friendly yet low-key way, mentioning the problem but not dwelling on it. And if the meeting time we suggest doesn't work for the student, I look for another time. For example, if Erica had said she had plans to eat lunch with a friend, I would have scheduled a different time to talk with her about her writing. Whether or not to meet with me isn't a choice, but when to meet is.

Use careful teacher language

As with all aspects of teaching, choosing our words and tone of voice carefully makes a big difference to the success of problem-solving conferences.

Use a matter-of-fact tone

Children who have difficulty controlling themselves, getting along with others, or doing their school work are probably used to being talked at in angry or pleading tones and often have had years of experience in tuning out adult words. By using a neutral tone that implies that these are issues everyone struggles with and we're here to help, we allow the children to relax, listen, and participate.

Keep teacher talk to a minimum

Early in my career, I'd often "have a chat" with a student who was misbehaving. These chats entailed me talking and the child acting like she was listening. Then the child would happily run off, ready to continue the behavior that I had so articulately chatted about.

When I learned about problem-solving conferences, I realized that our goal should be to enlist children in the work of solving problems, forging a partnership with them. To do this, we need to give them the space to think and talk, to actively engage in finding a solution. Keeping our own talk to a minimum allows them to do this.

Be specific

Being specific when describing problematic behaviors allows the child to understand what exactly isn't working. "Your reader's notebook entry has no periods" is clear and direct. "You're always careless with your work" is too general, leaving the child to guess at what we mean. Such generalizations may also sound like accusations, making the child feel attacked and

therefore defensive. This destroys the collaborative tone we hope to establish.

When we name the goal as one or two specific behaviors, the child knows what is expected. It's okay to include a general goal statement such as "Erica will do quality writing" as long as "quality writing" is defined with some specifics. In Erica's conference, we included the two specifics of spelling "no excuses" words correctly and using end punctuation in each sentence.

Use words and phrases that empower the child to reflect

Using the phrase "I've noticed"—as in "I've noticed that you don't let others play the game"—helps us avoid making a value judgment about a child's behavior. It thus allows the child to examine the behavior for himself rather than become defensive.

"Might it be?" or "I'm wondering if"—as in "Might it be that you really like Justin and want to play with him" or "I'm wondering if it's because you want to have as much time to play with Justin as possible"— are phrases that imply that we, the teachers, have an idea but we're enlisting the child in considering its validity. We might also say, "I'm going to throw out some ideas here. One might sound right to you. Let's try and see."

"Sometimes kids … " is another phrase that allows us to suggest an idea without being overbearing. For example, "Sometimes kids don't let others play a game because they want more time to play with their best friend." A child can then decide whether he is one of those kids. It's important that we allow students to explore their thoughts and feelings, not the thoughts and feelings that we think they have or should have.

Use positive language that helps the child see a new way

If we use phrases such as "control of your body," "doing careful work," or "being a good friend," we show the child what she may be able to achieve. To say that "Erica will do quality writing" encourages Erica to imagine herself as a quality writer. In contrast, "Erica will improve her writing" focuses on a more negative image of Erica as a problem writer. With our words, we help children envision a way to be their best selves in the classroom.

Stay open to surprises

In problem-solving conferences, we share our thoughts and listen to the student's thoughts. In this way, we team up with the child and reflect together. Often, we learn things we didn't know before. Being open to children's ideas is vital in successfully solving the problem with them.

Without Erica's crucial insight about writing being a "danger zone," for example, she and I might have wandered down a path of trying one solution after another that didn't address the true cause of the problem.

In another example, Rachel followed her third grade teacher around the classroom asking questions all day long. Because Ms. Harrison knew that Rachel was the youngest child in a large and busy family, she thought that Rachel was trying to get more attention. She tried to offer this attention when Rachel wasn't acting so demanding by inviting Rachel to have special lunches with her. But it didn't work. Rachel didn't want to have special lunches with Ms. Harrison.

Then Ms. Harrison met with Rachel using the problem-solving conference format and asked, "Might it be that you want me to pay more attention to you?"

Rachel's response surprised Ms. Harrison. "Oh no," Rachel explained, "I don't want any teachers noticing me. I want to blend in. It's just that sometimes I don't understand how to do my school work." Once Ms. Harrison realized that what Rachel wanted was academic help, she was able to give her that support.

Children can also surprise us by suggesting great solutions to their problems. Eric was a first grader who talked all day long. During class meetings and group discussions he called out constantly, interfering with other children's learning. During a problem-solving conference, Eric and his teacher brainstormed possible solutions. When Ms. Adams said that one possibility would be for Eric to raise his hand to speak, Eric said, "We keep trying that, and it hasn't worked. Why don't we try Popsicle sticks?"

At Eric's suggestion, Ms. Adams gave Eric three Popsicle sticks at the beginning of each class discussion. Every time he spoke, Eric gave Ms. Adams a Popsicle stick. Once the sticks were gone, Eric had made his contributions to the discussion. This system reminded Eric to stop and

think, before he opened his mouth, whether what he wanted to say was really important. That pause also gave him time to remember to raise his hand to be called on.

Bring outside information to the conference

It's important to be open to children's ideas, but it's also important to prepare some working hypotheses of your own before the conference. Classroom observations, information from colleagues and parents, knowledge of child development, and educational theories can all help. This information helps us to think on our feet during the conference and to provide appropriate follow-up after the conference.

Classroom observations

Through observing our students we have an "opportunity to wonder and learn," as early childhood educators Judy Jablon, Amy Laura Dombro, and Margo Dichtelmiller put it (Jablon, Dombro, & Dichtelmiller, 2007, p.7). Wondering and learning involves collecting information through our eyes and ears, thinking about what that information might mean, and constructing hypotheses about student behavior accordingly.

In one fourth grade class I taught, students were creating objects to show what they learned during our recent field trip to the Nature Center. Carlos was making a meticulous forest scene out of clay. The leaves on the trees were shaped to look like oaks, maples, and sycamores. No detail was omitted.

Later in the day, at writing time, Carlos had one sentence on his paper. He was paralyzed, unable to move forward with his story. This writer's block showed up in other writing situations as well. By the second month of school, Carlos's writing had ground to a halt.

On the basis of many classroom observations of Carlos, like the one of his work on the forest scene, I surmised that his perfectionism was holding him back as a writer. When we met for a problem-solving conference, I asked, "Might it be that you think your writing has to be perfect the first time?" Carlos readily agreed that he did want his work always to be perfect. This opened a conversation about writing as a process. It allowed me to take the first steps in helping him break writing into manageable steps so that he could become a more fluent writer.

Observing our students gives us an opportunity to know them better and thus have tools to forge a vital alliance, to become the adult who will help the child grow.

Information from parents

Children spend a long day in school, but their day continues at home. Parents can supply crucial information about after-school play, sibling relationships, and weekend interactions among friends.

Tony was a bright and charming fourth grader. He loved to read and would arrive each morning eager to tell me all about the chapter of *Harry Potter* that he'd read the night before. I could count on Tony to contribute thoughtfully to math discussions, sharing a strategy that others might not have thought of. Other students loved to work with him because of his creative ideas.

But Tony had a problem with homework. By mid-October he had turned in few assignments. The class had practiced doing "homework" in school, brainstormed the best places to do homework at home, and reviewed what to do if they got stuck. Most of the students were completing their nightly homework with pride. Tony, on the other hand, always had an excuse: "Last night we had a special birthday for my grandmother" or "I had to go to my sister's basketball game."

Logical consequences such as finishing homework during a portion of Morning Meeting weren't working. Tony was missing too much of Morning Meeting. I called home to discuss Tony's homework but quickly realized that Tony's parents, who both worked long hours, weren't able to supervise Tony's homework. I also thought that since Tony was a fourth grader, homework should be his responsibility. So I asked Tony to meet with me to discuss the problem.

Before we met, I looked at the parent/guardian questionnaire that Tony's mother, Mrs. G., had responded to in September. Could anything there provide clues to why Tony did so little homework? "Tony is our oldest child and our only boy. He is our 'little prince,'" Mrs. G. had written. "His sisters do everything for him. They fix him snacks, do his chores, and give him their toys."

Although this didn't solve the mystery around Tony's homework problem, it did help me recognize that there might be differing expectations of Tony at home and at school. I kept Mrs. G.'s words in the back of my mind as I prepared for the conference. To forge an alliance with Tony, I needed to be empathetic toward him, and his mother's observations helped me gain that empathy.

When Tony and I met, we noted things that were going well in school. Then we looked at my record of his homework completion and noticed the many boxes without checks. I explained that homework was an important part of fourth grade and I wanted to help him do his homework independently. In a friendly and empathetic tone I said, "Sometimes kids just don't feel like doing their homework. Might that be true for you?" I told him a true story about how I hid my homework in the bushes when I was in school.

Tony immediately lit up. He quickly agreed that he'd much rather watch TV than do his homework. My acceptance of the fact that he just didn't feel like doing his homework seemed to help Tony accept that despite his feelings, he had to do his homework. Together we began to shape a homework plan for him. We agreed that Tony would do his homework right away, as soon as he got home from school, before he turned on the TV. Tony's homework habits began to turn around.

Knowledge of child development

Knowledge of child development can help us consider realistic objectives for a student and strategies for reaching them. It can even help us decide whether a problem-solving conference is appropriate.

Megan's mother left a message for me. "Megan didn't sleep at all last night. She was so worried about the big math test today. Could you give her a little reassurance this morning?" I wracked my brain. What math test? What could Mrs. K. be referring to? I quickly called Mrs. K.

As we talked I realized that the day before, I had said that I was going to start quizzing students in this third grade class informally on their addition facts to see what they remembered from second grade. Megan, a seven-year-old, had worried about this quizzing all night.

Seven-year-olds tend to be perfectionists. They can become tense and overwhelmed by feelings of inferiority. I guessed that Megan's bad night was a developmentally expected bump in the road. In a quick chat with Megan as the students were arriving in the morning, I explained that I didn't expect her to remember all of her addition facts, that kids forget things in the summer. I also quizzed her on some easy addition facts and congratulated her on knowing them. Such reassurance is much needed by seven-year-olds and goes a long way with them. Sure enough, Megan went skipping off, once again confident of her math abilities.

If Megan were a generally confident eight-year-old, I might have seen her worries differently because eight-year-olds, unlike sevens, tend to be energetic and eager to take on big challenges. If an otherwise self-assured eight-year-old were having math anxiety, I would have guessed that anxiety to be a symptom of true difficulty. I would have begun to pay careful attention to her attitudes toward math, thinking about a possible problem-solving conference if the problem were to persist.

Educational theories

Information from educational thinkers can help us understand our students. Andrew, the child with learning difficulties and ADD whose story began this chapter, actually had many unsuccessful problem-solving conferences with me throughout the fall before we had that breakthrough conference. In each of the unsuccessful ones, we easily agreed upon the problem—that Andrew got stuck when it was time to write. He even agreed that he would like to work with me to get better at writing.

Our conferences, however, always broke down at the "exploring the cause of the problem" stage. None of the ideas that I floated using "Might it be … ?" questions seemed right to Andrew, and when I asked for his ideas, he would just say "I dunno."

Because we didn't know why getting his ideas down on paper was so hard for him, I only had rather formulaic strategies to suggest, such as "I could make a mark on your paper, and then come back to check whether you've written to that mark." The strategy in Andrew's special education plan, that he use the computer to write, was no help at all. Andrew would just play with the computer keys and change the fonts over and over.

Hoping to get some direction, I read *A Mind at a Time* by pediatrician Mel Levine (2003), an authority on behavioral and learning problems in children. Levine wrote that some children with ADD have difficulty controlling their mental energy. These students, he writes, "show signs of mental fatigue more often and with greater severity than others" (p. 61). Sometimes such children also have difficulty controlling their "sleep–arousal" cycle.

I thought of how Andrew's mother had reported that Andrew had difficulty falling asleep at night and getting up in the morning. I decided to try another problem-solving conference.

In this conference (the one described at the opening of this chapter), I asked him, "Might it be that when it's time to write, you feel too tired to get your ideas down?" For the first time, I saw that look of recognition in Andrew's eyes. "I get really, really tired and writing is hard for me," he said.

"Are there times when you aren't as tired?" I asked Andrew.

"I'm full of energy first thing in the morning."

From there we quickly agreed that Andrew should have a special writing time in the morning. After a conversation with Andrew's parents, we also agreed that to make that happen, his dad would drop him off at school on his way to work.

Gradually give the student more responsibility

Many effective teachers teach children to read using a "gradual release of responsibility" model. First the teacher directly instructs the whole class. Then children practice the new skill in a small group under the teacher's watchful eyes. Once the skill is partially mastered, the children might practice the skill more independently with partners. Finally, they practice the skill as they read by themselves.

In the same way, as children are practicing new social skills or new work habits, they begin with maximum teacher supervision and then move on to greater independence.

Eric started practicing self-control by giving his teacher a Popsicle stick whenever he spoke in the group. Gradually he and Ms. Adams moved toward Eric's taking more responsibility for turn taking, giving up the Popsicle stick method.

Ultimately, we want to teach children age-appropriate social skills. Nudging the child to move, as he is ready, from more supervision to less supervision allows for this learning.

Questions from Teachers

What if the student doesn't see his behavior as a problem?

A problem-solving conference doesn't mend every difficult situation. Not every student is ready to be self-reflective. If that's the case with a student, it's best to simply state the classroom rules and redouble your efforts to use logical consequences consistently to reinforce those rules.

For example, Mason teased other children mercilessly. When I made this observation during our conference, he said, "But they're annoying." Further conversation only led to more blaming of others rather than reflections about his own behavior.

Given Mason's intransigence, I decided to abandon the conference. I reframed the meeting and set clear limits. I reminded Mason that one of our classroom rules was "Be kind" and told him that if I heard him teasing he would be separated from the group so that the other students would not have to endure his unkindness.

Not every student is open to collaboration, either. Children who are engaged in a power struggle with their teacher, for example, are not usually ready to collaborate. In that case, it's better not to try a problem-solving conference but rather to withdraw from the conflict and begin to build a different relationship with the child.

For example, Shanesha refused to do her math work. When work was assigned, she loudly announced "You can't make me" and proceeded to sit passively throughout the math period.

I found myself feeling provoked, as if I wanted to make her, and recognized this as a symptom of a power struggle. Shanesha was right, I couldn't make her. Rather than attempting a problem-solving conference, I used logical consequences, simply telling Shanesha that math time was for math and she'd have to make up any missed work either during Quiet Time or for homework. I didn't discuss it with her.

Meanwhile, I worked on building a positive relationship with Shanesha during other times of the day. On the playground I twirled the jump rope while she and her friends jumped. I found ways to give her positive power. I invited her to teach some other children how to fold the paper airplanes she was so skilled at creating. Slowly Shanesha began to relax and trust me. Then we were ready for a problem-solving conference.

What if the teacher and student agree on a strategy, but it doesn't help?

Some conferences lead to an effective strategy right away. With Erica, the writing buddy solution and the extra academic support that I arranged from Ms. Fraser, a retired teacher, did in fact help. Erica's work improved and her confidence in her academic ability grew.

Other conferences lead to strategies that are effective only for a while. Andrew, for example, wrote productively for a couple of months after we instituted the special early morning writing time. But when I raised the bar and expected more writing, Andrew dug in his heels and refused to write anything.

Sensing that a different approach was now needed, I met with Andrew again and introduced an individual written agreement, a structure for giving external incentives for behavior change when a child needs intensive support. (See Chapter Six to learn about individual written agreements.)

Occasionally, a strategy that a student and teacher agree on is completely ineffective. Ruby and Mia ate together every day at lunch. The two fifth graders walked around the perimeter of the playground every day at recess, making it hard for others to be with them. Ruby was the one "in charge," and Mia's mother reported that Mia felt resentful because she wished she could play with other children.

The teacher met with Mia, hoping to give her support in making some additional friends. The two agreed that Mia would invite others to join them at recess. But Ruby responded by calling the other children names. Their teacher quickly realized that the strategy she and Mia had crafted wouldn't be helpful without Ruby's cooperation. Her next step was to use a different strategy, a conflict resolution meeting between Ruby and Mia. (See Chapter Three to learn about conflict resolution.)

I have several students who could use problem-solving conferences. I don't have time for so many. What should I do?

If you have more than one or two students in the problem-solving conference process at one time, it may be beneficial to look at other aspects of your classroom. Are you using encouraging teacher language? Modeling and practicing expected behaviors? Assigning academic work that the children can do?

Also keep in mind that a problem-solving conference should be reserved for a child's persistent, rather than occasional, problem. When the classroom community is safe, friendly, and purposeful and the work is at just the right challenge level, persistent problems should diminish.

If you're doing all these things and multiple students are still having difficulties, next think about whether all those students need a one-on-one conference. Is there a small group of students who have continual conflicts with each other? Perhaps those students would benefit from a conflict resolution meeting (see Chapter Three) or a small group meeting using the class meeting format suggested in Chapter Five.

Once you've tried or ruled out these other problem-solving strategies, if you still have too many students who need a one-on-one problem-solving conference, I suggest starting with the one or two students whose behaviors are most troublesome. Success with them will bring a measure of peace to your classroom and allow you to make time for another conference.

Examples of Problem-Solving Conferences

E X A M P L E   1
Saul, who bit and scratched

Saul, a first grader, had trouble making friends. His most worrisome behavior was that he scratched and bit other children. Classmates avoided him and their parents complained, "If only Saul weren't in the class."

Saul's teacher, Ms. Thomas, was determined to help Saul become part of the classroom community. She knew that she would need to work with

the other students to help them be more accepting of Saul, but first she needed to help Saul with the behaviors that were particularly bothersome to his classmates.

Ms. Thomas spent a few days observing appealing things about Saul. She noticed that Saul tried to do his best school work. He loved to write and happily spent stretches of time covering pages with sentences about trucks (TRKS) and Power Guys (PR GIs). Saul was anxious to please and wanted to show his teacher his work as soon as it was completed.

Ms. Thomas also paid attention to her own relationship with Saul. She made sure that she greeted Saul warmly each morning, checked in with him during independent work times to make sure that he understood directions and was working comfortably, and helped him join the tag group at recess.

For their problem-solving conference, Saul and Ms. Thomas met during lunchtime. Ms. Thomas started by warmly smiling at Saul and saying that she was pleased to have lunch and chat with him. Saul grinned widely, happy to have some time alone with his teacher.

Ms. Thomas said she knew that Saul really wanted to have some friends and that she'd like to help him make friends.

"Yup," Saul responded. "Yesterday you got the boys to let me play tag with them."

"I've noticed that the kids often don't want you to join them," continued Ms. Thomas. "One of our rules is 'Be kind to everyone,' so they need to let you play. Why do you suppose they don't want you to play?"

"Because they're mean?" suggested Saul.

"Remember when you scratched Justin when he cut you in line?" asked Ms. Thomas. "When you scratch other kids while they're standing in line, they don't want to stand next to you."

"They're mean to me. That's why I scratch and bite," Saul replied.

Ms. Thomas knew it was important for Saul to be assured that his teacher would protect him from exclusion, just as the teacher would protect the

other students from Saul's scratching and biting. "It's important that they be kind to you. That's our rule," said Ms. Thomas. "I'll work on helping them learn to be kinder. It's also true that the kids will want to work and play with you if you learn to be gentle with them. Would you like me to help you with that?"

Saul looked up at his teacher a little teary-eyed and said, "Okay."

Ms. Thomas wrote down the goal: *Saul will be gentle with his classmates*.

Saul and Ms. Thomas then brainstormed some strategies that might help him remember to be gentle. They agreed that Ms. Thomas would give Saul a private, nonverbal reminder, a tap on the shoulder, before he got in line, sat in the circle, or went to PE—all of which were his predictable trouble spots.

They also agreed that after one week they would meet again to compare observations on how things had gone during the week and think about where to go from there.

Throughout the week, Ms. Thomas gave Saul gentle reminder taps. This close support helped him refrain from hurting his classmates.

Meanwhile, Ms. Thomas was using other strategies such as a whole-group reflection on the class rules and a class meeting (see Chapter Five) to help the other children be kind to everyone, including Saul. She also spoke with the other first grade teachers so that they would be alert on the playground, helping Saul to join group games. The classroom community was beginning to include Saul, and Saul was beginning to feel a sense of belonging.

➤ THINGS TO NOTE in Saul's conference

- *Teacher–student rapport:* Saul knew from Ms. Thomas's warm greetings, check-ins during independent work time, and support on the playground that she liked him.

- *Specificity in describing the problem:* "When you scratch other kids while they're standing in line, they don't want to stand next to you."

- *Reference to classroom rules:* "One of our rules is 'Be kind to everyone.'"

- *Positive language that helped Saul envision a better way:* "The kids will want to work and play with you if you learn to be gentle with them."

- *Writing down the goal:* This way Saul and his teacher could both refer to it later.

- *An exciting goal:* Saul was motivated to achieve his goal because it would help him make friends.

- *Respect for Saul's privacy:* Ms. Thomas and Saul established a nonverbal reminder for him to be gentle.

- *Follow-through:* After the conference, Ms. Thomas consistently gave Saul the reminder taps.

- *Work with the entire class:* Ms. Thomas used several strategies to strengthen the atmosphere of inclusion, respect, and trust in the class.

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EXAMPLE 2

Lisa, defiant toward the teacher

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On the second day of fourth grade, Lisa argued bitterly with me during a whole-class lesson on ways we use math in the world. She was so intent on having things her way that she lay on the floor kicking and screaming, effectively bringing an end to the math lesson for everybody.

The third day of fourth grade, during another math lesson, this time about base ten blocks, she threw her blocks at me. This time I called an administrator, and she was sent home for the rest of the day.

Even though we'd only been in school a few days, Lisa was showing a pattern of defiance. This told me that I needed to have a problem-solving conference with her right away to establish basic classroom expectations.

Lisa was an appealing child with an off-beat sense of humor. I was happy to see her when she arrived in the morning and looked forward to her funny contributions in classroom conversations. After only a few days of school, I could tell that she knew I liked her. Lisa was a bright, articulate child with a strong sense of self. I had a feeling she'd have a lot to say at

a problem-solving conference.

Lisa arrived on the fourth day of school with an apology note that her mother had helped her write during her afternoon at home. I had had plenty of time to calm down myself and was ready to greet her in a friendly manner.

"I can see that you're sorry," I said in a friendly voice. "I do think that we need to talk. How about meeting today at lunchtime? We need to fig- ure out together how to make sure events like the one yesterday don't happen again."

I purposely phrased my invitation as a question. To avoid confusing children, I don't ask when I mean to tell. But this invitation was truly a question. If Lisa had wanted to have lunch with friends, I would have arranged a different time. But Lisa said yes to my invitation, and we met at lunchtime, sitting at her table, each eating our sandwich.

"Lisa," I said, "You have so much to contribute to our classroom com- munity. You've shared thoughtful ideas as we've begun to create our class- room rules. You've offered thoughts about why listening is important and why we all need to be kind to each other."

Lisa responded, "In third grade some kids really bugged me. That's why we need a rule about being kind." Her words didn't surprise me. After only a few days of school, I was beginning to see how she viewed the world.

"There's one thing we need to talk about, though," I said. "You know that in school kids need to listen to teachers and do what they say," I added. "You even contributed some ideas about that as we were working on the class rules." Just to make sure that she understood, I added, "When kids argue with teachers during lessons, it keeps everyone from learning. No one learned much math during our lesson yesterday or the day before."

Lisa rolled her eyes a little in a knowing way and said, "Well-l-l, I know I'm supposed to listen to teachers. I just get so mad sometimes. I wanted more blocks yesterday. I had a really good idea about what to do with them."

In that sentence, Lisa acknowledged that she did need to listen to teachers and also explained the reason that it was hard for her. I could skip the step of searching for the causes of the problem, because Lisa had revealed the cause.

"So, sometimes it's hard for you to control yourself when you have important ideas?" I asked, to make sure that I understood her.

"Yeah."

"Would you like to work on this problem with me?" Everything she had said implied that she did want to work on the problem, but I felt that it was important to ask formally and obtain her agreement. Knowing we might have hard times ahead, I wanted us to have this moment to refer back to.

"I know I should listen and I shouldn't argue, but I just can't stop myself," Lisa responded.

"What if we thought of some strategies that might help you stop yourself?" I asked.

"Okay," she answered in a reluctant tone. Lisa clearly knew that arguing with teachers wasn't helping her or her classmates learn, but I could see that the goal of controlling herself was a daunting one for her. It was enough that she agreed to work with me, however reluctantly. We could build on that.

"Lisa, it's fine if you disagree with teachers. It's helpful to all of us when you share your thoughts," I said. "But if you feel yourself losing control, you need to find a way to first calm down and then talk to me later, after the lesson." I wanted her to feel free to engage with the lesson but not to disrupt and bring learning to a halt. "What might we do to help you notice when you're losing control?" I asked.

"You could give me a sign that the other kids wouldn't know about, and I could go sit at the reading table," Lisa suggested. I hadn't yet introduced positive time-out to the class, but Lisa had experienced this strategy in other grades.

"You could sit right next to me during lessons, and I could give you a gentle tap when I see you starting to argue, just to remind you," I suggested.

"We could keep a chart like I had in second grade, and I could get stars for staying in control," Lisa added.

"Which of these would you like to try first?" I asked. I knew that Lisa needed to feel in control of this process. If she chose the strategy, it was more likely to be effective.

"Let's try you giving me a sign, and I'll go and sit at the reading table to calm down," Lisa said. "You can pull on your ear. That's what my third grade teacher did." Lisa had experience with many possible strategies!

I wrote down our agreement: *When Lisa starts to lose control and argue with her teacher, Ms. Crowe will pull on her ear, and Lisa will go to the reading table and sit there while she regains control. She will discuss her disagreement with Ms. Crowe after the lesson is over.* I wrote the date and we both signed the paper.

"Let's meet next week to talk about how things are going," I said. Lisa was excited about another private meeting with me. She wrote next Friday's date on two sticky notes, putting one on her table and one on my plan book.

The next day, when Lisa started to argue during a science lesson, I gently pulled on my ear. Lisa quietly got up and went to the reading table to calm down.

As the year progressed, Lisa continued to struggle with maintaining self-control in various areas, but we had together come up with an effective way to address the specific problem of her arguing with me. That proved a critical starting point in her ongoing learning.

➤ **THINGS TO NOTE in Lisa's conference**

- *Teacher–student rapport:* The children and I, as a group, had begun to build a positive classroom climate during the first few days of school. Furthermore, I'd had lots of friendly and personal interactions with Lisa during these few days, and she knew that I liked her.

- *Calm teacher and student demeanor:* The meeting took place after both parties had had time to calm down after the second incident.

- *Positive language:* I used words that helped Lisa envision a better way. Examples are "some strategies that might help you stop yourself" and "first calm down and then talk to me later, after the lesson."

- *Pacing and flow:* It's important to include all steps in a conference. But when Lisa spontaneously identified the reason for her arguing, there was no need to explicitly search for reasons. I went right to the next step in the conference.

- *Respect for Lisa's privacy:* I gently pulled on my ear to let her know it was time for her to leave the group.

- *Building on past success:* Lisa and I borrowed from strategies that had worked for her in other grades.

- *Writing down the goal:* Lisa and I could both refer to it later as needed.

- *Follow-through:* I used the strategies that we agreed on, and we met a week later to discuss how things were going.

CONFERENCE PLANNING/RECORDING SHEET

Use this sheet as you plan and conduct a problem-solving conference.

Write down your ideas ahead of time in **pencil**, paying particular attention to the language you'll use. (Suggested phrases are included in italics.)

Then, during the conference, use **pen** to record what happens.

That way you'll be prepared to use positive and collaborative language, and you'll have a record of the conference to look back on later.

Student: _____

Date, time, and place: _____

Reaffirming rapport

For example:

You work so hard at math time.

Yesterday I saw you helping Melanie find her independent reading book.

Talking about the problem

For example:

I noticed that when you write, you often forget punctuation and spelling that I know you know. What have you noticed?

Teacher	Student

Naming the behavior as a problem and why it's a problem

For example:

When I see you poking kids in line, I notice that they get annoyed.

It's important to keep your papers in your own area so that your tablemates will have space to work.

It's important that you read a just-right book so you can learn to be a better reader.

Inviting the student to work on the problem

For example:

Would you like to work on this together?

I'd like to help you with this, if you'd like to work on it.

(If the student declines your invitation to work together, abandon the conference, restate the rules, and redouble your efforts to use logical consequences consistently.)

Suggesting possible causes of the problem

For example:

Might it be that you think kids will want to be your friend if you snatch their hats and run away?

Sometimes kids forget their homework because they think it's too hard. Could that be what's happening here?

Articulating a clear, specific goal to work on

For example:

Your classmates will want to work with you more if you share your thoughts calmly and respectfully. What if we thought of some ways for you to do that?

Which one of these three goals would you like to work on first?

Suggesting possible solutions for working on the problem:

For example:

What might help you remember to wait your turn to speak in a group discussion?

The solution the teacher and student agree to try: