

The “Make a Plan” Plan

All teachers sometimes face behaviors that challenge and frustrate them. I've worked with children who repeatedly leave circle time, grab toys from friends, make noise at nap time, and splash water on the floor in the bathroom. Sometimes absolutely nothing I do helps a child learn new behaviors. As a result, I've found myself feeling frustrated, confused, even angry—a sign that it's time for me to step back and regroup.

At times like these, I use what I call the “Make a Plan” Plan. It's not a solution to a particular problem. Rather, it's a strategy for helping a teacher and a child find the solution *together*. Here's how it works.

Step 1: Get together. This sounds simple, but it's not. The teacher and child need a safe space that allows for a real conversation. Guidance works best when the adult and the child feel like they're on the same side of the problem (Carlsson-Paige 2008). Teachers need

enough time and physical space to avoid interruptions and to make sure that the child doesn't feel threatened, judged, or pressured (by the adult or by onlookers). The best time to approach the child is at a point when things are going well for everyone, and the problem isn't occurring. *“Hey, Ariel,” I say. “I need your help solving a problem. Is this a good time for us to talk?” I ask her to choose a piece of paper and something to write with so we can remember our ideas. Then we find a quiet place to sit together.*

Step 2: Describe the problem. Both sides need to agree on what exactly is going on. Since the teacher and child are working together, it is important for the teacher to avoid placing blame (Faber & Mazlish [1980] 2012). *“Ariel,” I say, “We have a nap time problem. Today I felt really bad at nap time. How did you feel?” “Bad too,” says Ariel. “We're both feeling bad at nap time!” I exclaim. “That's a problem! Let's write it down. Do you remember why we were both feeling bad?” At this point, children's honesty can be surprising. “I got out of bed,” says Ariel. “I remember that,” I say. “That's what made us both feel bad?” She nods. “Okay,” I say, “I'm writing it down.”*

If the child and teacher disagree about the nature of the problem, they need to keep talking until they find common ground. It's much harder to solve a problem if those involved don't agree on what the problem is.

Step 3: Brainstorm solutions. *“We need to make a plan so things go better tomorrow,” I say. “What do you think we should do?”* A lot of children think this is a rhetorical question (that you are not honestly seeking their ideas) or that there is only one right answer. They will sit quietly waiting for the adult to answer it. You may need to wait awhile the first time you try this approach. *“We've tried all my ideas, and they didn't work,”* you might say. *“We need your ideas.”* Resist the urge to offer an idea (or, if you *must* give an idea, provide several to choose from). It is important for the ideas to come from the child. Young children are much more likely to participate in problem solving when they have a genuine voice in the process (Nelsen, Erwin, & Duffy 2007).

Whichever idea the child eventually chooses, be sure to write it down—even if you think it won't work. The secret is that this is not when you solve the

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problem. *“I’ll rub your back, and you’ll stay on your bed?” I say. “Do you think that will make us both feel better next time? Great! I’ll write it down.” (I do not mention that I have tried every conceivable kind of backrub in the last two weeks and none of them have worked.)* After a child has gone through this process a few times, it might be time to start collaborating more genuinely. Both teacher and child can offer real suggestions and both can veto ideas they find unacceptable. However, the goal the first time you use the plan is for the child to buy into the process. For now, accept the child’s ideas—even if they seem far-fetched.

Step 4: Write it down. You’ve already been writing, but finishing touches can give the child a feeling of ownership of this solution (Carlsson-Paige 2008). Read it aloud all the way through and ask if there’s anything the child would like to change. The child might want to decorate the plan. With older children, a teacher could mention that when adults make a contract, they both sign their names at the bottom to show they really mean it. End with a high five or a hug and say, “I think it will work!”

It probably *won’t* work the first time. Not to worry! It’s all part of the plan.

I put the plan with Ariel’s nap bag. A few minutes before nap time, she and I read through the plan again and do another high five. I put the plan next to her bed where she can see it. Nap time happens. It’s a disaster. If anything, it goes worse than the day before. I am not upset, though. I know about Step 5.

Step 5: Revise the plan. *Later that afternoon I call Ariel over. “I want to look at our plan to see if it worked. Let’s take a*

Involving Families

Families can be a part of the “Make a Plan” Plan too—though you’ll need to explain to them how it works and why you’re doing it. Simply showing them a contract you made with their child will be confusing. They don’t know the context of the problem or the process you’re going through. Once they see the process working, they can very easily learn to use it at home as well.



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look. Hmm, it says that I would rub your back and that you would stay in bed. Did I rub your back? I did! Did you stay in bed? No? Oh my goodness, our plan didn’t work! I guess we need to make a better plan!” And we go back to Step 2.

This is where the magic happens. The child can see that her teacher cares enough to listen to her ideas (Dreikurs & Soltz 1964) and to follow through on his promises. Her teacher is not upset with her. On the contrary, he is optimistic and trusting. When she sees that her teacher believes in this process, she’ll

invest in it too. Sharing power with the child takes work, but is a highly effective method of guidance (Carlsson-Paige 2008).

When one of the plans finally works—probably sooner than expected—don’t skip Step 5! Come together to reflect and celebrate. *Did it work today? It did? Hooray!* When you ask the child, “Would you like to keep the same plan tomorrow?,” the answer is likely to be yes. When their choices work out, children gain a genuine feeling of autonomy—an essential ingredient for successful guidance practices (Faber & Mazlish [1980] 2012).

I have had tremendous success using the “Make a Plan” Plan, often with children who are the most resistant to other guidance strategies. It works because it gives the child genuine ownership of the problem-

Help families develop plans to involve their children in solving problems. Sign and make copies of the Message in a Backpack on page 12 to send home. It’s also available online (in English and Spanish) at naeyc.org/tyc.

Supporting Language

For dual language learners or children with language delays, use a series of photos or drawings of the steps of several different plans. Let children choose (perhaps by pointing) which solution to try. The goal is to give the child a sense of choice and shared commitment to the problem-solving process. Neither of these goals requires verbal communication. Children feel less self-conscious and fearful about communication when teachers' actions show them that their ideas and participation are valued.

solving process. When trying to solve a problem in the moment, both the child and teacher may be stressed out and can feel like adversaries. But when they make a plan together, they are on the same team, working together and committing to trusting each other. The plan transforms an ineffective power

struggle into an opportunity for mutual respect (Dreikurs & Soltz 1964). Like all effective methods of discipline, the "Make a Plan" Plan makes relationships stronger (Curtis & Carter 2011). And as a bonus, the process helps children develop core socioemotional capacities such as positive self-identity,

sense of competence, conflict-resolution skills, and communication skills (Epstein 2009).

After three weeks of mounting tensions at nap time, things are finally going well. Ariel doesn't sleep, but she sits quietly reading a book while I help the other children fall sleep. Then we sit together and chat. This was her idea. TYC

Reflective Questions

Before you sit down to make a plan with a child, it may be helpful to engage in some self-reflection with a Thinking Lens™.

Know yourself

■ Consider some specific situations when you have found children's behavior to be particularly problematic. Can you find any patterns in these situations, behaviors, or children? What might be influencing your responses? How might you rethink the problem and make a plan for yourself before you approach the child?

Seek the children's point of view

■ Consider the child's perspective. What might the child be trying to accomplish? Might you be missing something that is drawing the child's attention and engagement?

Examine the environment

■ How might the organization of the physical environment and materials be impacting the child's behavior? How might the organization of the daily routine and schedule be affecting the child's behavior?

Consider multiple perspectives

■ How might the child's culture and family background be influencing his behavior? What questions might you ask to get the perspective of his family? What child development or early learning theories might help you reflect on his behavior and your response?

The "Make a Plan" Plan is my adaptation of a guidance technique used at Pacific Primary, a preschool in San Francisco where I previously taught. They, in turn, adapted the techniques from *Early Childhood Adventures in Peacemaking*, by William Kreidler and Sandy Whittall (1999).

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Solving Problems With Your Child



Sometimes children have problems getting along with others or following our few, simple classroom rules. When this happens, we work with the child to figure out a solution. Most of the time this works well. Children learn that their teacher is on their side. And they learn an important skill—how to solve problems.

You might want to try our Make a Plan method at home.

Get together. Put your child at ease. Choose a comfy space and a time when your child will feel open to sharing his or her ideas.

“I need your help solving a problem. Is this a good time for us to talk?”

Describe the problem. It’s important for you and your child to agree about what the problem is. You may need to work together to pinpoint the exact problem.

*“What happened?”
“How did you feel when...?”*

Brainstorm solutions. Have an honest discussion. Ask your child to suggest a few solutions and pick one to try.

“We need to make a plan so things go better later. What do you think we should do?”

Write it down. Write the plan on a piece of paper and read it aloud. Invite your child to add drawings or words. This helps a child feel like it really is his or her plan.

“I’ll write down your idea on this piece of paper. Do you want to decorate it for us?”

Revise the plan. Try it out! If the plan does not work the first time, revise it until you find something that works for both of you.

*“Did it work today? It did? Hooray!”
“Our plan didn’t work! I guess we need to make a better plan!”*

A message from your child’s teacher
