

# Introduction

The ability to think critically and solve problems peacefully is an essential skill for success in life. Preparing children to become productive adults means providing excellent academic instruction, as well as reinforcing the social and problem-solving skills that are essential to this task.

Team work with its demand for negotiation and decision making skills, is increasingly important in the modern workplace. The foundation for success in this arena is built upon excellent listening, decision making and problem-solving skills. It is clear that our schools must give children the opportunities to learn these skills.

Children who have the ability to master academic material may end up failing because they lack the social problem-solving skills necessary to adjust successfully to school settings. All too often, we fail to be proactive, punishing children for inappropriate behaviour, rather than teaching them the skills in the first place. This increases the risk that these children will be labelled "behaviour problems". We are all aware of the potential negative academic outcomes of such labelling.

In addition, schools are necessarily structured places. Interactions and activities are guided by rules of order. For some children, these rules and expectations are different from their experiences in the community and at home. They may have difficulty negotiating a different set of rules and expectations. Clearly, direct teaching of social skills is crucial for these children.

Schools will generally have a PSHCE curriculum which may address some of these issues. The *Getting Along Together* curriculum should be used to enhance whatever systems are currently in place.

- In *Success for All* schools, decision-making and conflict-resolution strategies are taught at the beginning of the year and reinforced through co-operative learning and PSHCE activities. This method enables children to use social problem-solving strategies in all *Success for All* curriculum areas, such as STaR or Shared Text literacy.
- During the first week of school, the reading curriculum will cover two special units in problem solving. The first unit addresses listening skills; the second unit focuses on conflict-resolution skills.

The social problem-solving curriculum consists of three components.

- 1) **Direct Instruction:** Classroom lessons of key problem-solving skills are embedded in the academic curriculum throughout the content areas.
- 2) **Application:** Children begin to "self-talk" their way through problems using a consistent decision-making model.
- 3) **Practice:** Children frequently practise their problem-solving skills using *The Footsteps to Friendship* and during Circle Time.

## Direct Instruction

There are two separate social problem-solving units. The first is a unit on listening skills and the second is a unit on conflict resolution. These lessons are designed to be taught during Literacy block although class teachers can teach the lessons at a time during the day more suited to their own timetable. Lessons are usually taught in class groups. Each lesson is linked to a STaR or Shared Text book. Lessons on listening skills and conflict resolution are necessary in order to give children the background necessary to use teams effectively within their SFA lesson.

## Application

Children experiencing a problem in school need opportunities to calm down, to use a decision-making model to think through their behaviour, and to make well-reasoned decisions regarding future behaviour. The Think It Through sheets are designed to give children some quiet time to reflect and practise "self-talking" their way through a decision-making model. Think It Through sheets should be readily available. When a child has a problem with another child or with his or her own classroom behaviour, the children involved are instructed to complete a Think It Through sheet. Once they have completed this step, they can progress to talking about the problem by using the Footsteps to Friendship.

## Practice

There should be opportunities for children to practise conflict resolution in class. Once a week children should gather for Circle Time. This provides a scheduled opportunity for both you and the children to discuss the good news and the class concerns for the week.

## Think it Through

**When a child experiences a problem he or she:**

- Completes a Think It Through sheet (partial completion is acceptable based on your determination); and
- (if it is a teacher-child problem) gives you the sheet and agrees on a time to talk about it; or
- (if it is a child-child problem) completes a Think It Through sheet and may then choose to go through the steps of Footsteps to Friendship with the other child to solve the problem; wait until Circle Time or enlist help from you, the teacher, or a peer mediator in following the steps of the Footsteps to Friendship. (Early in the year, you will have to monitor most of the activities. By the end of the year, children are adept at solving most simple problems on their own.)

When children are going to discuss a problem, it is important to give them an initial structure for the process. The step-by-step structure of the Footsteps to Friendship provides a way to make the process of solving problems concrete and replicable across the school.

The Footsteps to Friendship are kept as a folder game. Children complete a Think It Through sheet and then use the Footsteps to Friendship folder game. (The

Footsteps to Friendship folder can be as simple as a small poster of the Footsteps to Friendship for the board with two markers for the children to move as they go through the steps.)

## Circle Time

These weekly meetings shall be opportunities for the class to share good news with one another, discuss common class concerns and try to solve any ongoing conflicts. There are many different ways to structure a Circle Time. The common underlying feature or intention of these meetings is to provide an ongoing and consistent opportunity to practise and reinforce the problem-solving skills and structures introduced in the *Getting Along Together* curriculum. A Circle Time meeting could look like this:

**The Circle Time meeting often consists of the following elements:**

1. Encouraging Words
2. Class Concerns
3. Footsteps to Friendship
4. Teacher Affirmation

## Encouraging Words

Forms for Encouraging Words are kept next to a box, which is used to hold these positive messages and any communications about interpersonal concerns children may be having. Children should frequently write down examples of peers being good team members, or using positive behaviour in the classroom. Teachers are encouraged to make liberal use of Encouraging Words. The best way to cement better social problem-solving skills in children is to make sure there is ample positive reinforcement of desired behaviours.

Throughout the week, children should put Encouraging Words into the box. The Circle Time meeting begins with you or one of the children reading the Encouraging Words that were collected during the week.

## Class Concerns

Ongoing general class concerns can be discussed during a Circle Time (i.e., taking turns at the slide, listening to each other). Use this as an opportunity to have the whole class follow the problem-solving steps. For children to be able to apply these skills successfully and in a variety of settings across the school day, it is important to make sure that they are provided with consistent, ongoing opportunities to practise the listening and problem-solving skills addressed in the curriculum.

## Footsteps to Friendship

The lessons in *Getting Along Together* are designed to follow the sequence of Footsteps to Friendship. This is a process that is designed to be an engaging, concrete way for children to practise step-by-step listening and conflict-resolution skills. Solutions for Footstep to Friendship need to be win-win solutions; compromise, making amends and sharing are all good win-win solutions. Win-win solutions are those in which both parties can feel good about the outcome. Very often during conflicts, solutions are win-lose: one person wins and the other loses.

For example, Tracey may take Jimmy's pencil because she likes it. Tracey may feel good (she wins), but Jimmy does not (he loses).

Some children feel that apologising for an action means that they have "lost." They view apologising as a win-lose solution. Be sure to reinforce the concept that making responsible, mature decisions is a winning philosophy. It promotes stronger friendships, identifies the ability to lead, increases self-respect, and earns the respect of others. The intangible gains of apologising may be worth more than the pencil or book a person took without asking. When the solution to a conflict results in both sides being worse off than before, this is a lose-lose solution. For example, two children who are fighting to be the first in line to go out for play may end up losing play altogether. The Circle Time provides an opportunity to model and encourage win-win solutions to conflicts.

### **Preparing for Footsteps to Friendship**

Children first need to identify the problem. Both children must agree on the problem to be solved. To prepare them for the Footsteps to Friendship process, have the two children involved in the conflict fill out a Think It Through sheet and construct an "I" Message before they come to the Footsteps to Friendship. As children become more experienced in the process, they usually are able to begin the Footsteps to Friendship without having to fill out a Think It Through sheet.

Sometimes there is more than one problem. In this case, each child should prepare an "I" Message. Children then need to decide which issue they will address first. Sometimes the problem is not contained in a child's "I" Message, and children may need help in recognising the true problem. For example, Susan might complain that Billy hit her. Billy may be angry that Susan called him a name. Both of those actions may have occurred because the children had difficulty taking turns at the computer. Children must understand that difficulty sharing also needs discussion. For example, encouraging the children to explore the question "What can we do when we both want to use the same piece of equipment?" may, in the long run, be more effective because it focuses on identifying the problem, not just on solving the hitting and name calling that resulted. Teachers will need to help children with this process of uncovering the underlying problem.

The Footsteps to Friendship can be constructed as a folder game for individual children to use. At the beginning stages of this type of practice, children involved in a conflict should first complete a Think It Through sheet and then work with each other to complete the Footsteps to Friendship. If they are stuck and need assistance, they can approach you or a peer for guidance.

In the earlier years (Reception-Year 2), it is usually most effective to have children sit in a semicircle around a graphic simulation of the Footsteps to Friendship. In Years 3-6, you can use a poster on the wall as a reminder of the following steps:

## Step 1

- One child involved in the conflict shares his or her concern using the first part of an "I" Message: "I feel \_\_\_\_\_ when (or when you) \_\_\_\_\_." The other person listens and repeats it. It is most effective to address one person's problem at a time. If both people have a problem, they can create and respond to the first part of each other's "I" Message. Then you can suggest to the second child that each one will have a chance to walk through the steps of the Footsteps to Friendship before the session is completed. In the intermediate years, some children will be able to take time in this step to each share the first part of an "I" Message before moving through the rest of the steps. This can act to diffuse the emotion surrounding the conflict, and can begin to build a more conversational, natural approach to solving problems. But, in the earlier years, and in the initial stages of learning this process, it is best to stick to the steps and keep the process as simple as possible.
- One way to keep everyone actively involved in this kind of practice situation is to have the children seated around the Footsteps to Friendship give the pair a thumbs up (if the step was completed correctly) or a thumbs down (if it needs some clarification). If the first part of the message was not clear or if the person had difficulty paraphrasing that section, you and/or the class can help clarify the message and then give a thumbs up.

## Step 2

- One child suggests a solution, which is the second part of the "I" Message: "I would like \_\_\_\_\_," while the other listens and then repeats it.
- The rest of the class should be prepared to offer at least one alternate solution. The lessons of Unit 2 prepare children for this step.

## Step 3

- This is the same as Step 2, except that children switch roles: the one who listened before offers a solution now, while the one who suggested a solution before listens and repeats the solution offered now.
- The ground rules here are that each child must give one win-win solution to the conflict, and the class should be ready to offer at least one win-win solution as well.

## Step 4

- Children must agree on a win-win strategy that they will implement to solve the conflict. The class offers a "thumbs up" if the children have agreed to a win-win solution to the conflict. This step is practised, along with the other three steps during the lesson.
- Children complete the final step with applause from the class. One way to formalise this process is to create a "Win-Winners Circle" and a record of children who reach that circle on the bulletin board. Positive recognition and reinforcement are significant factors in the success of this process and the transfer of ownership and enthusiasm from you to the children.

- If there are two problems, for example—Sara may have scribbled on Janet's paper because Janet called her an idiot—Janet may have asked to do the Footsteps to Friendship because of Sara's behaviour. Once that problem is solved, Sara may want to discuss Janet's name calling. Both problems should be solved before going to the Win-Winners Circle.
- Always remind children to evaluate whether their solution worked. It is important for them to realise that there is more than one way to solve a problem. Sometimes people are not successful the first time, and they need to try other solutions. This is normal. Good problem solving does not necessarily mean solving the problem the first time, but rather continuing to try and evaluating different win-win solutions until the problem is solved. Evaluation and the commitment to try again are essential. When evaluation shows the solution to be ineffective, both parties can draw upon the suggestions that the class has generated in the process of practising the Footsteps to Friendship. If those suggestions are unavailable, children can try the whole process again to obtain additional help.

## Teacher Affirmations

Teachers can end Circle Time meetings by identifying some of the positive behaviours they saw during the lesson.

## Helpful Hints for Implementing Getting Along Together strategies within "Circle Time"

### Schedule

Set a regular time (20-30 minutes), when the children will be able to concentrate and participate fully, for the weekly session. Remember, there are many different ways to structure a Circle Time. The common underlying feature or intention is to provide a consistent opportunity to practice and reinforce the problem-solving skills and structures introduced in the Getting Along Together curriculum.

### Expectations

Develop ground rules for Circle Time with your class. A sample set of ground rules might be:

- Use problem-solving steps to calm down (Stop and Stay Cool Steps) and to communicate peacefully about problems (Footsteps to Friendship).
- Use effective listening skills: paraphrasing, listening posture, concentration and no interrupting.
- Select solutions from the Conflict Stoppers chart: apologise, ignore, compromise, self-talk, stop and cool down, ask for help.
- Avoid roadblocks like sarcasm, put-downs, threats, not listening, being defensive.

- Work together to create a classroom environment of respect and support by avoiding Roadblocks and using Conflict Stoppers.

## Tone

Start and end the Circle Time on a positive note. Build a high level of motivation for the problem-solving process. Make sure that the child who attempts to find a peaceful solution to a conflict receives plenty of encouragement and praise. If a child uses a Conflict Stopper or solution, such as apologising, making amends, compromising, or talking about it, be sure to recognise this aloud. It is vital for the whole class to support and encourage that behaviour as well. Children need reinforcement to attempt peaceful solutions. Children who take responsibility and try to find peaceful solutions to problems deserve recognition.

## Evaluations

Remember to consistently model, apply and practise the process. Check on the progress and effectiveness of the plans that have been developed. Teach the importance of evaluating and, when necessary, redesigning solutions to create more effective plans.

## Sources

Practice situations can be taken from novels, stories, videos, films, TV, real-life examples, scenarios and plays written by children. However, in the initial practice sessions, it is advisable to start with "neutral" material that doesn't identify or point fingers at any of the children.

## Questions

- **Multiple problem-resolution situations.** Often both children have a problem: For example, "Kelly hit me because I took her pencil." After the children become comfortable with the steps of the Footsteps to Friendship as designed, it is acceptable to make a small adaptation that provides both children with the opportunity to state the first part of an "I" Message. However, it is usually most effective to solve only one problem at a time. As the children become very experienced with the process, they may become adept at solving their problems simultaneously.
- **Complications.** If a problem is complicated and you feel unsure as to how to help resolve it, remember that you don't have to solve it on the spot. You can take time to think, and then you and the children can return to a problem-solving session on the next day. Also remember that you don't have to solve it! Your role in this process is to facilitate the model and provide practice with skills that will empower the children to become increasingly responsible and well versed in solving their own problems.
- **Enjoy and have plenty of patience!** This is a positive, interactive part of the school day and can be fun for you and your children. The integration and transfer of problem-solving skills requires a lot of practise, and you may not see immediate results. Modelling, practising, and applying these skills to real-life situations across the school setting are crucial to obtaining successful results with the Getting Along Together curriculum.