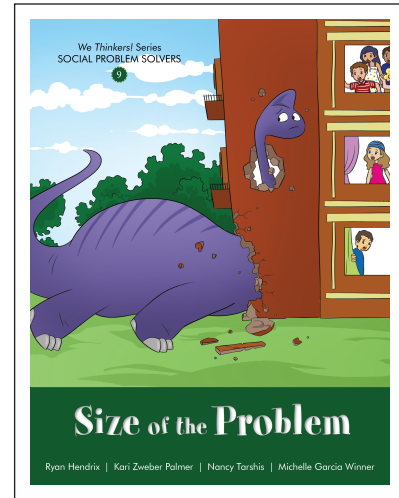


Unit **9**

Size of the Problem



Family Letter and At Home Activities

In our Social Thinking group we are learning about the concept **size of the problem**. Whenever we're around other people, we're involved in problem solving as a means to figure out how to act, what to say, and how to keep ourselves and others feeling comfortable together. Social problem solving is complex and requires us to consider many different aspects of a situation and the people in it.

Before you think about teaching problem solving to your child, we encourage you to first think about your own adult experiences with in-the-moment problem solving. Have you ever overreacted to a problem? Most of us have experienced times when our reaction didn't match the actual size of the problem! And, we may have noticed the response in others or the consequences that followed. While we all want our children to become more successful with problem solving, we need to keep in mind that if we, as adults who have had years of practice, still struggle with this in our own lives, it's unrealistic to expect to teach kids to fully control their own behaviors and problem solve without hiccups. It's a learning process for us all!

We are, however, able to teach children the building blocks of understanding that will go a long way in helping them become better at problem solving a situation. The goal of this unit is to increase our children's awareness of the following concepts, which ultimately contribute to them learning better self-regulation:

- Problems come in different sizes
- Emotions and reactions come in different sizes
- Reactions come from emotions
- It's expected that the size of the emotion and related reaction matches the size of the problem.

Where do we start?

To begin, we define the following concepts:

- **Problem:** A problem is something that happens that was not part of the plan and negatively influences it. Problems make people feel uncomfortable.
- **Size of the Problem:** Problems come in different sizes. *Small problems* can be taken care of quickly and can be solved on our own or with the help of another person. Kids can help other kids solve small problems. *Medium* problems take more time to solve and require more help. Usually adults help solve medium problems. However, it's expected that kids help solve medium problems with the adults. Finally, *big problems* take a lot of time to take care of and require a lot of help from others. When big problems happen, even adults need help from other adults.
- **Feelings:** Feelings are what happen on the inside of our bodies. To help us talk about our feelings we use words such as happy, mad, sad, and scared. When problems happen, we have different feelings of different sizes or intensities. Because problems make people feel uncomfortable, we usually use words such as *frustrated, stressed, sad, upset, disappointed, nervous, worried, and afraid*.
- **Reactions:** Reactions come from our feelings. A reaction is what we show on the outside by what we say and do. Just as problems and feelings come in different sizes, so do our reactions. It's expected that the size of the reaction on the outside should match the size of the problem.

By teaching the above concepts, we help establish norms around defining and emotionally responding to a problem. With our early learners we want children to better understand that when they share space and interact with others, they constantly have to problem solve. When problems occur, there are expectations for how they will respond or try to respond to them.

That DOES NOT mean we actually expect kids to SHOW the expected reaction. Many young children struggle to keep calm when they feel passionately about something! By teaching children to be aware of the size of the problem, size of the emotion and size of the related reaction, we are helping them think about their problems and learn that they can have control over how they react to different problems.

It's also important to note that we aren't telling kids how to feel. Each of us has the right to our own emotional reaction, which is a combination of hardwiring (temperament) and life-experience. We are suggesting that children can learn to adjust how they are feeling by learning more about what constitutes a problem and that problems come in different sizes. A number of children think any problem is a huge devastating event. We are trying to help them learn that something called a "problem" might not be such a huge event. It may actually be a "small problem." Knowing this, in turn, can help us stay calmer; we learn we can solve it quickly! Teaching these concepts and ideas is essential to social emotional regulation. Having a big reaction to a "not big" problem creates a new problem, since people tend to react to the emotional reactions of others.

As we work to build this self-awareness in our early learners, and we encourage them to look at how others react to various sizes of problems, children may eventually gain enough self-regulatory capacity to hear those words in their brains and in the moment think, “Stop, and think. This is a small problem. I can stay calm.” This level of self-awareness and self-regulation could be years and years away, however. Think of your role as planting seeds of understanding.

It is very helpful to model this thinking and behavior for your children. As small or medium problems emerge in your life, talk to your children about what you’re noticing, how you feel, and how your feelings are tied to how you’re reacting. The more times you can point out your own thinking and behavior the more opportunity you give your child to learn about what goes on inside your mind. This will help them learn how they can think inside their own minds too when problems arise!

To figure out the size of the problem we think about:

- How long it will take to make the problem smaller, fix it, or make it better
- How much help we need and from whom (kids or adults)

Small problems are considered small because they do not take a very long time to make better. It can take a few seconds up to a few minutes to solve them. Who helps? Children can solve small problems by themselves or with the help of another person. That person can be another kid or a grown-up. If children can stay calm when small problems occur, problems are solved even faster!

Medium problems take a longer time to fix or make better. It can take minutes up to hours. Who helps? It takes more people to solve a medium problem. An adult usually helps solve a medium problem alongside the child. Because the problem takes some effort to solve, children may feel a little bit sad, worried or frustrated. Children can talk to an adult about how they feel and adults can let children know their plan to help solve the problem!

Big problems take a really long time to solve. It can take days, weeks, months or even longer to make these problems better. Who helps? When big problems happen, even grown-ups need help from other grown-ups. It takes a lot of people to work through big problems. They can make people feel scared, upset or mad. Adults and children usually have to talk about big problems and think about different solutions. Big problems usually mean people have to make some big changes to solve them. This is part of what can make people upset.

Note: The concept of time is developmental. Understanding the passage of time can be especially difficult for some students. Many students will not know the difference between a few seconds and minutes, for example. So, keep this in mind when discussing the “how long will it take?” component of problem solving. Timers, a clock or a stopwatch can be effective when used



in the moment to capture the amount of time it takes to solve a problem. We recommend the use of the Time Timer (timetimer.com) to help teach students about the passage of time. The Time Timer is a visual timer that shows the passage of time. You set the timer by moving a red disk on a clock face to the desired time for an activity. As time elapses the red disk disappears, allowing children to literally see the passage of time.

Activities to try at home

1. Highlight naturally occurring times when you (as the caregiver) encounter a problem. It's important for your child to understand that you are constantly being challenged by problems of all sizes. Thinking out loud about problems and their solutions models the language of problem solving for your child.

In using the language of problem solving, we have found it helpful to follow a formula of sorts in breaking down a problem or situation. You don't need to include all elements in all examples!

- What happened
- The size of the problem
- How you felt about it
- Ideas for solving the problem or making it smaller
- What you did
- How you felt about it afterward

Consider the following examples and how you might talk out loud through the situation:

- "This morning I spilled my coffee on the table when I was reaching for some fruit. I felt really frustrated because I wanted to drink it and now there was a mess. Then I thought about how it was just a small problem. And I could fix it by myself. I stayed calm, wiped up the spill, and poured myself another cup. It was quick and easy to fix that problem. I felt proud of myself for staying calm."
- "I really wanted to wear my green shirt today, but I spilled yogurt on it. I was disappointed. I thought about how I could wash it and wear it another day. I stayed calm and changed into another shirt. It was just a small problem, no big deal."
- "Oops, I missed that parking spot. That's okay; we can just park a little further away. Small problem!"
- "When I went to the store they were all out of bananas. That wasn't my plan. I was calm and chose apples instead. I can get bananas next time. I was proud of myself for being flexible and having a small reaction to a small problem."

2. Reinforce times when you observe your child engaged in problem solving and demonstrating small reactions to small problems. While it's much easier to catch your child in a moment where his or her reaction does not match the size of the problem, it's important to set a positive tone with this vocabulary. In our experience, when children hear you point out that they're having big reactions to small problems in the moment they're having that reaction, it can escalate the problem and create negative feelings toward the language and terms.

Consider the following examples:

- “Wow, when your crayon broke you stayed calm, and chose a different color to finish your picture. It didn't take very long to get another crayon and you made the problem smaller all by yourself!”
- “I know you wanted to keep building when it was time for school. We made a plan to build more after school today. I am so proud of your flexible thinking! We kept the problem small!”
- “We're going to play a game together. Everyone will choose a different colored game piece. We might not get the color we want. That's just a small problem. Maybe we can get a different color next time. If we can stay calm and be flexible, we can play the game! That will make everyone feel good. We can always play again, and if you are calm, everyone else will feel calm too and we will want to play again.”
- “You lost the game. I know it feels like a big problem and I understand that you are upset. But it's just a small problem. Even though it feels like a big problem, it's expected you show a small reaction. We can play again. Maybe next time you will be the winner.”

Size of the Problem: Activity Worksheet to use at Home

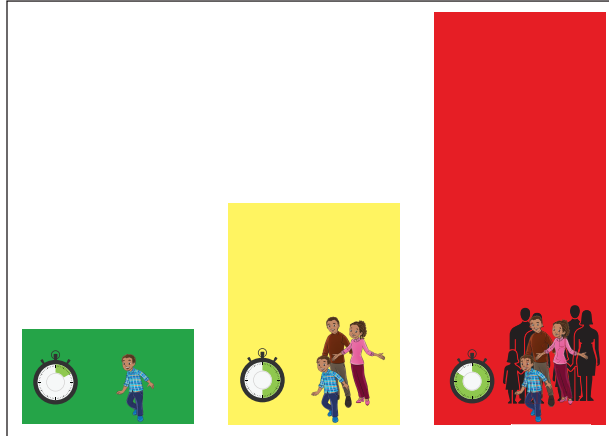
The purpose of this worksheet is to reflect on problems that happen at home. By completing this with your child, you are establishing a language you and your child can use to talk about problem solving and reactions. Please note: the best time to fill out this sheet is **AFTER** a problem has occurred and your child is calm. You want to find a time when your child is ready to learn, not when the child's emotions have taken over.

Directions

1. Before you sit down with your child, think of a time when he or she was **successful** with problem solving. Think of a moment when you were perhaps surprised at his/her ability to stay calm in the face of a problem. It is best to start from a positive perspective.
2. Complete column 1: What is the Problem? Help your child identify the problem. Write down what happened.

3. Complete column 2: How did you feel? Use the Word Bank provided.
4. Complete column 3: What is the size of the problem? Use the Size of the Problem Scale to guide your discussion.

Size of the Problem Scale



The purpose of this visual is to help children learn how to put problems in perspective. As we think through various problems and their relative sizes, we can see how they compare to each other. By determining the relative size of the problem, students will gain a deeper understanding of how to look at the “big picture” and put problems into perspective. On this scale green represents a small problem, yellow is a medium problem, and red is a big problem. The clock represents the amount of time it typically takes to solve this level of problem, and the people indicate who might help solve the problem. For instance: a small problem (green) can be solved pretty quickly and usually just by the person alone.

Some children may readily be able to identify the size of the problem. For others, this will be much more challenging, as it requires a child to take perspective and put clues together to make a smart guess. This becomes even more challenging if we are asking a child to identify the size of his or her own problem. The goal with this worksheet is to start the discussion.

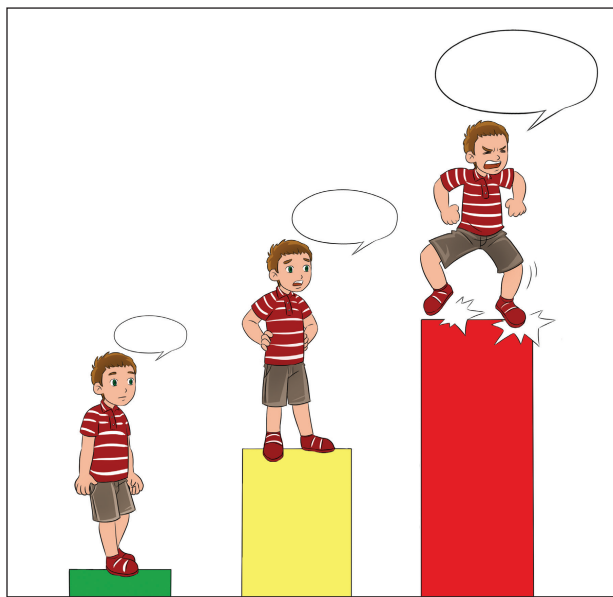
To figure out the size of the problem we think about:

- How long it will take to make the problem smaller, fix it, or make it better
- How much help we need and from whom (kids or adults)

5. Complete column 4: Size of the Reaction

- Identify the size of the child's reaction for the situation. To talk about different sizes of reactions we use the Problem, Feelings and Reaction Scale.


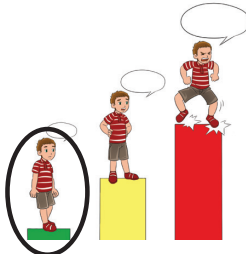
Problem, Feelings and Reaction Scale



The boy on the blocks is Evan, one of the characters from the storybook: *Size of the Problem: Dinosaur Adventure*. As you can see, Evan is calm when standing on the small block and increasingly frustrated as the blocks get bigger. Different sizes of reactions are expected for different problems. Most of the problems that come up during the day are small. For kids, however, sometimes small problems FEEL like big ones. We don't want to tell kids how they should feel about something or label their feelings as good or bad. Our goal is to teach that when a small or medium problem occurs, it is expected that the child shows a small or medium reaction (behavior) on the outside. The size of the reaction should match the size of the problem.

While a child may be able to *tell* you a small reaction is expected for a small problem, when the problem is his own this understanding may fly out the window and his reaction may be quite different! We expect that children will be able to talk about the relative sizes of problems (and reactions) long before they are able to demonstrate that knowledge in the moment or use a strategy to maintain or regain a regulated state. By having this conversation, you are helping your child better understand the expectations around problem solving.

6. At this point, you will have completed one example. It will look something like this:

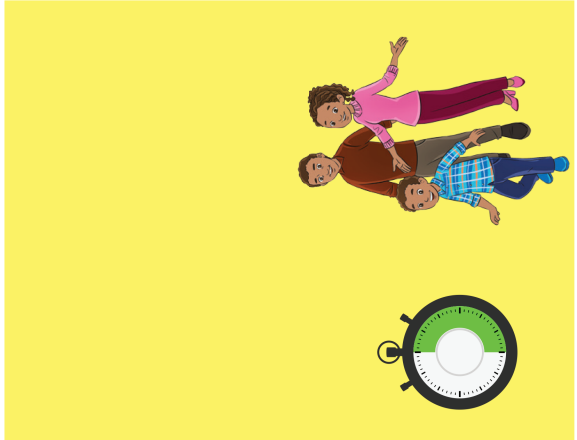
Size of the Problem and Reaction: Family Worksheet			
What is the problem?	How did you feel?	What is the size of the problem?	What is the size of the reaction?
At bedtime there was only time to read one book, and we usually read two or three books.	<i>Sad</i> <i>Disappointed</i>		

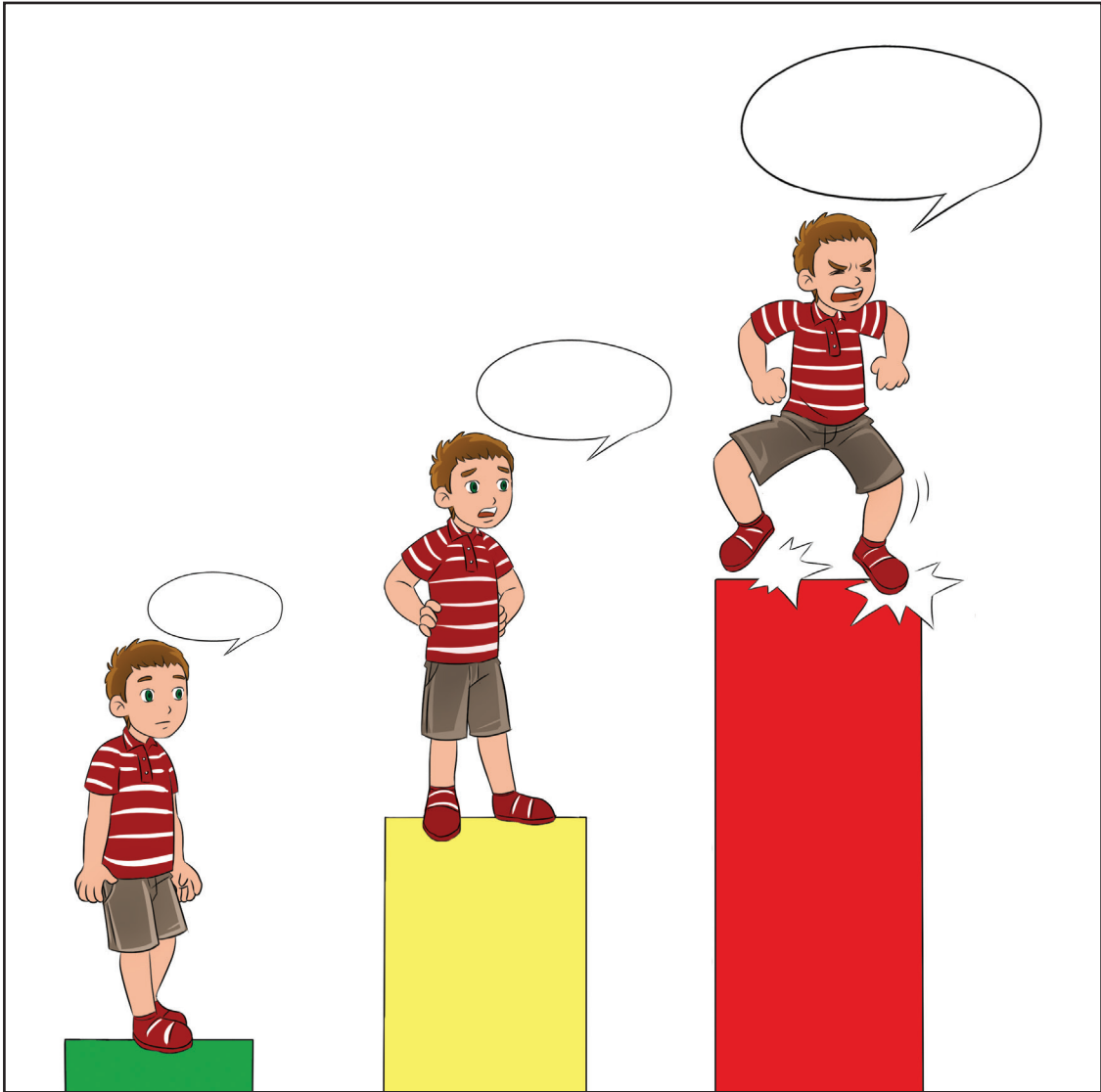
7. Over time, fill out the remainder of the worksheet, one problem at a time. Use examples of times when your child was successful AND had challenges in matching the size of the problem with the size of his or her reaction. As you talk through each example, discuss if the size of the problem matched the reaction. Why or why not? Always keep in mind that this is meant to be a learning opportunity. You and your child are exploring a complicated process. With practice, your child's thinking and skills will evolve over time.

*The storybook mentioned in this letter is part of *Social Problem Solvers*, Volume 2 of the *We Thinkers!* series, our Social Thinking early learner curriculum. Volume 1 (*Social Explorers*) and Volume 2 each consist of five storybooks that introduce social concepts through a themed adventure, and a curriculum book with units, activities and tips to teach the concepts. A music CD, *The Incredible Flexible You*, supports the curriculum with 12 songs, each of which relate directly to the Social Thinking Vocabulary concepts introduced in the two volumes. It's not necessary to purchase any of these materials to work with your child on these concepts at home. The Family Letters share basic information and vocabulary and suggest some at-home activities. Also, there are many free articles on the Social Thinking website that describe the core philosophy of Social Thinking (www.socialthinking.com).

The music CD and each set of five storybooks are sold separately from the curriculum, should you like to extend your child's learning at home. Parents purchasing either the storybook set(s) or the music CD for at-home use are eligible to enter discount code "storybooks10" at checkout to receive 10% off the retail price of those products.

NOTE: Volume 1 of *We Thinkers!* was previously released under the name, *The Incredible Flexible You*. The name was changed in early 2016, however the content in all materials in Volume 1 remained the same.





Size of the Problem and Reaction: Family Worksheet

What is the problem?	How did you feel?	What is the size of the problem?	What is the size of the reaction?
At bedtime there was only time to read one book, and we usually read two or three books.	<p><i>Sad</i></p> <p><i>Disappointed</i></p>		

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Feelings Word Bank

Use the following word list to talk to your child about feelings. Helping your child label the emotions he/she experiences goes a long way toward processing and understanding the emotions the child is feeling. Our kids often have difficulty using words that go beyond the basic: happy, sad, mad, and scared. Increasing your child's emotional vocabulary will be helpful in many areas, including problem solving!

Happy

- Calm
- Glad
- Pleased
- Great
- Wonderful
- Excited
- Proud

Sad

- Unhappy
- Upset
- Down
- Gloomy
- Disappointed
- Let down
- Lonely

Mad

- Angry
- Bothered
- Frustrated
- Troubled
- Cross
- Horrible
- Furious

Scared

- Uncomfortable
- Uneasy
- Nervous
- Worried
- Frightened
- Afraid
- Terrified