

Size of Problem Size of Reaction



hearts & minds

PSYCHOTHERAPY GROUP

Size of Problem

Size of Reaction

If you're looking for a way to help your Deeply Feeling child better modulate their emotions, try teaching them about "Size of Problem" and "Size of Reaction." This concept, developed by Michelle Garcia-Winner, teaches children the foundations of problem solving in a way that allows them to choose an effective way of communicating their distress and enlisting the help of people around them.

The Foundations

To help children truly understand and apply this concept, it's important to break it down into four key principles that children can understand and remember. By starting with the foundations, it becomes easier for children to use the "Size of Problem-Size of Reaction" strategy when they need it.

There are 4 key concepts that all children should understand:

1. Problems come in different sizes
2. Emotions and reactions come in different sizes
3. Emotions are normal and help determine how we should react
4. It's expected that the size of the emotion and related reaction matches the size of the problem.

Defining our Terms

While adults use word like problems, emotions and reactions all the time, not all children can easily define these terms. So before launching into discussion about problem solving, take a moment to make sure that you and your child are defining these constructs the same way.

To help you get started, here's a glimpse of how I might explain these to one of my younger clients.

Problem

A problem is something that happens that was not part of the plan and negatively influences it. Problems can make people feel uncomfortable. Some examples of problems are:

- Something unexpected happens
- Things didn't go the way I planned
- I didn't get what I wanted

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. For example, I might be a little bit scared of a spider, but I'll probably be very scared of a poisonous snake.

Reactions

Our feelings usually tell us how we should react. Reactions are what we do, show and say on the outside because of the feelings we have on the inside. Reactions also come in different sizes.

Size of Problem-Size of Reaction

Once you've made sure that you and your child understand problems, feelings and reactions the same way, it's time to take a deeper dive into the world of problem solving.

Problems come in different sizes, and it's important for children to recognize this to manage their reactions appropriately. Small problems, or Size 1 problems, are issues that can be taken care of quickly and often can be solved on their own or with the help of peers. These are the kinds of problems that can be ignored or addressed without much fuss, such as a minor disagreement with a friend or a small spill.

Medium-sized problems, or Size 2 problems, require more time and effort to solve and usually need adult assistance. While adults are needed to help address these issues, it's crucial that children also play a role in solving them. This collaboration helps children learn problem-solving skills and gain confidence in handling more complex situations. Examples of medium problems might include a larger conflict at school or difficulty with a homework assignment.

Big problems, or Size 3 problems, are the most serious and often require significant time and multiple resources to resolve. These problems typically involve situations that pose a serious risk or cause significant distress, such as big injuries, fires, emergencies, or broken bones. When big problems arise, even adults might need help from other adults or experts to manage the situation effectively. Understanding the severity of these problems helps children realize the importance of seeking appropriate help and staying calm in emergencies.

Now, for the RULE.

Wait! There's a rule?

Yup! Here it is. The rule that everyone should know, but few are taught:

The size of our reaction should match the size of the problem.

That's all folks. It's that simple.

Trouble is that kids often make the mistake of thinking that the size of their reaction on the outside needs to match the size of their feelings on the inside. The trouble with this is that if the size of one's reaction is too seen by others as being "too big" or an "overreaction" for the size of the problem, others around them begin to feel uncomfortable and will move away.

Objections, Anyone?

It is completely understandable that some parents and professionals might feel concerned about any approach that seems to suggest limiting a child's emotional expression. Indeed, children have the right to their feelings and need to express them in a way that feels authentic to them. However, teaching children about the size of a problem and the appropriate size of their reaction is not about suppressing their emotions or invalidating their experiences. Rather, it is about equipping them with the skills to navigate their emotional landscape more effectively and respond in ways that are proportional and constructive.

This approach acknowledges that all feelings are valid and important. It does not deny a child's right to feel deeply; instead, it offers them a framework to better understand their emotions and reactions. By learning to differentiate between small, medium, and big problems, children can still feel their emotions fully while also developing the ability to self-regulate and problem-solve. This balance helps them to express their feelings in ways that are both healthy and productive, ensuring that their emotional needs are met without overwhelming themselves or those around them.

Ultimately, this empowers children to handle life's challenges with resilience and confidence, honoring their deep feelings while guiding them towards thoughtful and effective responses.

As we work to build this self-awareness in our early learners, and we encourage them to observe 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 problems emerge in your life, talk to your children about what size you think they are (1, 2, or 3), and how your reaction is related to the size of the problem. The more times you can point out your own thinking and behavior, the more opportunities you give your child to learn about the process of quantifying the size of problems and reactions.

Building a Foundation for Emotional Resilience

Remember, that building this kind of emotional resilience takes time and patience. It's a gradual process that unfolds over years of consistent modeling, gentle guidance, and lots of practice. Here are a few practical tips to keep in mind:

1. **Be Patient and Consistent.** Children won't grasp this concept overnight. Be patient and continue to reinforce the idea gently and consistently.
2. **Celebrate Small Wins.** Acknowledge and celebrate when your child successfully identifies a small problem and reacts appropriately. Positive reinforcement can be a powerful motivator.
3. **Provide Support and Understanding.** Offer comfort and understanding when your child struggles with this concept. Validate their feelings and gently guide them towards a more measured reaction.
4. **Create a Safe Space for Discussion.** Encourage open discussions about emotions and reactions. Creating a safe space for your child to express their feelings without judgment is crucial for their emotional development.

By fostering an environment where children can learn to assess the size of a problem and respond accordingly, we are equipping them with essential life skills that will serve them well into adulthood. It's about planting seeds today for a future where our children can navigate life's challenges with confidence, resilience, and calm.

Size of Problem-Size of Reaction

Small (Size 1)



Problem

- Can be solved without help or ignored.
- Can be fixed quickly
- No danger is involved
- Usually involves one other person or no one else

Reaction

- Little to no reaction (remain calm and not get upset)
- Be flexible
- Ignore it
- Take 3 breaths
- Count to 10

Problem

- May need an adult to help solve it
- May last longer
- May involve coming up with a few solutions
- No danger is involved

Reaction

- Might feel sad, upset, frustrated or bothered
- Talk it out/ask for help
- Think of 2-3 ways to make the problem better
- Use a coping tool

Medium (Size 2)



Big (Size 3)



Problem

- Needs an adult to solve it
- Usually not an easy solution
- Usually involves a more serious injury or safety issue, blood or fire

Reaction

- Feel very upset, hurt, angry or scared)
- Yell for help
- Run away
- Get a trusted adult

Size of Problem

Size of Reaction

Activities for Home Practice



Highlight naturally occurring times when you (as the parent) 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."

Size of Problem

Size of Reaction

Activities for Home Practice

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. 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!" or "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.

3

Family challenge: Have children and adults come up with imaginary problems and reactions. Go around the table and ask children to label the problem or reactions as a 1, 2, or 3. Alternatively, you can take a family vote to see who things it's a 1, 2 or 3.

4

Act it out: Have a parent or child act out a problem and reaction. Have the audience give a 'thumbs up' if the problem and reaction are the same size, and a 'thumbs down' if the problem and reaction are not the same size.

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Small (Size 1)



- Problem
- May need help solve
 - May last
 - May involve with a
 - No d

Reaction

no reaction
and not

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Act it out: Have a person act out a problem and reaction. Have the audience 'thumbs up' if the problem and reaction are the same size, and a 'thumbs down' if the problem and reaction are not the same size.

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