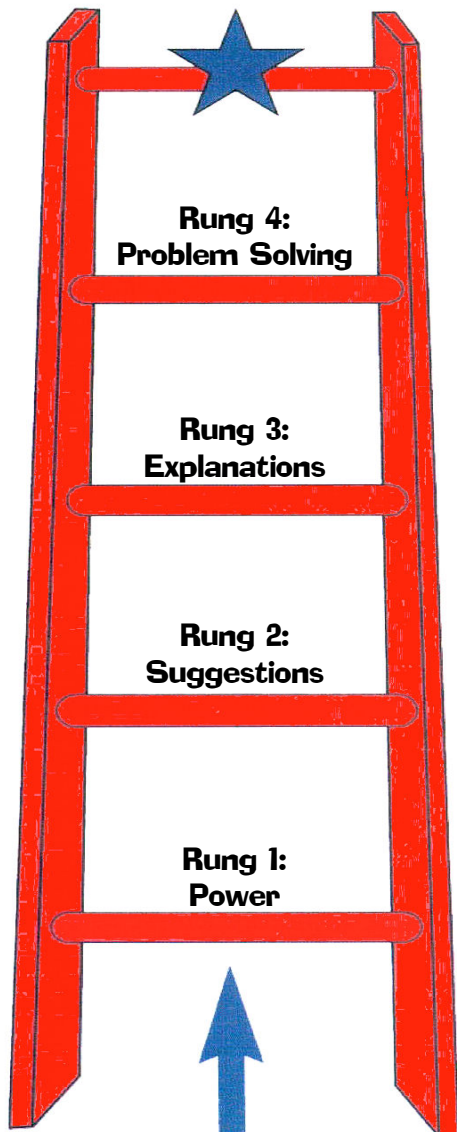


## The I Can Problem Solve Discipline Ladder

Dr. Myrna B. Shure, Drexel University



The "I Can Problem Solve" (ICPS) approach looks at how parents and other caregivers talk with children when conflicts or other problems arise. To distinguish the problem solving approach from other positive forms of discipline, the styles are put onto rungs of a ladder.

### Rung 1: Power

The power approach on rung 1 of the ladder includes discipline techniques such as physical punishment, verbal commands, and belittling. Spanking is on this rung. Yelling statements such as:

*How many times do I have to tell you?*

*Don't ever hit your brother again!*

*If you two can't share your toy, I'll put it away so neither of you can have it!*

Time-out, done badly, is also on this rung. Time-out was originally meant to be used as a calming down period so parent and child could talk. When used as punishment, "Go to the time-out chair!" the child is often humiliated in front of others and may be concerned about revenge. Time-out separates children from each other, but the problem is not solved. The child learns nothing about how to resolve conflicts, and just feels more frustrated and angry. Feeling overpowered, some children eventually become immune to this kind of discipline and learn not to care what happens to them.

### Rung 2: Suggestions

The second rung gives the child positive suggestions of what to do, instead of what not to do. Instead of saying, "Don't grab toys," a parent might say, "Ask for what you want," or "Share your toys."

### Rung 3: Explanations

On the third rung, parents explain why a child should or should not do something. The explanation is to provide an understanding or sensitivity of the impact of child's behavior on others. Parents explain how they are feeling: *"I feel angry when you hit your brother."*

The power, suggestions, and explanations rungs on the discipline ladder do not guide the children to think about the impact of their behavior on others. Suggestions and explanations are important discipline methods. But, children by age 4 have heard the suggestions and explanations many, many times. Because parents are telling them what they already know, children tune out the message. Parents, feeling frustrated, may revert back to the power approach.

### Rung 4: Problem Solving

Children as early as age four can, or can learn, to tell us what and what not to do and why—if they have the skills to do that. The problem solving approach turns statements into questions. Instead of telling the child to, *"Ask nicely for the toy,"* ask, *"What can you do or say so your brother will let you play with his truck?"* Sometimes that's all a parent needs to ask. And instead of telling the child, *"I feel angry when..."*, the child is asked, *"How do you think I feel when..."?* Following is a parent's side of a full scale dialog using the problem solving approach. Notice how the parent adjusts to the child's response.

*"What happened, what's the problem?"*

*"How does your brother feel when you grab toys?"*

*"What happened after you grabbed the toy?"*

*"How did that make you feel?"*

*"How do you think I feel when that happens?"*

*"Can you think of something different to do so that won't happen?"*

Parents do the thinking on the power, suggestions, and explanations rungs of the

Prepared by: Joan E. LeFebvre, Professor, Department of Family Development, University of Wisconsin-Extension  
Reviewers: Myrna B. Shure, Ph.D., Drexel University, and Gay Eastman, Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Extension  
Layout: Penny Otte, Office Operations Associate, Family Living Area Office, Vilas County

discipline ladder. On the problem solving rung, the child becomes an active participant. Parent and child must listen to each other. The parent comes to better understand the child's feelings and children come to know that parents care about their feelings. Children also come to recognize that parents have feelings, too.

The problem solving approach is one where you teach children *how* to think, not *what* to think. When parents use this approach, children feel better about themselves, try harder to reach their goals, get frustrated less easily, behave better, have more friends, and do better in school.

Positive effects are likely when parents take time, over a couple of months, to learn and apply the problem-solving approach. This includes learning the skills, teaching language and practicing the method. The best way to do this is to participate in a *Raising a Thinking Child* workshop series where you can also share your experiences with other parents. Check your local Extension office or Family Resource Center to see if the series is available where you live.



For more information about the I Can Problem Solve problem solving method, check out these resources by Myrna Shure:

- *Raising a Thinking Child*. (1996). Pocket Books.
- *Thinking Parent, Thinking Child: How to Turn Your Most Challenging Everyday Problems into Solutions*. (2005). McGraw-Hill.



#### Source:

Shure, M. (2006). *Raising a thinking child*. Minneapolis, MN: Family Information Services Focus Issue: Parenting/Child Development.

This document can be made available in alternative formats, such as large print, Braille, or audio tape, by contacting your county Extension office. (TTY 1-800-947-3529)

For more information on Parenting and Child Development, contact: Joan E. LeFebvre, Area Family Living Agent, University of Wisconsin, Extension, 330 Court Street, Courthouse, Eagle River WI 54521-8362, 715-479-3653, FAX 715-479-3605, E-Mail joan.lefebvre@ces.uwex.edu November 2008