Systematic problem-solving

This approach, which is particularly useful for dealing with social and learning-based problems, can be used by parents & children, teachers & students, as well as between adults. It involves the following six steps:

1. Defining the problem

- Start by talking about the child's (other's) feelings and needs. First describe what you think it is like from the child's perspective, then let them elaborate.

- Then talk about your feelings and needs. Be careful not to be accusatory, or attack the child's character – just describe how the actions/situation makes you fell, and why you would like to resolve it.

The aim is to get a shared agreement on what exactly the problem is.
Often there are different perspectives to a problem: i.e. A teacher might have a problem that a student has not done their homework. The student might have the problem that he or she doesn't have somewhere to do their homework. If there is shared definition that the difficulty is, say, how the child can find somewhere to do the work, then the process of finding a solution can begin.

2. Generating ideas

- Brainstorm together to find a mutually agreeable solution. If possible, let the child come up with the first few ideas.

- Write down all ideas—without judging! Even if you think it is impractical, or even malicious, write down ALL suggestions (i.e. 'No more homework', or 'Move to a bigger house with a study'). Evaluation comes later.

This is the process of thinking about all the things that might possibly be done to solve the problem. It is important to accept all ideas suggested. Often, children may be reluctant to offer ideas for fear they will be criticised as impractical or dismissed. Writing everything down sends a strong message that they are being taken seriously. If the child who can't find a place to do his homework suggests that he doesn't do it, write this suggestion down, but invite him to keep thinking of other strategies.

3. Critically evaluating ideas.

- Look over the ideas, and invite the child to help you evaluate their practicality and outcomes – be empathetic (Oh, wouldn't it be nice if you could have your own study room! Unfortunately…).

Once a list has been generated that contains some feasible ideas, then it is time to think some of them through. Sometimes ideas can be grouped together. To help evaluate them, it can be useful to ask questions that link actions with consequences. For instance, 'If you do that what would happen next?' or 'How would others respond?' From all these ideas, select the ones which are worth trying and discard those not worth pursuing or that no one wants to discuss.

4. Selecting a solution

- Decide together which suggestions you like, which you don't, and which plan to follow through on?

From the possibilities generated, select one to try out. If necessary, develop an action plan. The child needs to have commitment to try it out; so the more he or she is involved in the selection process and the final choice, the better. It is important that any solution fits with the parent's / school's values and beliefs about what is acceptable behaviour.

5. Trying it out

6. Evaluating it

- *Arrange a follow-up where you can hear about what has happened and whether the problem has been resolved. If so, positive feedback is clearly in order.*

However, it is important to remember that very few things in life are permanent. What works today might not work tomorrow. Just because you have 'problem solved', and appeared to resolve the problem, it may reoccur. If this happens, repeat the process and try again!

We are teaching children that they needn't be our victims or our enemies. We are giving them the tools that will enable them to be active participants in solving the problems that confront them — now, while they're at home / school, and in the difficult, complex world that awaits them.