Many middle school children become frustrated with problem solving, because they expect to find the answer quickly and easily. However, **real problems are difficult to solve.** Unlike a simple equation which follows a pattern that can be practiced and repeated, problem solving requires the use of strategies that help the problem solver to understand the problem, devise and carry out a plan and confirm the solution.

Successful problem solvers use a wide variety of strategies. They more often transform word problems into representations like equations or pictures. They also check their own work and spend time thinking about the strategies they use.

Why does anyone struggle through the hard work of solving difficult problems? Most likely it is because finding a solution to **the problem is important to us.** This becomes a major stumbling block for adolescents, because most, if not all of the “problems” presented in math class seem unimportant or meaningless. While these “problems” allow students to practice problem solving and help teachers measure students’ skills, they are often not interesting for students.

However, middle school students have a lot of experience solving meaningful problems. For example, a young athlete faces the problem of how to train her body to prepare for a competition. Friends negotiate the problems and difficulties of adolescent relationships. Even video games can provide opportunities for problem solving. Solving these problems is a rewarding experience that drives them to want to do it more often. If they can make the connection between these everyday experiences and the problems presented to them in math class, they can begin to see the importance of problem solving in math as well.

Since problems present no obvious solution, middle school children will be more successful at problem solving if they have a wide range of strategies to apply to any situation. They will also be more successful if the problem is important to them. There a number of ways you can help your child:

- Avoid giving your child the answer, because struggle is part of the process.
- Encourage your child to try multiple ways to solve a problem.
- Give your child opportunities to see you solve everyday problems.
- Explain the reasoning you use to solve problems.
- Support and encourage your child to solve his or her real-life problems.
- Help your child reflect on these problem-solving experiences.

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