

# Size of the Problem

## Thinking Strategy Activity<sup>7</sup>

### Materials

#### Size of the Problem activity:

- One Size of the Problem: Big vs. Little Problems worksheet (Reproducible V) for each student
- Copies of Size of the Problem visual (Reproducible W) to post and share with students' teams
- Students' Zones Tools worksheets



### Vocabulary

#### What is the size of the problem?

Is it a big problem or a little problem? (These are both questions posed to help students measure the size of the problem they are experiencing.)

#### Big problems

(problems that many people share and that have no easy, quick, or pleasant solution)

#### Medium problems

(problems some people share that are able to be resolved in an hour to a couple of days)

#### Little problems

(problems that only affect one to two people and can be ignored or solved in a matter of minutes)

### Preparation

- Copy the Size of the Problem worksheet (Reproducible V) for each student.
- Write a scale from 1-5 on the white board, with 5 on the top. Write "People see as Big Problems" next to the 4 and 5, "People see as Medium Problems" next to the 3, and "People see as Little Problems" next to the 2 and 1.
- Write the schedule on the board:
  1. Lead-in
  2. Size of the problem
  3. Wrap-up

### Lead-in

Explain to students that when they participate in group activities, such as working with others on a project or playing a game together, they may get upset over what we call "little problems or glitches." For example, sometimes someone else gets something they wanted (such as the color game piece, an assigned topic to study, or being chosen first). Other times they may have an idea of how to do something, but the people they are with choose to do it a different way. We want to start working on the fact that some problems are really big while others are little and can simply be ignored. Problems require different reactions, emotions, and solutions based on their size. Tell students they will be brainstorming problems and discussing the size of each problem.

### Activity

1. Explain to students that they can use the "big problem, medium problem, and little problem" strategy to help them sort out what is important to them. Associate hand gestures with big, medium, and small problems by holding your hands apart at varying distances.
2. Define what makes a problem large or small. Some of our biggest problems are problems that many people share and that have no easy, quick, or pleasant solution. Discuss what types of emotions are associated with different levels of problems and that big problems involve Red Zone reactions, medium problems involve Yellow Zone reactions, and little problems involve Green Zone reactions (which is little to no reaction).
3. Discuss how different problem levels impact a situation over time. Come up with clear examples such as how the results of a tornado can last for years (big problem) or arguing can make people upset for hours and make them feel physically bad (moderate size problem, depending on the situation). With a little problem or glitch, such as not getting

<sup>7</sup> Size of the problem learning activity was adapted with permission from Michelle Garcia Winner's *Think Social!* (2005), pages 44-46, [www.socialthinking.com](http://www.socialthinking.com).

- the color game piece they want, the feeling ends as soon as the game is over and perhaps as soon as they start playing the game.
4. Have the students brainstorm different types of problems. Facilitate the students' discussion to determine where each problem fits on the scale. Examples of a 5 could include large earthquakes, being seriously hurt, or a death in the family; a 4 could include car accidents or a parent in the hospital; a 3 could include getting in a big fight with their sibling, a detention, or a suspension; a 2 could include someone taking something of theirs without asking or not doing as well as they hoped on a test; and a 1 could include not getting the color mat they want to sit on, going last, or making a mistake.
  5. When determining the Size of the Problem with students, have a copy of the Size of the Problem worksheet (Reproducible V) for each student so they can write down what the class has brainstormed together on the board. An alternative is to create one Size of the Problem worksheet together as a class and then make a copy for each student.
  6. Discuss how the students can start to sort out and analyze that little problems or glitches actually merit smaller Green Zone responses and reactions. Point out that this relatively quick recovery from feeling frustrated to being fine and staying in the Green Zone is what other people expect as well.
  7. Using the Zones Tools worksheet, have students indicate in which zone or zones they feel thinking about the Size of the Problem would help them.

### Wrap-up

- Discuss with students their own emotions.
 

*What happens when you have Red Zone responses that are at the level of a big problem when actually it was just a little problem or glitch? For example, what if you tear up your paper and storm away when you make a mistake on your work?*

*If you think about using the Size of the Problem as a tool, how can it change the outcome for you (i.e., recover quickly versus not getting work done and people feeling like you overreacted)?*
- The goal is to slowly work with students on understanding that their emotional response prevented them from getting their work done on time or prevented them from playing the game that they stormed away from (whatever the circumstance that may be most appropriate for your students). Have students place their Size of the Problem worksheets along with their Zones Tools worksheet in their Zones Folders.



### Note to Teacher

**D**o adapt the examples provided to fit your students' needs. Some students have more difficulty relating to society's problems as big problems because the problems do not directly affect them (such as an earthquake in another country). It is recommended that all examples are meaningful for the students and applicable to their daily life if students struggle empathizing with global or societal problems.

### Ways to generalize learning

- Copy The Size of the Problem visual to post where students can see it and share the visual and vocabulary with others who work closely with the students.
- This activity will establish basic vocabulary about the size of a problem and how it relates to the levels of emotions people experience and expect within various situations. Continue to use size of the problem vocabulary with students as problems occur in real time to further deepen their understanding and application of the tool. If a student reports that he or she feels it is a big problem he or she is experiencing, you can ask follow-up questions, such as, "Do you need to go to the hospital?" "Should I call 911?" or "How many people do you think we need to solve this problem?"

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