Collaborative & Proactive Solutions
The Next Generation of Solving Problems Collaboratively

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www.livesinthebalance.org
www.cpsconnection.com
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“Man masters nature not by force but by understanding.”
Jacob Bronowski

“One of the best ways to strengthen resistance is to fight against it.”
Rick Irving, LICSW

“A mind once stretched by a new idea never regains its original dimension.”
Oliver Wendell Holmes

“Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.”
Benjamin Franklin

“I hope that someday we will learn the terrible cost we all pay when we ignore or mismanage those people in society who most need our help.”
The Hon. Judge Sandra Hamilton, Provincial Court of Alberta, Canada

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Lives in the Balance is a non-profit organization founded by Dr. Ross Greene to provide free resources on the research-based model of care he originated -- now called Collaborative & Proactive Solutions (CPS) -- and to advocate on behalf of behaviorally challenging kids and their caregivers.

THE PROBLEM:

• In too many places – homes, schools, mental health settings, therapeutic facilities, and in the juvenile justice system -- behaviorally challenging kids are still poorly understood, and treated in ways that are punitive, adversarial, reactive, unilateral, ineffective, and counterproductive. This scenario places these kids at serious risk for a variety of adverse outcomes.

• Thanks to the sizeable body of research that has accumulated over the past 50 years, significant progress has been made in our understanding of the factors underlying challenging behavior, and points toward lagging skills (rather than lagging motivation) as the key factor. However, this research has been slow to influence assessment and treatment in many settings.

THE MISSION:

• Advocate on behalf of behaviorally challenging kids and their caregivers, call attention to specific situations and settings in which these kids are still being treated in ways that are counterproductive and ineffective, and provide vital resources so that people and settings get the information they need to change course and move away from punitive, adversarial, unilateral, reactive interventions and toward interventions that are non-punitive, non-adversarial, collaborative, proactive, skill-building, and relationship-enhancing.

• Provide free, web-based resources – on Dr. Greene’s model and other non-punitive, non-adversarial interventions – to help people understand behaviorally challenging kids in ways that are more compassionate, accurate, and productive and intervene in ways that are more effective.

• Collaborate with organizations disseminating other non-punitive, non-adversarial interventions and with stakeholders who care about and support behaviorally challenging kids and their caregivers for the purpose of moving this agenda forward, focused initially in the state of Maine, and then replicated elsewhere.

Don’t miss the 4th Annual Lives in the Balance Summit on Non-Adversarial, Non-Punitive Interventions for At-Risk Kids!

www.livesinthebalance.org
A more compassionate, productive, effective approach to understanding and helping behaviorally challenging kids

Dr. Ross Greene is the originator of the research-based approach to understanding and helping behaviorally challenging kids – as described in his books *The Explosive Child* and *Lost at School* – that has been implemented in countless families, schools, inpatient psychiatry units, therapeutic groups homes, and residential and juvenile detention facilities. The approach sets forth two major tenets. First, challenging behavior in kids is best understood as the result of lagging cognitive skills (in the general domains of flexibility/adaptability, frustration tolerance, and problem solving) rather than as the result of passive, permissive, inconsistent, noncontingent parenting. And second, the best way to reduce challenging episodes is by working together with the child – collaborating – to solve the problems setting them in motion in the first place (rather than by imposing adult will and intensive use of reward and punishment procedures). Here are some of the important questions answered by the model:

**Question:** Why are challenging kids challenging?  
**Answer:** Because they're lacking the skills not to be challenging. If they had the skills, they wouldn’t be challenging. That's because – and this is perhaps the key theme of the model – *Kids do well if they can*. And because (here’s another key theme) *Doing well is always preferable to not doing well* (if a kid has the skills to do well in the first place). This, of course, is a dramatic departure from the view of challenging kids as attention-seeking, manipulative, coercive, limit-testing, and poorly motivated. It's a completely different set of lenses, supported by research in the neurosciences over the past 30-40 years, and it has dramatic implications for how caregivers go about helping such kids.

**Question:** When are challenging kids challenging?  
**Answer:** When the demands or expectations being placed upon them exceed the skills that they have to respond adaptively. Of course, that's when we all respond maladaptively: when we’re lacking the skills to respond adaptively. Thus, an important goal for helpers is to identify the skills a challenging kid is lacking. An even more important goal is to identify the specific expectations a kid is having difficulty meeting (the conditions in which challenging behavior is occurring), referred to as *unsolved problems*...and to help kids solve those problems. Because unsolved problems tend to be tend to be highly predictable, the problem-solving should be proactive most of the time. Identifying lagging skills and unsolved problems is accomplished through use of an instrument called the *Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems (ALSUP)*. You can find the ALSUP in The Paperwork section of the website of *Lives in the Balance*, the non-profit Dr. Greene founded to help disseminate his approach ([www.livesinthebalance.org](http://www.livesinthebalance.org)).

**Question:** What behaviors do challenging kids exhibit when they don't have the skills to respond adaptively to certain demands?  
**Answer:** Challenging kids communicate that they’re struggling to meet demands and expectations in some fairly common ways: whining, pouting, sulking, withdrawing, crying, screaming, swearing, hitting, spitting, kicking, throwing, breaking, lying, stealing, and so forth. But what a kid *does* when he’s having trouble meeting demands and expectations isn’t the most important part (though it may feel that way)... *why* and *when* he's doing these things are much more important.

**Question:** What should we be doing differently to help these kids better than we're helping them now?  
**Answer:** If challenging behavior is set in motion by lagging skills and not lagging motivation, then it's easy to understand why rewarding and punishing a kid may not make things better. Since challenging behavior occurs in response to highly predictable unsolved problems, then challenging kids – and the rest of us – are a whole lot better off when adults help them solve those problems. But if we solve them unilaterally, through imposition of adult will (referred to in the model as “Plan A”), then we’ll only increase the likelihood of challenging episodes and we won’t solve any problems durably. Better to solve those problems collaboratively ("Plan B") so the kid is a fully invested participant, solutions are more durable, and (over time) the kid — and often the adults as well — learn the skills they were lacking all along. *Plan B* is comprised of three basic ingredients. The first ingredient – called the *Empathy* step – involves gathering information from the child so as to achieve the clearest understanding of his or her concern or perspective on a given unsolved problem. The second ingredient (called the *Define Adult Concerns* step) involves entering into consideration the adult concern or perspective on the same unsolved problem. The third ingredient (the *Invitation* step) involves having the adult and kid brainstorm solutions so as to arrive at a plan of action that is both realistic and mutually satisfactory...in other words, a solution that addresses the concerns of both parties and that both parties can actually perform.

**Question:** Where can I learn more about this model?  
**Answer:** The *Lives in the Balance* website is a very good place to start. It has a ton of free resources to help you learn about and apply Dr. Greene’s approach, including streaming video, audio programming, commentary, support, and lots more.

**Question:** Isn’t this the same model as what was previously known as *Collaborative Problem Solving*?  
**Answer:** Dr. Greene is the originator of the *Collaborative Problem Solving* approach, and for many years referred to his model by that name in his research papers, scholarly articles, books, and workshops. However, due to legal action taken by Massachusetts General Hospital, he is prohibited from using that name to refer to his model. He now calls his model *Collaborative & Proactive Solutions* (CPS). Be careful! There are others using the name *Collaborative Problem Solving* out there, but they had nothing to do with the origination or development of Dr. Greene’s model and are not associated with Dr. Greene or *Lives in the Balance* in any way!

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**Empathy Step**

**Ingredient/Goal:**
Gather information about and achieve a clear understanding of the kid’s concern or perspective on the unsolved problem you’re discussing.

**Words:**

Initial Inquiry (neutral observation): “I’ve noticed that…(insert unsolved problem)…what’s up?”

Drilling for Information: usually involves reflective listening and clarifying questions, gathering information related to the who, what, where, and when of the unsolved problem, and asking the kids what they’re thinking in the midst of the unsolved problems and why the problem occurs under some conditions and not others.

**More Help:**
- If you’re not sure what to say next, want more info, or are confused by something the kid has said, say:
  - “How so?”
  - “I’m confused.”
  - “I don’t quite understand.”
  - “Can you tell me more about that?”
  - “Let me think about that for a second.”

If the kid doesn’t talk or says “I don’t know”, try to figure out why:
- Maybe the unsolved problem wasn’t free of challenging behavior, wasn’t specific, wasn’t free of adult theories, or was “clumped” (instead of split)
- Maybe you’re using Emergency Plan B (instead of Proactive Plan B)
- Maybe you’re using Plan A
- Maybe he really doesn’t know
- Maybe he needs the problem broken down into its component parts
- Maybe he needs time to think

**What You’re Thinking:**
“What don’t I yet understand about the kid’s concern or perspective? What doesn’t make sense to me yet? What do I need to ask to understand it better?”

**Define the Problem Step**

**Ingredient/Goal:**
Enter the concern of the second party (often the adult) into consideration

**Words:**

- “The thing is (insert adult concern)….or
- “My concern is (insert adult concern)…”

**More Help:**
Most adult concerns fall into one of two categories:
- How the problem is affecting the kid
- How the problem is affecting others

**Invitation Step**

**Ingredient/Goal:**
Brainstorm solutions that are realistic (meaning both parties can do what they are agreeing to) and mutually satisfactory (meaning the solution truly addresses the concerns of both parties)

**Words:**

Restate the concerns that were identified in the first two steps, usually beginning with “I wonder if there is a way…”

**More Help:**
- Stick as closely to the concerns that were identified in the first two steps
- While it’s a good idea to give the kid the first opportunity to propose a solution, generating solutions is a team effort
- It’s a good idea to consider the odds of a given solution actually working …if you think the odds are below 60-70 percent, consider what it is that’s making you skeptical and talk about it
- This step always ends with agreement to return to Plan B if the first solution doesn’t stand the test of time

**What You’re Thinking:**
“Have I summarized both concerns accurately? Have we truly considered whether both parties can do what they’ve agreed to? Does the solution truly address the concerns of both parties? What’s my estimate of the odds of this solution working?”

**Don’t…**
- skip the Empathy step
- assume you already know what the kid’s concern is and treat the Empathy step as if it is a formality
- rush through the Empathy step
- leave the Empathy step before you completely understand the kid’s concern or perspective
- talk about solutions yet

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Drilling Cheat Sheet

The goal of the Empathy Step is to gather information from the child about his/her concern or perspective on the unsolved problem you're discussing (preferably proactively). For many adults, this is the most difficult part of Plan B, as they often find that they are at a loss for words and unsure of what to ask next. So here's a brief summary of different strategies for "drilling" for information:

Reflective listening and clarifying statements
Reflective listening basically involves repeating what a child has said and then encouraging him/her to provide additional information by saying one of the following:

- "How so?"
- "I don’t quite understand"
- "I’m confused"
- "Can you say more about that?"
- "What do you mean?"

Reflective listening is your “default” drilling strategy...if you aren’t sure of which strategy to use or what to say next, use this strategy.

Asking about the who, what, where/when of the unsolved problem
Examples:

- “Who was making fun of your clothes?”
- “What’s getting the way of completing the science project?”
- “Where is Eddie bossing you around?”

Asking about why the problem occurs under some conditions and not others
Example: “You seem to be doing really well with Taylor in your work group in math...but not so well in your work group in social studies...what’s getting in the way in social studies?”

Asking the child what s/he’s thinking in the midst of the unsolved problem
Notice, this is different than asking the child what s/he is feeling, which doesn’t usually provide much information about the child’s concern or perspective on an unsolved problem. Example: “What were you thinking when Mrs. Thompson told the class to get to work on the science quiz?”

Breaking the problem down into its component parts
Example: “So writing the answers to the questions on the science quiz is hard for you...but you’re not sure why. Let’s think about the different parts of answering questions on the science quiz. First, you have to understand what the question is asking. Is that part hard for you? Next, you need to think of the answer to the question. Is that part hard? Next, you have to remember the answer long enough to write it down. Are you having trouble with that part? Then you have to actually do the writing. Any trouble with that part?”
Discrepant Observation
This involves making an observation that differs from what the child is describing about a particular situation, and it's the riskiest (in terms of causing the child to stop talking) of all the drilling strategies.
Example: “I know you're saying that you haven’t been having any difficulty with Chad on the playground lately, but I recall a few times last week when you guys were having a big disagreement about the rules in the box-ball game. What do you think was going on with that?”

Tabling (and asking for more concerns)
This is where you're “shelving” some concerns the child has already discussed so as to permit consideration of other concerns.
Example: “So if Timmy wasn’t sitting too close to you, and Robbie wasn’t making noises, and the floor wasn’t dirty, and the buttons in your pants weren’t bothering you...is there anything else that would make it difficult for you to participate in Morning Meeting?”

Summarizing (and asking for more concerns)
This is where you're summarizing concerns you've already heard about and then asking if there are any other concerns that haven’t yet been discussed. This is the recommended strategy to use before moving on to the Define the Problem step.
Example: “Let me make sure I understand all of this correctly. It’s hard for you to do your social studies worksheet for homework because writing down the answers is still hard for you...and because sometimes you don’t understand the question...and because Mrs. Langley didn’t hasn’t yet covered the material on the worksheet. Is there anything else that’s hard for you about completing the social studies worksheet for homework?”

Prepared with the assistance of Dr. Christopher Watson

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ALSUP Cheat Sheet

Here are some guidelines for using the Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems (ALSUP):

- The ALSUP is best used as a discussion guide rather than as a free-standing checklist
- Meetings should be focused almost totally on identifying lagging skills and unsolved problems...story-telling, hypothesizing, and theorizing is to be avoided
- It’s best to discuss each lagging skill (rather than “cherry-picking”), starting at the top
- If a lagging skill is endorsed, don’t continue moving down the list of lagging skills...move over to identify the unsolved problems associated with the lagging skill
- To identify unsolved problems, begin with the stem, “Can you give some examples of times when...” and then restate the endorsed lagging skill (e.g., ”Can you give me some examples of times when Tommy is having difficulty making transitions?”)
- Identify as many unsolved problems as possible for each endorsed lagging skill...don’t move on after identifying only one unsolved problem
- Many lagging skills may contribute to the same unsolved problem...don’t spend valuable meeting time trying to be precise about which lagging skill best accounts for a given unsolved problem
- Here are some guidelines for writing unsolved problems:
  o They usually begin with the word Difficulty... (e.g., Difficulty taking out the trash on Thursday mornings)
  o They should contain no reference to the child’s challenging behaviors, though reference to expected behaviors is fine (so you wouldn’t write Screams and swears when having difficulty completing the word problems on the math homework...instead write Difficulty completing the word problems on the math homework)
  o They should contain no adult theories (so you wouldn’t write Difficulty writing the definitions to the spelling words in English...because his parents were recently divorced)
  o They should be split, not clumped (so you wouldn’t write Difficulty controlling impulses but rather Difficulty raising hand during social studies discussions)
  o They should be specific...there are two strategies to help:
    ▪ Include details related to who, what, where, and when
    ▪ Ask What expectation is the child/student having difficulty meeting?

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**Instructions:** The ALSUP is intended for use as a discussion guide rather than as a freestanding check-list or rating scale. It should be used to identify specific lagging skills and unsolved problems that pertain to a particular child or adolescent. If a lagging skill applies, check it off and then (before moving on to the next lagging skill) identify the specific expectations the child is having difficulty meeting in association with that lagging skill (unsolved problems). A non-exhaustive list of sample unsolved problems is shown at the bottom of the page.

### LAGGING SKILLS

- Difficulty handling transitions, shifting from one mindset or task to another
- Difficulty doing things in a logical sequence or prescribed order
- Difficulty persisting on challenging or tedious tasks
- Poor sense of time
- Difficulty maintaining focus
- Difficulty considering the likely outcomes or consequences of actions (impulsive)
- Difficulty considering a range of solutions to a problem
- Difficulty expressing concerns, needs, or thoughts in words
- Difficulty understanding what is being said
- Difficulty managing emotional response to frustration so as to think rationally
- Chronic irritability and/or anxiety significantly impede capacity for problem-solving or heighten frustration
- Difficulty seeing the “grays”/concrete, literal, black-and-white, thinking
- Difficulty deviating from rules, routine
- Difficulty handling unpredictability, ambiguity, uncertainty, novelty
- Difficulty shifting from original idea, plan, or solution
- Difficulty taking into account situational factors that would suggest the need to adjust a plan of action
- Inflexible, inaccurate interpretations/cognitive distortions or biases (e.g., “Everyone’s out to get me,” “Nobody likes me,” “You always blame me,” “It’s not fair,” “I’m stupid”)
- Difficulty attending to or accurately interpreting social cues/poor perception of social nuances
- Difficulty starting conversations, entering groups, connecting with people/lacking other basic social skills
- Difficulty seeking attention in appropriate ways
- Difficulty appreciating how his/her behavior is affecting other people
- Difficulty empathizing with others, appreciating another person’s perspective or point of view
- Difficulty appreciating how s/he is coming across or being perceived by others
- Sensory/motor difficulties

### UNSOLVED PROBLEMS

**UNSOLVED PROBLEMS GUIDE:** Unsolved problems are the specific expectations a child is having difficulty meeting. Unsolved problems should be free of maladaptive behavior; free of adult theories and explanations; “split” (not “clumped”); and specific.

**HOME:** Difficulty getting out of bed in the morning in time to get to school on time; Difficulty getting started on or completing homework (specify assignment); Difficulty ending the video game to get ready for bed a night; Difficulty coming indoors for dinner when playing outside; Difficulty agreeing with brother about what television show to watch after school; Difficulty handling the feelings of seams in socks; Difficulty brushing teeth before bedtime; Difficulty staying out of older sister’s bedroom; Difficulty keeping bedroom clean; Difficulty clearing the table after dinner

**SCHOOL:** Difficulty moving from choice time to math; Difficulty sitting next to Kyle during circle time; Difficulty raising hand during social studies discussions; Difficulty getting started on project on tectonic plates in geography; Difficulty standing in line for lunch; Difficulty getting along with Eduardo on the school bus; Difficulty when losing in basketball at recess

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Four Important Themes

• Emphasis is on problems (and solving them) rather than on behaviors (and modifying them)
• Problem solving is collaborative rather than unilateral (something you’re doing with the kid rather than to him)
• Problem solving is proactive rather than emergent
• Understanding comes before helping…indeed, understanding is the most important part of helping
The Most Important Theme

Kids do well if they can

*If the kid could do well, he would do well*
Important Questions

Why are challenging kids challenging?
When are challenging kids challenging?
What are we going to do differently now that we know why challenging kids are challenging?

A less important question:
What do challenging kids do when they’re challenging?
Traditional Answer to Why?: Challenging Behavior Is Working

Because of passive, permissive, inconsistent, non-contingent parenting, the kid has learned that challenging behavior is an effective means of getting something (e.g., attention) and escaping and avoiding something (e.g., homework).

“First pass” definition of function: It’s working
Leads to interventions aimed at ensuring that kids know that maladaptive behavior is not going to work and incentivizing the performance of adult-imposed replacement behaviors.

DON’T STOP AT “WORKING”!!!
Important Questions

If the kid had the skills to go about getting, escaping, and avoiding in an adaptive fashion, then why would he be getting, escaping, and avoiding in such a maladaptive fashion?

Doesn’t the fact that the kid is getting, escaping, and avoiding in a maladaptive fashion suggest that he doesn’t have the skills to go about getting, escaping, and avoiding in an adaptive fashion?

(We all get, escape, and avoid…but why is the kid getting, escaping, and avoiding in such a maladaptive fashion?)
Another Important Theme

Doing well is always preferable to not doing well

(prerequisite: skills)
Unconventional Answer to Why?: Challenging Kids are Lacking Skills

Challenging kids are challenging because they’re lacking the skills not to be challenging…they are delayed in the development of crucial cognitive skills, such as flexibility/adaptability, frustration tolerance, and problem-solving.

“Second pass” definition of function: challenging behavior communicates that the kid doesn’t have the skills to respond to problems more adaptively

Leads to interventions aimed at identifying the skills kids are lacking and the specific conditions (unsolved problems) in which those lagging skills are making it difficult for the child to meet expectations….and then solving those problems and simultaneously teaching those skills
What Skills Are Behaviorally Challenging Kids Lacking?

- Executive skills
- Language processing/communication skills
- Emotion regulation skills
- Cognitive flexibility skills
- Social skills
Unconventional Answer to *When?*: The Clash of the Two Forces

Challenging episodes occur when the cognitive demands being placed upon a person outstrip the person’s capacity to respond adaptively (best conceived as “adaptational failures” or “incompatibility episodes”).

![Diagram showing Lagging Skills and Demands of Environment intersecting]
When in a Child’s Development Do Incompatibility Episodes Begin to Emerge?

When incompatibility between the child’s characteristics (i.e., skills) and characteristics of the environment (i.e., demands) starts to emerge.
The Clash of the Two Forces

Unsolved Problems: the specific expectations a child is having difficulty meeting because of his/her lagging skills (the specific conditions in which the demands being placed upon the child are incompatible with his/her skills)
Adult Roles in the Lives of Behaviorally Challenging Kids

- Identify lagging skills
- Identify unsolved problems
- Solve problems collaboratively and proactively
The Little *What?*

The Spectrum of Looking Bad: a continuum of behaviors that kids (and other human beings) exhibit when the forces clash
Identifying Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems

How are all these lagging skills and unsolved problems identified?
The Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems (ALSUP)

- The ALSUP is meant to be used as a discussion guide for achieving a consensus - not simply a checklist or mechanism for quantifying (quantification comes in third).

- The ALSUP helps caregivers focus on things they can actually do something about (if we only focus on things we can’t do anything about, we are likely to come to the conclusion that we can’t do anything to help).

- We’re looking to avoid the “correlation equals causation error”.

- In a meeting, this discussion usually takes about 50 minutes…but only if we stop theorizing, hypothesizing, and telling stories.
Using the ALSUP

- One section contains a representative list of the skills frequently found lagging in challenging kids
- Middle section is where unsolved problems are identified
- Goal is to have a meaningful (not perfunctory) discussion about the degree to which each lagging skill applies to a particular child (don’t just check and move on), along with the unsolved problems associated with the lagging skills
  - Discussion of a kid’s strengths isn’t a bad idea, though identification of lagging skills is what typically leads to a more compassionate understanding of the kid’s difficulties
- Unsolved problems are examples of expectations a child is having difficulty meeting in association with certain lagging skills
  - Wording: Typically start with “Difficulty…” and then the expectation the child is having difficulty meeting
Using the ALSUP: Guidelines for Identifying Unsolved Problems

Unsolved Problems should be:

• Free of challenging behaviors
• Free of adult theories (no need to explain anything yet)
• Split, not clumped
• Specific

  Strategy #1: Who, What, Where/When…NOT why)
  Strategy #2: What expectation is the child having difficulty meeting?
Using the ALSUP

- Expect light bulbs to go on
  - When caregivers come to recognize that a kid is, indeed, lacking many skills
  - When caregivers come to recognize why prior interventions have been ineffective
  - When caregivers begin to regret the manner in which they’ve been interacting with a kid based on incorrect assumptions
  - When caregivers become aware that unsolved problems occur under highly specific conditions
  - When caregivers recognize that unsolved problems are predictable and therefore be solved proactively
  - When caregivers begin pondering how they’re going to create mechanisms for changing practices given what they now know about a kid’s difficulties
More Unsolved Problems: Ask the Kid

- “What are people bugging you about?”
- “What are people giving you a hard time about?”
- “What are you getting in trouble for?”
Next Goal: Prioritizing

- You can’t work on everything at once
- Focus on the “big fish” first
  - Severity: those unsolved problems contributing to the kid’s worst moments or safety issues
  - Frequency: those unsolved problems contributing to incompatibility episodes most often
Keeping Track: The Problem Solving Plan (Plan B Flowchart)

- Specify high-priority unsolved problems
- Designate person primarily responsible for solving the problem with the child
- Follow the remaining sequence to a successful resolution
- Add new unsolved problems as old ones are solved
Options for Handling Unsolved Problems

Plan A: solve the problem unilaterally

Plan B: solve the problem collaboratively

Plan C: set the problem aside for now
Options for Handling Unsolved Problems

Plan A: Solve the problem unilaterally
- “I’ve decided that...”

• Plan A is unilateral
• Plan A involves the imposition of adult will, often accompanied by adult-imposed consequences
• Plan A causes incompatibility episodes in challenging kids
• Plan A provides no information whatsoever about the factors making it difficult for the kid to meet a given expectation
• Thus, solutions arrived at through Plan A are “uninformed solutions”
Timing is Everything

INCOMPATIBILITY EPISODES ARE HIGHLY PREDICTABLE

Crisis Management: Intervention is reactive and occurs emergently, in the heat of the moment

Crisis Prevention: Intervention is planned and occurs proactively, well before highly predictable incompatibility episodes occur again

Question is not “What should I do when…?”, but rather “What should I do before…?”
Options for Handling Unsolved Problems

**Plan C:** Set the problem aside for now (prioritizing)
- Emergency C: “OK”
- Proactive C:
  - don’t bring it up
  - an agreed-upon interim plan for tabling the problem for now

Dropping expectations (even temporarily) can be hard!
Options for Handling **Unsolved Problems**

**Plan B:** Solve the problem collaboratively

- **Emergency B:** more useful for de-escalation (durably solving problems isn’t likely in the heat of the moment)

- **Proactive B:** more useful for working toward durable solutions *(creating TIME)*
The Three Steps of Plan B

1. Empathy Step
   (information gathering so as to identify child’s concerns)

2. Define Adult Concerns Step
   (identify adult’s concerns)

3. Invitation Step
   (brainstorm and select solutions that are realistic and mutually satisfactory)
The Empathy Step

Fundamentally Simple Part:
The goal of the Empathy step is to gather information so as to achieve the clearest possible understanding of the kid’s concern or perspective on a given unsolved problem.

Introduction:
The Empathy step begins with the words “I’ve noticed that”, followed by an unsolved problem and an initial inquiry (“What’s up?”).
The Empathy Step of Plan B

Especially Hard:

What happens after “What’s up?”

• The kid says something
• The kid says nothing or “I don’t know”
• The kid says, “I don’t have a problem with that”
• The kid says, “I don’t want to talk about it”
• The kid responds defensively (“I don’t have to talk to you!”)
The Empathy Step (cont.): The Kid Says Something
- Key Theme: Don’t run with the first thing the kid says
- Drilling Strategies:
  - Reflective listening and clarifying statements (“How so?” “I don’t quite understand” “I’m confused” “Can you say more about that?” “What do you mean?”)
  - Asking about the who, what, where/when of the unsolved problem
  - Asking about why the problem occurs under some conditions and not others
  - Asking the kid what s/he’s thinking in the midst of the unsolved problem (more important than feeling)
  - Breaking the problem down into its component parts
Additional (Later) Drilling Strategies:

- Discrepant Observation
- Tabling (and asking for more concerns)
- Summarizing (and asking for more concerns)
The Empathy Step (cont.): The Kid Says Something

Also Hard:
- You’re not thinking about solutions yet (the Empathy step is a “Solution-Free Zone”)
- Remember, “drilling” isn’t “grilling”…it involves “listening,” not “lessoning” or “lessening” (dismissing, trumping)
- Stay neutral, non-defensive throughout (suspend your emotional response…the Empathy step isn’t about you)
- Don’t rush (the Empathy step is not a mechanical formality…you’re really curious…you really want to know!)
- You’re not ready to leave the Empathy step until you’ve summarized and asked for more and have a clear understanding of the kid’s concern or perspective
The Empathy Step (cont.): I Don’t Know/Silence

What to Do:
- Don’t freak
- Keep drilling

If He’s Still Not Talking, Figure out Why:
- You used Plan A or Emergency Plan B instead of Proactive Plan B
- The Introduction wasn’t specific, free of theories, free of maladaptive behaviors, split
- He doesn’t trust you and/or the process yet (he has a lot of experience with Plan A)
- He really doesn’t know
  - Maybe he’s never thought about it before
  - Maybe you’ve never asked before
  - Maybe he hasn’t thought about his concerns for a very long time
- He needs the problem broken down into its component parts
- He needs time to think (adults better get comfortable with silence)
- He’s having difficulty putting his thoughts into words

What If He’s STILL Not Talking?
- Educated guessing/hypothesis testing
The Empathy Step (cont.)
Other Responses to “What’s Up?”

- “I don’t have a problem with that”
  - that’s the beginning of his concern or perspective…start drilling!
  - the kid almost certainly has a problem with all the conflict surrounding the unsolved problem

- “I don’t want to talk about it”
  - first, assume he has a good reason
  - next, give him permission not to talk
  - see if he’ll talk about why he doesn’t want to talk about it
  - don’t do anything today that will reduce the likelihood of the kid talking to you tomorrow

- Defensiveness (“I don’t have to talk to you!”)
  - he may need reassurance that you’re not using Plan A
    - “I’m not telling you what to do”
    - “You’re not in trouble”
    - “I’m not mad at you”
    - “I’m just trying to understand”
The Define Adult Concerns Step

Fundamentally Simple Part:
• The goal of this step is to *ensure that the adult’s concern or perspective is entered into consideration* (possibly beginning with, “The thing is...” or “My concern is...”)

What’s Hard:
Adults frequently don’t know what their concerns are (though they do often know what their solutions are)
• Adult concerns typically fall into one of two categories:
  - How the problem is affecting the kid (e.g., health, safety, learning)
  - How the problem is affecting others (e.g., health, safety, learning)

• The Define the Problem step is a Solution-Free Zone, too...the first two steps are reserved exclusively for concerns
Also Hard:

- If you get solutions instead of concerns on the table in the first two steps, that’s a power struggle (a win/lose proposition)
  - Solving problems collaboratively is a win/win proposition

- Some kids say they “don’t care” about your concern
The Invitation Step

Fundamentally Simple Part:
Goal of this step is to *brainstorm solutions that are realistic and mutually satisfactory*

What’s Hard:
- Proving to the kid that you’re as invested in getting his concern addressed as you are in getting your own concern addressed
- The wording is hard:
  - Should recap two concerns so as to summarize the problem to be solved (Starts with: “I wonder if there’s a way…”)
  - The kid is given the first opportunity to generate solutions (“Do you have any ideas?”), but resolution of the problem is a team effort (collaborative)
The Invitation Step (cont.)

– you don’t know where the plane is landing before it takes off (no preordained solutions)

– The concerns of both parties are the reference point against which all solutions are weighed

– Goal is to come up with a solution so the problem doesn’t come up again…not to come up with a solution for what to do in the heat of the moment when the problem recurs

– The Invitation ends with an agreement to return to Plan B if the first solution doesn’t stand the test of time
You’re Ready!

Additional Pointers

- Solving problems tends to be incremental
- The first solution seldom solves the problem durably…most problems require more than one discussion
- Solutions that don’t stand the test of time:
  - weren’t as realistic and mutually satisfactory as first thought
  - didn’t address concerns that hadn’t yet been identified
- Your first Plan B: just do the Empathy step (save the next two ingredients for the next day)
- You don’t get good at Plan B without practicing Plan B (the first 20 are for practice)
How are the Skills Trained?

Mostly Indirectly

- Some skills can be trained directly
  - some social skills
  - language processing/communication skills
- There really isn’t a technology for teaching (directly) most of the lagging skills on the ALSUP…but there is a technology for teaching those skills indirectly (Plan B)
- By collaboratively solving the problems associated with a given lagging skill, you’re simultaneously (but indirectly) training that skill…you’re building a “problem-solving repertoire”
- There are also skills being taught in each of the three steps of Plan B
Implementation in Schools and Facilities (Start Small)

- **Leadership commitment**
  - Time, continuity, participation

- **Formation of Core Group (start small)**
  - Practice using ALSUP and Plan B
  - Ensures that there are mentors to help others
  - Ensures structures that support the model are in place before full-scale implementation
  - Integrate paperwork into existing systems
  - Create new mechanisms for communication, follow-up

- **Create a plan for spreading, training, coaching**
  - Helping those who are having trouble
  - Revisiting/revising existing policies/procedures
Is Plan B Relevant for Kids with Very Limited Communication Skills?

• Reference point is infants
  – Identifying unsolved problems (requires excellent observational skills)
  – Identifying concerns
  – Collaborating on solutions

• Important Questions:
  – Does the child need additional training on the basics?
    • The relationship between problems and solutions
    • Basic concepts of problems and concerns
  – How is the child communicating now? Can we build on existing means of communication?
    • How can we help the child communicate more easily (pictures) about the basic components of problem-solving (problems, concerns, solutions)?
Additional Information/Resources

www.livesinthebalance.org
Guided tours/Web-based radio programs/
Advocacy/support/Care Packages/Bill of Rights

www.cpsconnection.com
Advanced and certification trainings