Collaborative Problem Solving
Understanding and Helping Kids with Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Challenges

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

“Man masters nature not by force but by understanding.”
Jacob Bronowski

“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

“I don't believe people get tired of helping – only that they get tired of feeling helpless.”
Nancy Gibbs
Important CPS Themes

- Emphasis is on solving problems rather than on extinguishing or replacing behaviors
- Problem solving is collaborative rather than unilateral
- Understanding comes before helping…indeed, understanding is the most important part of helping

Most Important Theme: CPS Philosophy

Kids do well if they can

If they’re not doing well, we adults need to figure out why, so we can help.

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, noncontingent parenting, the kid has learned that challenging behavior is an effective means of getting something (e.g., attention) or escaping or avoiding something (e.g., homework).

"First pass" definition of function: It's working
- leads to interventions aimed at ensuring that kids have the incentive to do well

Important Questions

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

Mantra

Doing well is always preferable to not doing well
(prerequisite: skills)

So don’t stop at “working”… move on to the next level of analysis!
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 solving problems and teaching lagging cognitive skills

Evidence for the Association Between Lagging Skills and Challenging Behavior

- Executive skills
- Language processing skills
- Emotion regulation skills
- Cognitive flexibility skills
- Social skills

Unconventional Answer to When?:
The Clash of the Two Forces
When in a Child’s Development Do Incompatibility Episodes Begin to Emerge?

The Clash of the Two Forces

Mantra

Every incompatibility episode involves a lagging skill and a demand for that skill (an unsolved problem)
The Little What?:
The Spectrum of Looking Bad: a person may exhibit any of a variety of challenging behaviors when the clash of forces occurs, distinguished primarily by their severity.

Implementing CPS: Roles and Goals
- **Lenses come first:**
  - Identify lagging skills
- **Get organized:**
  - Identify unsolved problems
  - Create mechanisms for communication and proactive intervention
- **Get busy:**
  - Solve problems and simultaneously teach skills

Lenses and Organization:
Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems

How are all these lagging skills and unsolved problems assessed?
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)
- Theories, hypotheses, and story-telling do not move the process forward
- We’re looking to avoid the “correlation equals causation error”

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 it’s lagging skills that typically lead to a more compassionate understanding of the kid’s difficulties
- Unsolved problems are examples of times when a child’s lagging skills are making it difficult to respond adaptively to specific demands or expectations
- Best to avoid listing behaviors as unsolved problems...goal is to identify the conditions in which the behaviors are occurring (typically, difficulty with a particular expectation)
- Don’t slip theories in at the last minute!

Using the ALSUP

- Expect light bulbs to go on and “Wow” moments to occur
  - 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 begin pondering how they’re going to create mechanisms for changing practices given what they now know about a kid’s difficulties
Using the ALSUP

- Other ways to identify unsolved problems:
  - Ask the kid (and other caregivers)
  - Stories of incompatibility episodes
    - embedded within every story of a incompatibility episode is the unsolved problem that set the episode in motion
    - adults tend to start at the end of the story, so they may need to rewind the tape
  - Keep a log for a week
  - Goal is to be as specific as possible about unsolved problems (with whom, over what, where, and when - NOT WHY -- are incompatibility episodes occurring?)
  - Split the unsolved problems...don’t clump
  - Expect more “Wow” moments: Focusing on specific problems helps make the general situation less ambiguous, less overwhelming, and more predictable

Lagging Skills + Unsolved Problems:

INCOMPATIBILITY EPISODES ARE HIGHLY PREDICTABLE

- that means we can intervene proactively
- “predictable” doesn’t mean every time...It means that an unsolved problem heightens the likelihood of an incompatibility episode

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 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

Three Options
(Common Approaches to Handling Unsolved Problems)

Plan A: Unilateral problem solving
(imposition of adult will, often accompanied by adult-imposed consequences)

Plan B: Collaborative Problem Solving

Plan C: Drop it for now (prioritizing)

Three Options
(Common Approaches to Handling Unsolved Problems)

Plan A: Unilateral problem solving
(imposition of adult will)
- “I’ve decided,” followed by “No,”
  “You must,” “You can’t,”
  “1-2-3”

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...solutions arrived at through Plan A are “uninformed” solutions
Get Busy:
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...?”

Three Options
(Common Approaches to Handling Unsolved Problems)

Plan C: Drop it for now (prioritizing)
- Emergency C: “OK”
- Proactive C: an agreed-upon interim plan for tabling the problem for now

Dropping expectations (even temporarily) can be hard!

Three Options
(Common Approaches to Handling Unsolved Problems)

Plan B: Collaborative Problem Solving
- 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 (make an appointment)

Solving problems collaboratively can be hard too!
Get Busy: Entry Steps for Plan B

1. Empathy
2. Define the Problem
3. Invitation

Get Busy: Empathy Step of Plan B

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

What’s Hard:
The wording on getting the Empathy step rolling:
- Plan B begins with an observation about an unsolved problem ("I’ve noticed that…"), along with an initial inquiry ("What’s up?")
- Key Themes: Proactive, Specific, Neutral
- As often as possible, should be theory- and behavior-free

Also Hard:

What happens after “What’s up?”
- The kid says something
- The kid says nothing
- The kid says “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!”)
Empathy Step (cont.): The Kid Says Something

Drilling for Information is Really Hard:
- Key Theme: Don’t run with the first thing the kid says
- Here are some strategies:
  - Asking about the who, what, when, and where of the unsolved problem
  - Asking about why the problem occurs under some conditions and not others
  - Breaking the problem down into its component parts
  - Asking the kid what s/he’s thinking in the midst of the unsolved problem (more important than feeling)
  - 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?”)

Empathy Step (cont.): The Kid Says Something

Still Hard:
Getting to your “aha!” moment is hard…don’t be a genius!
- What you’re thinking: “What don’t I understand yet about his/her concern or perspective? What part of the picture is still incomplete? What do I need to ask next so that I understand it better? (you shouldn’t be thinking about solutions yet)
- The Empathy step is a “Solution-Free Zone”

Empathy Step (cont.): A Few Additional Pointers

- Remember, “drilling” isn’t “grilling”…it involves “listening,” not “lessoning” or “lessening” (dismissing, trumping)
- Stay neutral, non-defensive throughout
  - suspend your emotional response
  - 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 have a clear understanding of the kid’s concern or perspective
Empathy Step (cont.): He Didn’t Talk: 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 observation wasn’t neutral or specific
- 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 he hasn’t thought about his concerns for a very long time
- He needs the problem broken down into its component parts
- He needs to think (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

Empathy Step (cont.): Other Patterns After “What’s Up?”

- “I don’t have a problem with that”
  - that’s the beginning of his concern or perspective, start drilling!
- “I don’t want to talk about it”
  - he probably has a good reason, we need to respect that
  - sometimes kids need permission not to talk
  - 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”

Get Busy: The Define the Problem 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
- What’s the score? The first two steps are reserved exclusively for concerns
Get Busy: The Define the Problem Step

Also Hard:
• Sometimes there are two solutions instead of two concerns on the table at the end of this step
  - that’s a power struggle (a win/lose proposition)
  - Collaborative Problem Solving is a win/win proposition
• Some kids say they “don’t care” about your concern

What you’re thinking: “Have I clearly articulated my concerns? Does the kid understand what I’ve said?”

Get Busy: The Invitation Step

Fundamentally Simple Part:
Goal of this step is to brainstorm solutions that will address the concerns of both parties
• Lets the kid know this is something you’re doing with him rather than to him

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.)

• Not being a genius is hard
  • you don’t know where the plane is landing
  • don’t “embed” solutions in the invitation!
• Coming up with a good solution is hard
  • A good solution meets two criteria
    • Realistic
    • Mutually Satisfactory
  • 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 Step (cont.)

- What you’re thinking:
  - Early: “Have I summarized both concerns accurately?”
  - Later: “Have we truly considered whether both parties can do what they’re about to agree to? Does the solution truly address the concerns of both parties?”
  - Prior to Signing Off: “What’s my estimate of the odds of this solution working?” (if the odds are below 60-70 percent, figure out why and modify/revise the solution or continue brainstorming)

- 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

- By collaboratively solving the problems associated with a given lagging skill, you’re simultaneously (but indirectly) training that skill
- Some skills can be trained directly
  - some social skills
  - language processing/communication skills
- But there really isn’t a technology for teaching (directly) most of the lagging skills on the ALSUP
Get Busy: Front-Loading Key Elements
(embedding, not tasting)

- Leadership commitment (to time, continuity, participation)
- Formation of Core Group/CPS Team to ensure that structures that support CPS are in place before full-scale implementation
- Game plan/timeline/benchmarks (helps ward off "implementation dip")
- Establishing goals for dramatic reductions in detention, suspension, restraint, seclusion
- Integration of paperwork (ALSUP, Plan B Flowchart) into existing systems
- Creation of new mechanisms for communication, follow-up
- Commitment to proactive intervention; debriefing
- Tracking/monitoring systems, data collection
- Creation of mechanisms for spreading, training, coaching
- Spreading to entire facility (staff development)
- 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:
  - How is the child communicating now? Can we build on them?
  - Are there ways to help the child communicate more easily (pictures)?
  - Which component of solving problems are we trying to help the child communicate about right now?

Medication?

1. What does medication treat well? What does medication not treat well?
2. Does the kid present with any issues that medication would be expected to treat well?
   - Inattention/disorganized thinking
   - Hyperactivity-Impulsivity
   - Irritability/Obesiveness
   - Extremely short fuse
   - General anxiety
   - Sleep
   - Tics
Additional Information/Resources

www.livesinthebalance.org
Advocacy/support/Care Packages/Bill of Rights
Action Plan B
Web-based radio programs/Listening Library
Streaming video

www.cpsconnection.com
Advanced and certification trainings

www.cpsinitiative.com
Consultation
CPS Store
Resources

Books on Collaborative Problem Solving:


Selected Papers/Articles:


Support:

For additional resources, support, to learn more about consultation services and continuing education opportunities, and to advocate for kids with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges, visit the website of Dr. Greene’s non-profit organization, *Lives in the Balance* (www.livesinthebalance.org). And be sure to join in on Dr. Greene’s web-based radio programs for educators and parents (or listen to the archives)...details on the Lives in the Balance website.

About the Speaker:

Dr. Greene is Associate Clinical Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and the Cambridge Health Alliance, adjunct Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at Virginia Tech, and Senior Lecturer in the school psychology program of the Department of Education at Tufts University. He is no longer associated in any way with the General Hospital Corporation/Massachusetts General Hospital or any of its programs. He can be reached through the Contact page on the Lives in the Balance website.
BILL OF RIGHTS FOR BEHAVIORALLY CHALLENGING KIDS

If we don't start doing right by kids with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges, we're going to keep losing them at an astounding rate. Doing the right thing isn't an option...it's an imperative. There are lives in the balance, and we all need to do everything we can to make sure those lives aren't lost.

Behaviorally challenging kids have the right:

- To have their behavioral challenges understood as a form of developmental delay in the domains of flexibility/adaptability, frustration tolerance, and problem-solving.

- To have people -- parents, teachers, mental health clinicians, doctors, coaches...everyone -- understand that challenging behavior is no less a form of developmental delay than delays in reading, writing, and arithmetic, and is deserving of the same compassion and approach as are applied to these other cognitive delays.

- Not to be counterproductively labeled as bratty, spoiled, manipulative, attention-seeking, coercive, limit-testing, controlling, or unmotivated.

- To have adults understand that challenging behavior occurs in response to specific unsolved problems -- homework, screen time, teeth brushing, clothing choices, sibling interactions, and so forth -- and that these unsolved problems are usually highly predictable and can therefore be solved proactively.

- To have adults understand that the primary goal of intervention is to collaboratively solve these problems in a way that is realistic and mutually satisfactory so that they don't precipitate challenging behavior any more.

- To have adults (and classmates) understand that time-outs, detentions, suspensions, expulsion, and isolation do not solve problems or "build character" but rather often make things worse.

- To have adults take a genuine interest in their concerns or perspectives, and to have those concerns and perspectives viewed as legitimate, important, and worth listening to and clarifying.

- To have adults in their lives who do not resort to physical intervention and are knowledgeable about and proficient in other means of solving problems.

- To have adults who understand that solving problems collaboratively -- rather than insisting on blind adherence to authority -- is what prepares kids for the demands they will face in the real world.

- To have adults understand that blind obedience to authority is dangerous, and that life in the real world requires expressing one's concerns, listening to the concerns of others, and working toward mutually satisfactory solutions.
**ASSESSMENT OF LAGGING SKILLS & UNSOLVED PROBLEMS** (Rev. 8/29/11)

**Instructions:** The ALSUP is intended for use as a *discussion guide* rather than 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 examples (unsolved problems) in which that lagging skill is causing difficulty. Unsolved problems should specify the explicit conditions in which the child or adolescent is having difficulty meeting expectations (a non-exhaustive list of potential unsolved problems is shown at the bottom of the page). To assist in prioritizing, also rate the degree to which each recorded unsolved problem is setting in motion challenging episodes.

**LAGGING SKILLS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lagging Skill</th>
<th>Examples (Unsolved Problems)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty handling transitions, shifting from one mindset or task to another</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulty doing things in a logical sequence or prescribed order</td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulty persisting on challenging or tedious tasks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poor sense of time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulty maintaining focus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulty considering the likely outcomes or consequences of actions (impulsive)</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulty considering a range of solutions to a problem</td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulty expressing concerns, needs, or thoughts in words</td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulty understanding what is being said</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulty managing emotional response to frustration so as to think rationally</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic irritability and/or anxiety significantly impede capacity for problem-solving or heighten frustration</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty seeing the “grays”/concrete, literal, black-and-white, thinking</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulty deviating from rules, routine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty handling unpredictability, ambiguity, uncertainty, novelty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty shifting from original idea, plan, or solution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty taking into account situational factors that would suggest the need to adjust a plan of action</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>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”)</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty attending to or accurately interpreting social cues/poor perception of social nuances</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty starting conversations, entering groups, connecting with people/lacking other basic social skills</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty seeking attention in appropriate ways</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulty appreciating how his/her behavior is affecting other people</td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulty empathizing with others, appreciating another person’s perspective or point of view</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty appreciating how s/he is coming across or being perceived by others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**EXAMPLES OF UNSOLVED PROBLEMS**

**HOME:** Waking up/getting out of bed in the morning; Completing morning routine/getting ready for school; Sensory hypersensitivities (specify); Starting or completing homework (specify); Time spent in front of a screen (TV, video games, computer); Going to/getting ready for bed at night; Sibling interactions (specify); Cleaning room/completing household chores (specify)

**SCHOOL:** Shifting from one specific task to another (specify); Getting started on/completing class assignment (specify); Interactions with a particular classmate/teacher (specify); Behavior in hallway/at recess/in cafeteria/on school bus/waiting in line (specify); Handling disappointment/losing at a game/not coming in first/not being first in line (specify)
PLAN B FLOWCHART (7-12-10)

Child’s Name ___________________________ Date ____________________

**UNSOLVED PROBLEM #1**

- Adult Taking the Lead on Plan B
- Kid’s Concerns Identified (Empathy Step)
- Adult Concerns Identified (Define the Problem Step)
- Solution Agreed Upon (Invitation Step)
- Problem Solved?
  - Yes _______ Date _______
  - No _______ Comment:

**UNSOLVED PROBLEM #2**

- Adult Taking the Lead on Plan B
- Kid’s Concerns Identified (Empathy Step)
- Adult Concerns Identified (Define the Problem Step)
- Solution Agreed Upon (Invitation Step)
- Problem Solved?
  - Yes _______ Date _______
  - No _______ Comment:

**UNSOLVED PROBLEM #3**

- Adult Taking the Lead on Plan B
- Kid’s Concerns Identified (Empathy Step)
- Adult Concerns Identified (Define the Problem Step)
- Solution Agreed Upon (Invitation Step)
- Problem Solved?
  - Yes _______ Date _______
  - No _______ Comment:
### 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 highly specific unsolved problem)... what’s up?”
- **Drilling for Information:** usually focuses on the who, what, where, and when of the unsolved problem, 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 your observation wasn’t very neutral
  - Maybe your unsolved problem was too vague
  - Maybe you’re using Emergency Plan B instead of Proactive Plan B
  - Maybe you’re using Plan A
  - Maybe he really doesn’t know
    - he might need time to think
    - he might need problem broken down into its component parts

**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?”

**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

### 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)…”
- Most adult concerns fall into one of two categories:
  - How the problem is affecting the kid
  - How the problem is affecting others

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

**What You’re Thinking:**
- “Have I been clear about my concern? Does the child understand what I have said?”

**Don’t:**
- start talking about solutions yet
- sermonize, judge, lecture, use sarcasm

### 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…”
- 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:**
- Rush through this step either
- Enter this step with preordained, “ingenious” solutions
- Sign off on solutions that both parties can’t actually perform
- Sign off on solutions that don’t truly address the concerns of both parties.
A more accurate, compassionate, productive understanding of (and approach to helping) behaviorally challenging kids

Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) is a model for understanding and helping kids with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges. The model was first described in the book, The Explosive Child, by Dr. Ross Greene, which was originally published in 1998 and is now in its fourth edition (2010).

The CPS 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 collaboratively solving 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 everyone looks bad: when they're lacking the skills to look good. 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 conditions or situations in which a challenging behavior is occurring in a particular challenging kid. In the CPS model, these conditions are referred to as **unsolved problems** and they tend to be highly predictable. 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 the CPS model (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 let us know 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 CPS 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 kids are a fully invested participant, solutions are more durable, and (over time) the kids -- 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 the Problem** step) involves entering into consideration the adult concern or perspective on the same unsolved problem. The third ingredient (called 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 has the CPS model been applied?
**Answer:** In countless families, schools, inpatient psychiatry units, group homes, residential facilities, and juvenile detention facilities, the CPS model has been shown to be an effective way to reduce conflict and teach kids the skills they need to function adaptively in the real world.

**Question:** Where can I learn more about Plan B and the CPS model?
**Answer:** The website of the non-profit **Lives in the Balance** website is a very good place to start. It has a ton of resources to help you learn about and apply the CPS model, including streaming video, audio programming, commentary, support, and lots more.
Founded in 2010 by Dr. Ross Greene, *Lives in the Balance* provides on-line resources and programming to help people better understand behaviorally challenging kids and implement the *Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS)* approach. Our mission is to advocate on behalf of kids with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges, and to support the parents, teachers, and others who are trying to help them.

*Lives in the Balance* needs your help! **Here’s what you can do right now!**

**LEARN**
Explore video programming explaining and demonstrating the CPS model

**SHARE**
Tell us about your efforts to help a challenging child or student and (perhaps) how the CPS model has had an impact

**CONNECT**
Be part of the discussion: ask questions, tune-in to radio broadcasts, find support

**COLLABORATE**
Take action on behalf of challenging kids and their parents, teachers, and other caregivers

**SIGN UP** for Action Plan B
the *Lives in the Balance* Call to Action

**NOW WHAT?**
Start Taking Action!

**VISIT** [WWW.LIVESINTHEBALANCE.ORG](http://WWW.LIVESINTHEBALANCE.ORG)