


**Parenting, Teaching and Treating Challenging Kids:
The Collaborative Problem Solving Approach**

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Kids do well if they can...

*...if they can't,
something is getting in the way.
We need to figure out what
so we can help.*

**Your understanding of a problem
determines your solution ...**

Conventional Wisdom

The most common over-simplified understanding:

Because of poor (passive, permissive, inconsistent) parenting, kids learn to use challenging behavior to get things (e.g., attention) or escape / avoid things (e.g., work).

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Logical Solution

The most common over-simplified solution:

Motivate compliant behavior through intensive, consistent programs of rewards, punishments and ignoring.

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Limits of Operant Strategies

What Operant Strategies Can Do:

- teach basic lessons / information
- facilitate extrinsic motivation

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Limits of Operant Strategies

What Operant Strategies Can Do:

- teach basic lessons / information
- facilitate extrinsic motivation

What Operant Strategies Can't Do:

- help kids stay regulated (they activate the stress response)
- facilitate intrinsic motivation (they actually demotivate kids)

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Unconventional Wisdom: It's a Learning Disability

- Challenging kids lack *skill* not will!
- Research in neurosciences: these kids are delayed in the development of crucial thinking skills - in areas like flexibility/adaptability, frustration tolerance, and problem-solving -- or have significant difficulty applying these skills when they are most needed

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Logical Intervention

Treat challenging behavior like you would any other learning disability:

- Assess which skills are lagging
- Use a different approach to teach those skills in increments the kid can handle

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Definition of Challenging Behavior

- Lagging skills alone do not cause challenging behavior
- Rather, challenging behavior -- including explosions, implosions and everything else in between -- occurs when someone is presented with a situation they lack the skills to handle well
- It takes two to tango: the pairing of a *skills deficit* and a *problem* that those skills would be required to solve

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Logical Intervention

- Identify the specific *skills deficits* contributing to the challenging behavior and practice those skills together with the child
- Identify the *problems you want to solve* that precipitate the challenging behavior and work together to solve them

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Approach Ingredients

1. Assessment: identify the specific *problems to be solved* and *lagging thinking skills* precipitating the challenging behavior
2. Planning: Know your options for responding to these problems and what each option accomplishes
3. Intervention: Solve problems while building skills, confidence and relationships

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Assessment

Goal of assessment is to create two lists:

- Problems to be solved / unmet expectations (over what is the child challenging?)**
 - The more specific the problem to be solved, the easier it will be to:
 - Help figure out which lagging skills explain the problem
 - Start a problem solving discussion
- Skills to be trained (why is the child challenging?)**
 - Don't obsess. Just hypothesize for now to promote a more compassionate view and a collaborative alliance

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Assessment

Behavior
↓
Problems to be Solved /
Unmet Expectations
↓
Skills to be Developed

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Assessing Thinking Skills

The Thinking Skills Inventory

- Provides a list of cognitive skills - some of which may be strengths but many of which are frequently found lagging in children with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges
- Meant to be used as a discussion guide for achieving a consensus
- Don't obsess! In the beginning you are just hypothesizing

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Research on Skills Deficits

Challenging behavior is linked with deficits in the following areas of thinking skill:

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

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Why the Emphasis on Skills?

Focusing on the lagging skills helps adults get on the same page to:

- understand maladaptive behavior is a form of learning disability and not intentional, goal-oriented, manipulative, or attention-seeking
- identify specific skills that need to be trained
- understand why incentive programs haven't made things better - and won't
- understand why they need a different approach
- steer clear of dead-end explanations

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Can't vs. Won't

- It is always safer to assume the problem is a result of lack of skill rather than lack of will
- The mindset of CPS helps adults stay regulated themselves

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Goals of Intervention

1. Pursue high priority expectations
2. Reduce challenging behavior
3. Solve chronic problems so they don't keep coming up
4. Build skills, confidence (ie, *intrinsic* motivation) and regulation
5. Create (or restore) a helping relationship

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Three Plans

(Your Options for responding to Problems/Unmet Expectations)

Plan A: Impose adult will

Plan B: Solve the problem collaboratively

Plan C: Drop it (for now, at least)


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Three Plans

Plan A: Impose adult will

- What goals ARE being pursued:
 - *Pursuing expectations*
- What goals are NOT being pursued:
 - *Reducing challenging behavior*
 - *Solving problems so they don't keep coming up*
 - *Building skills, confidence, attunement*
 - *Creating (or restore) a helping relationship*



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Three Plans

Plan C: Drop it (for now, at least)
Being strategic – not *giving in*

- What goals ARE being pursued:
 - *Reducing challenging behavior*
- What goals are NOT being pursued:
 - *Pursuing expectations*
 - *Solving problems so they don't keep coming up*
 - *Building skills, confidence, attunement*
 - *Creating (or restore) a helping relationship*

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Three Plans

Plan B: Work towards solving the problem in a mutually satisfactory and realistic manner

- What goals ARE being pursued:
 - *Pursuing expectations*
 - *Reducing challenging behavior*
 - *Solving problems so they don't keep coming up*
 - *Building skills, confidence, attunement*
 - *Creating (or restore) a helping relationship*

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Goals Achieved by the Three Plans

GOALS	PLAN A	PLAN C	PLAN B
Try to get your expectation met	X		X
Reduce challenging behavior		X	X
Build skills, confidence, attunement			X
Solve problems			X
Build relationship			X

Clearing up Misconceptions

- The Plans aren't needed unless you have an *unmet* expectation
- Setting an expectation is not the same as imposing your will when your expectation isn't met
- Plan B is not "picking your battles" or the average of Plans A and C
- Plan B is not a "technique"
- Plan B takes much less time than Plan A

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Important Reminder:

"Any problem/unmet expectation that can be handled using Plan A can also be handled using Plan B."

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What about safety issues?

The more severe or unsafe the behavior, the more important it is to solve the problem or work on the skills deficit causing the behavior in the first place.

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Prioritizing Problems to be Solved

Once you have identified the problems you want to solve, you will need to prioritize which you want to work on first

- If you have a strong alliance with the child, you can work on:
 - *The problems contributing to the most frequent or challenging behavior*
- If you don't have a strong alliance yet, you might need to start with:
 - *The problems most conducive to successful resolution*
 - *Or the problems the child is most invested in resolving*

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Prioritizing

After you decide which problems you want to work on first using Plan B, you will need to decide what Plan you will use for the other problems in the meantime

You only have two other options: Plan A or Plan C

- Neither Plan A nor Plan C will solve the problem, build skills or a helping relationship
- What's more important to you in the meantime: Pursuing your expectation (Plan A) or keeping the kid calm (Plan C)?

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Approach Ingredients

1. **Assessment:** identify the specific *problems to be solved* and *lagging thinking skills* precipitating the challenging behavior
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Reminder!

Challenging behaviors are highly predictable.

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Plan B Timing

EMERGENCY B

Takes place in the midst of challenging behavior occurring (yet again): crisis management/de-escalation

PROACTIVE B

Takes place well before challenging behavior recurs: (crisis prevention)

A prepared adult and a calm child are more likely to understand and solve problems

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Plan B Ingredients

1. **EMPATHY:** Clarify child concern
2. **SHARE** adult concern
3. **COLLABORATE:** Brainstorm, assess and choose solution

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“If I had an hour to solve a problem, I’d spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and 5 minutes thinking about solutions.”

— Albert Einstein

Plan B Ingredients

1. **EMPATHY:** Clarify child concern
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Empathy: Clarify Child Concern

- **THE GOAL:** gather information to understand the kid's *specific concern or perspective* about the problem or issue
- **THE SCRIPT:** start with a *neutral* observation ("I've noticed that..." "It seems like..." or "It looks as if...") followed by an inquiry ("What's up?")
- **THE TOOLS:** Empathic detective work to clarify concerns requires probing and drilling down using a combination of 4 tools:
 - clarifying questions
 - educated guessing
 - reflective listening*
 - reassurance*

* calming tools



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Ingredient #1

Empathy: Clarify Child Concern

How do you know when you are READY TO MOVE ON?

- Do you have a clear understanding of the child's concern or perspective?
- Can you envision some possible alternative solutions?
- Have you learned something new?
- Is the child calm and accessible (regulated)?

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Plan B Ingredients

1. **EMPATHY: Clarify child concern**
2. **SHARE adult concern**
3. **COLLABORATE: Brainstorm, assess and choose solution**

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Share Adult Concern

- **THE GOAL:** to make sure the adult's *concern / perspective* is on the table
- **THE SCRIPT:** express your concern by saying something like: "And the thing is" or "and my concern is" or "and what's important to me is"
- **THE TOOLS:** clarify your concerns / perspective *before* initiating the conversation. Are you concerned about someone's:
 - Health?
 - Safety?
 - Learning?
 - Impact of behavior on others?

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Share Adult Concern

How do you know when you are READY TO MOVE ON?

- You have *two* sets of concerns / perspectives on table
- Two sets of *solutions* = a power struggle ("dueling solutions")

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Plan B Ingredients

1. **EMPATHY: Clarify child concern**
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3. **COLLABORATE: Brainstorm, assess and choose solution**

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Collaborate: Brainstorm, Assess, Choose

- **THE GOAL:** to *brainstorm* solutions together so as to address both concerns, assess them and choose one
- **THE SCRIPT:** recap the concerns so as to summarize the problem to be solved: *"I wonder if there's a way that"* or *"I bet we can think of something so that ... (insert both concerns). Do you have any ideas?"*
- **THE TOOLS:** Any idea is a good idea! *"Let's think it through together."*
 - Does it work for you?
 - Does it work for me/us?
 - Is it doable?
 - If we do it, will it bring up any additional concerns?

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Collaborate: Brainstorm, Assess, Choose

How do you know when you are READY TO MOVE ON?

- When you have a mutually satisfactory and realistic solution
- And a follow-up plan to enact the solution and revisit the problem if the solution doesn't work

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This is Hard!

- Early on, Plan B will feel like slogging through mud (its awkward to the child too!)
- Over time, a Plan B "rhythm" or *PATTERN* should develop
- You don't have to finish all 3 ingredients in one discussion
- The first solution seldom solves the problem durably
- Difficult problems require revisiting which isn't a bad thing (creates a patterned activity)

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Skills Training

When the going gets tough in Plan B, the tough *keep* going!

Tough B is a learning opportunity for the kid and the adults:

- Lagging skills become clear
- The kid gets crucial practice at those skills
- And so do the adults!

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Skills Taught while Problems Solving

- **Collaborative Problem Solving is skills training!**
- **Skills are taught most effectively through experiential learning and a relational process:**
 1. *The Empathy step* trains identifying, clarifying and expressing concerns, separating affect
 2. *Sharing adult concern* trains taking another's perspective, recognizing impact on others and how one comes across, empathy
 3. *The Collaboration step* trains generation of solutions, anticipating and considering likely outcomes, moving off of original idea
- **The entire process naturally trains organized, reflective, flexible thinking and problem solving**

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Advantages of Experiential, Relational (vs. Didactic) Skills Training

- Doesn't require child's agreement that they lack certain skills or that they want you to be the one to train them!
- Doesn't require transfer of skills to "real world"
- Practices multiple skills at the same time
- Automatically focuses on the skills that need the most work
- Occurs in a *relational* context

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Adult Skills Training

The bad news: we adults have lagging skills too!

The good news: our attempts at Plan B reveal what skills we lack *and* every time we try Plan B we are naturally practicing our skills too

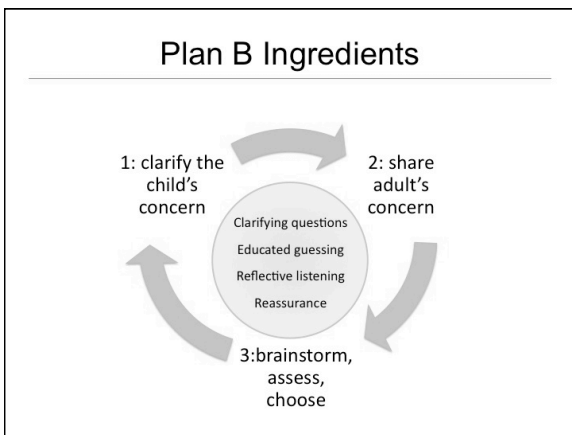
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The Relational Process

More bad news: Plan B isn't magical and requires many repetitions!

More good news: those repetitions are how new neural networks in the brain are developed

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The Artistry of Plan B

Providing **just enough** assistance with the parts of the process that the child struggles with

- Do too much and the child won't get a chance to practice the skill
- Do too little and the child won't stay regulated enough to practice

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CPS and Systems of Care

CPS is one of the few approaches that provides a common philosophy, language and process that can be used across settings and has shown effectiveness in:

- Correctional facilities
- Inpatient psychiatry units
- Residential treatment programs and group homes
- Day treatment programs
- Therapeutic, special and regular education classrooms and schools
- Homes

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CPS and Best Practices

CPS provides "one-stop shopping" for all the buzz words:

- CPS is an evidence-based, trauma-informed, strength-based, neuro-biologically grounded model that empowers youth and family voice

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Implementation in Systems

Effective implementation of an EBP requires changing behavior of staff and climate, culture and structures of the organization.

That's all!

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Implementation in Systems

Shifting the culture of a program and implementing a highly individualized model of care puts a system under a microscope:

- Communication Structures
- Leadership
- Existing models of intervention (combining models and avoiding overload or "flavor of the year")
- Roles
- Goals (is a quiet shift / class a good shift / class?)
- Teamwork
- Programming / Schedule
- Policies and Procedures
- Physical space
- Treatment Planning / Documentation
- Discharge and Aftercare

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Implementing in Systems: Lessons Learned

- It's a process not an event or outcome
- Takes time (3-5 years!), patience and relentless persistence
- Good advice when hiking: "don't mistake a clear view for a short distance!"
- Involves some discomfort
- Requires commitment and good leadership

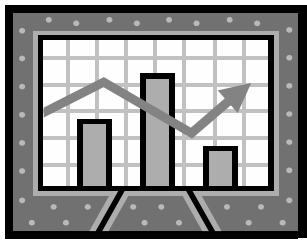
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Implementation in Systems

You can't use Plan A to get your colleagues to do Plan B!

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RESEARCH FINDINGS



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Research Summary

One-stop shopping for all known **published** and **unpublished** studies of child and caregiver outcomes:

Inpatient:	Outpatient:	Residential:	Juv. Detention:	Schools:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↓ number and duration of restrictive interventions (includes restraints, short holds, and seclusions) ↓ staff turnover 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↓ disruptive behaviors (e.g., symptoms of ODD and ADHD) ↓ parent stress ↑ parent-child relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↓ restrictive interventions ↓ aggression ↑ social skills and community participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↓ restrictive interventions ↓ staff injuries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↓ teacher stress ↓ discipline referral ↓ restrictive interventions

Pollastri, Epstein, Heath, & Ablon (2013), Harvard Review of Psychiatry Available at www.thinkkids.org

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When adults rethink challenging kids, amazing things can happen.



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- About the Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) approach
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- Trainings
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- Certified Providers and Systems
- Support Groups
- Resources for Parents: Books, Videos, Music
- How You Can Help You can Help

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