Collaborative Problem Solving and More: 
*Solutions for Peace at Home*

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Collaborative Problem Solving materials from Think:Kids at Massachusetts General Hospital Department of Psychiatry, [www.thinkkids.org](http://www.thinkkids.org)
Disclaimer

I am a Think:Kids’ Certified Trainer in the Collaborative Problem Solving® approach and have been approved by Think:Kids to use these materials.

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PARENT

- Perfect
- Disciplinarian
- Paragon
- Long-Suffering
- Accomplished
- Admirable
- Efficient
- Totally Organized
- Respected
PARENT

- Encouraging
- Understanding
- Empathetic
- Kind
- Flexible
- Trustworthy
- Tactful
- Thoughtful
- Loving
Our story
Conventional wisdom about kids with challenging behavior...

Kids do well if they want to
Your Understanding of Behavior Determines Your Solution
Conventional Wisdom says that Children Use Behavior

To get things  To avoid things
Logical Solution

Set up system of
*Rewards and Punishment*

(Operant system or Applied Behavior Analysis)
DO:
- Teach basic lessons
- Provide external motivation

DON’T:
- Teach complex thinking skills
- Build relationships
- Help kids stay regulated
Side Effects:

- Decreasing internal motivation
- Not worth trying
- Increases fixed mindset
Kids Do Well If They Can™

When this becomes our guiding philosophy, we are able to begin to TEACH and SUPPORT students, rather than simply try to MOTIVATE them.

- J. Stuart Ablon
What Fosters Intrinsic Motivation? (Self-Determination Theory)

Meeting Three Basic Human Needs

- **Competence**: Humans need to deal effectively with their environment.
- **Autonomy**: Humans need to control the course of their lives.
- **Relatedness**: Humans need to have close, affectionate relationships with others.
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.
Phases of Collaborative Problem Solving Approach

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
Assessment

Goal of assessment is to create 3 lists:

1. Challenging behaviors
   - The behavior you want to change

2. Problems to be solved
   - The situations in which the child is challenging

3. Lagging skills
   - Reasons why the child is challenging
Equation of Challenging Behavior

Skills \geq \text{Problem} = \text{Adaptive Behavior}

\text{Skills} < \text{Problem} = \text{Challenging Behavior}
Research on Skills Deficits

- Language & Communication
- Attention & Working Memory
- Emotion & Self-Regulation
- Cognitive Flexibility
- Social Thinking
Good News: New Neural Connections
Some Unsolved Problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Homework</th>
<th>Bedtime</th>
<th>Errands</th>
<th>Company</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dinner</td>
<td>Outings</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>Friends</td>
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<tr>
<td>Games</td>
<td>T.V.</td>
<td>Hunger</td>
<td>Boredom</td>
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<td>Chores</td>
<td>Bathing</td>
<td>Hygiene</td>
<td>Conversation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Noises</td>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td>Clothing</td>
<td>Computer</td>
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Phases of Approach

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
Expectations

• It is always important to establish structure and clear and realistic expectations!

• CPS does NOT mean anything goes!

Expectations consistently met \(\rightarrow\) No problem

Expectations not consistently met \(\rightarrow\) Problem

When you have a problem, the first step is knowing what your options are and what each option accomplishes (or doesn’t!)
Goals of Intervention

1. Pursue high priority expectations
2. Reduce challenging behavior
3. Solve chronic problems durably
4. Build skills, confidence (i.e., *intrinsic* motivation)
5. Create (or restore) a helping relationship
Three Plans

*(Your Options for responding to Triggers/Unmet Expectations)*

**Plan A:** Impose adult will

**Plan B:** Solve the problem collaboratively

**Plan C:** Drop it (for now, at least)
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 durably*
  - *Building skills, confidence*
  - *Creating (or restore) a helping relationship*
Plan C: Drop it (for now, at least)

Being strategic – not giving in

• What goals ARE being pursued:
  o Reducing challenging behavior

• What goals are NOT being pursued:
  o Pursuing expectations
  o Solving problems durably
  o Building skills, confidence
  o Creating (or restore) a helping relationship
Three Plans

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

• What goals ARE being pursued:
  o Pursuing expectations
  o Reducing challenging behavior
  o Solving problems durably
  o Building skills, confidence
  o Creating (or restore) a helping relationship
## Goals Achieved by the Three Plans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GOALS</th>
<th>PLAN A</th>
<th>PLAN C</th>
<th>PLAN B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Try to get your expectation met</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce challenging behavior</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build skills, confidence</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solve problems</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build relationship</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>✔</td>
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</table>
The Biggest Misconception

- CPS does NOT mean anything goes!
- Structure and clear expectations are always important
- Asking a child to do something (clearly and even emphatically) is NOT Plan A!
- Asking a child to do something is simply setting an expectation - which is not the same as trying to impose your will (Plan A) when someone doesn’t meet your expectations
- The Plans are not needed until you have an UNMET expectation
Important Reminder:

• Any problem that can be handled using Plan A can also be handled using Plan B.
• However, is there a time when you must use Plan A despite the downsides? Of course! But ...
What about safety issues?

The more severe or unsafe the behavior, the more important it is to solve the problem and build the skills causing the behavior in the first place.
Phases of Approach

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
Reminder!

Challenging behaviors are highly predictable.
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

**EMERGENT B**
No emergency, unpredicted situation, responding to mild pushback regarding expectation
Plan B Ingredients

1. **EMPATHIZE**: Clarify child concern
2. **SHARE** adult concern
3. **COLLABORATE**: Brainstorm, assess and choose solution
“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. **EMPATHIZE**: Clarify child concern
2. **SHARE** adult concern
3. **COLLABORATE**: Brainstorm, assess and choose solution
Empathize: Clarify Child Concern

THE GOAL: Gather information to understand the kid’s **specific concern or perspective** about the trigger or expectation.
Empathize: Clarify Child Concern

THE SCRIPT: Start with a *neutral* observation like ...

- “I’ve noticed that...”
- “It seems like...”
- “It looks as if...”

Followed by an inquiry:

- “What’s up?”
Empathize: Clarify Child Concern

TIPS for starting off on the right foot:

**DO:**
- State the *trigger or expectation*
- Stick with the facts or externalize the problem

**DO NOT:**
- Start with the challenging behavior
- Blame or assume

*But its not all about the words: body language, tone, etc. matter!*
Empathize: Clarify Child Concern

**THE TOOLS**: Detective work to clarify concerns requires probing and drilling down using a combination of 4 tools:

- clarifying questions
- educated guessing
- reflective listening*
- reassurance*

**THE FEELING**: EMPATHIC, patient, open-minded listening
Empathize: 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?
- Have you learned something new?
- Are you wanting to suggest a solution?
- Is the child calm (regulated) and accessible (because the next ingredient isn’t calming)?
Plan B Ingredients

1. **EMPATHIZE**: Clarify child concern
2. **SHARE** adult concern
3. **COLLABORATE**: Brainstorm, assess and choose solution
THE GOAL: to make sure the adult’s concern/perspective is on the table
Share Adult Concern

**THE SCRIPT:** Express your concern by saying something like:

- “*And the thing is*”
- “*And my concern is*”
- “*And what’s important to me is*”

**Not:** “I hear you but …”
Share Adult Concern

*TIP: Sharing the adult concern is not calming!*

So what do you do if child escalates or shuts down?

- Go back to Empathy and reassure them you haven’t forgotten about their concern!

And what do you do if child “doesn’t care” about the adult concern?

- They don’t have to! They just need to take it into consideration
Share Adult Concern

How do you know when you are

READY TO MOVE ON?

• Do you have two sets of concerns / perspectives on table? (not two sets of solutions = a power struggle (“dueling solutions”))
• Is child still calm and accessible (regulated)? If not, re-empathize!
Plan B Ingredients

1. EMPATHIZE: Clarify child concern
2. SHARE adult concern
3. COLLABORATE: Brainstorm, assess and choose solution
Collaborate: Brainstorm, Assess, Choose

THE GOAL: to brainstorm solutions together so as to address both concerns, assess them and choose one to try
Collaborate: Brainstorm, Assess, Choose

THE SCRIPT: Recap the concerns to summarize the problem to be solved:

• “I wonder if there’s a way that (insert both concerns)” or “I bet we can think of something so that (insert both concerns)”

Then bite your tongue and ask:

• “Do you have any ideas?” (WAIT first but its ok to suggest some if the child can’t)

Any idea is a good idea!

• “That’s an idea. Let’s think it through together.”
Collaborate: Brainstorm, Assess, Choose

**THE TOOLS:** *Think* it through together with these questions:

- Does it work for you?
- Does it work for me/us?
- Is it doable / realistic (*think* skills!)?
- If we do it, will it bring up any additional concerns?
- When can we talk again to see how it worked?
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
This is Hard!

• Early on, Plan B will feel like slogging through mud (it’s awkward to the child too!)
• Over time, a Plan B “rhythm” 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 (it’s not a deal you’re making!!)
Skills Taught while Problem Solving

- Collaborative Problem Solving is skills training!
- Skills are modeled, practiced and developed through experiential learning and a *relational* process
- The entire process naturally trains organized, reflective, flexible thinking and problem solving
- And fosters hope and optimism in the child that they can do better (growth mindset)
Plan B Skills Taught

1. EMPATHIZE: Clarify child concern
   Identifying, clarifying and expressing concerns, regulating emotions

2. SHARE adult concern
   Perspective-taking, recognizing impact on others, empathy

3. COLLABORATE: Brainstorm, assess and choose solution
   Generating solutions, reflecting on multiple thoughts, considering outcomes, moving off original idea
The Relational Process

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

More good news: those repetitions, conducted in a relational context, are how skills are built and new neural networks in the brain are developed.
Plan B Ingredients

1: clarify the child’s concern
2: share adult’s concern
3: brainstorm, assess, choose

Clarifying questions
Educated guessing
Reflective listening
Reassurance
Additional Communication Tools
During a meltdown

• Stay calm – your child can rely on your strength
• Speak quietly or just hold your child
• Be supportive and understanding
• Get down on your child’s level
• Use empathy: “you’re upset” “I can see you’re angry about...” “it’s really hard for you when...”
• Use reassurance: “We will work it out” “I’m on your side” “I love you”
Use Positive Phrasing

Instead of:
“Don’t run into the street!”

you can say....
Use Declarative Language

“I notice your friend wants a turn”
“I love pizza!”
“I think it might rain.”
“Last time this happened, we…”
I see socks on the floor...

Declarative Language is Experience Sharing!
Use to: share an opinion, make a prediction,
announce/celebrate, observe, reflect on past experience, problem solve
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Oppositional</th>
<th>Manipulative</th>
<th>Rude</th>
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<td>Rebellious</td>
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<td>Slow</td>
<td>Enraged</td>
<td>Irritable</td>
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<tr>
<td>High-Strung</td>
<td>Provocative</td>
<td>Grumpy</td>
<td>Stubborn</td>
<td>Spiteful</td>
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## Words We Use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sensitive</th>
<th>Careful</th>
<th>Methodical</th>
<th>Independent</th>
<th>Forthright</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eager</td>
<td>Enthusiastic</td>
<td>Observant</td>
<td>Vibrant</td>
<td>Individualistic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outgoing</td>
<td>Lively</td>
<td>Sincere</td>
<td>Persevering</td>
<td>Strong</td>
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<tr>
<td>Laid-Back</td>
<td>Passionate</td>
<td>Eager</td>
<td>Likable</td>
<td>Assertive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressive</td>
<td>Earnest</td>
<td>Patient</td>
<td>Determined</td>
<td>Irrepressible</td>
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Final Thoughts?
Further Resources

Changeable

The School Discipline Fix

Positive Discipline

How to Talk So Kids Will Listen

Declarative Language:
Resources

Collaborative Problem Solving materials, training, and more:
www.thinkkids.org

Positive Discipline, including online classes
www.positivediscipline.com/