

Wisconsin Public Psychiatry Network Teleconference
(WPPNT)

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**Treating Challenging Kids:
The Collaborative Problem
Solving Approach**

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RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS



DISCLAIMER:

I am a Think:Kids certified trainer using this material in collaboration with Think:Kids. These slides were developed by Think:Kids and are the property of Massachusetts General Hospital.



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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.*

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).

Most common over-simplified solution: Motivate compliant behavior through intensive, consistent program of rewards, punishment, and ignoring.

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Limits of Operant Strategies

Can facilitate teaching/learning of basic lessons: right from wrong. But ...

- It is highly likely that the child already knows the basic lessons (don't hit, don't swear, don't explode), and is already aware of the consequences for these behaviors
- Incentives and consequences can teach basic lessons but were never intended to help kids develop complicated *skills*

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Limits of Operant Strategies

Can facilitate *extrinsic* motivation (to perform behaviors one is already capable of consistently performing). But ...

- If a child does not yet have the skills to behave adaptively, adding incentives is unlikely to accomplish the mission
- Motivational programs make the possible more possible, but they don't make the impossible possible
- Motivational programs have side-effects:
 - The more extrinsic motivation is applied, the less intrinsic motivation the child develops
 - The more you motivate someone to do something, the more you teach them that they aren't trying hard enough
- **It is highly likely that the child is *already* motivated (not to be miserable)**
- What does motivate people *intrinsically*?
 - a sense of mastery, autonomy and purpose

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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
- Logical Intervention: Treat challenging behavior like you would a learning disability.

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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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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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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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What's the Difference?

	Problems	Skills
What are they?	Antecedents, precipitants, triggers, unmet expectations	The culprits causing the problems
How do you assess them?	Situational analysis: who, what, when, and where (the more specific the better)	Hypothesizing using the Thinking Skills Inventory (the why)
Why create these lists?	Starting point for collaborative problem solving	Fosters understanding and compassion (the shift in thinking)

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Expectations

Establishing (teaching) clear and realistic expectations is always important

- It is hard for a child to meet an expectation that they aren't aware of!

If your expectations are being met, you're happy!

If your expectations *aren't* being met, you've got a problem and you need a plan

- First step is knowing what your options are and what each option accomplishes

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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

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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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1. Empathy: Clarify Child Concern

THE GOAL: Gather information to understand the kid's *specific concern or perspective* about the problem or issue



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Empathy: 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?*”

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Empathy: 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

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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?

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2. Share Adult Concern

THE GOAL: to make sure the *adult's concern*
/ perspective is on the table



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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”*

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Share Adult Concern

THE TOOLS: clarify your concerns / perspective *before* initiating the conversation. What specifically are you concerned about:

- **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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3. Collaborate: Brainstorm, Assess, Choose

THE GOAL: to *brainstorm* solutions together so as to address both concerns, assess them and choose one to try

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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?”*

Any idea is a good idea!

- *“That’s an idea. Let’s think it through together.”*

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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?
- If we do it, will it bring up any additional concerns?
- When can we talk again to see how it worked?

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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 Taught while Problem Solving

- Collaborative Problem Solving is skills training!
- Skills are taught most effectively through a natural and *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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Active Ingredients

Challenging behavior is reduced by:

- Setting clear and realistic expectations
- Understanding why expectations aren't being met (lagging skills)/promoting more compassionate views and interactions
- Decreasing use of Plan A
- Increasing use of Plan C
- Using Plan B to solve problems and build skills and relationship



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The Power of the Relational Process

- Did Plan B work? While solving a problem using Plan B is an important goal, it is not the *only* goal
- The other goals (building skills, confidence and a helping relationship) are achieved by the *relational process* not the outcome
- Before the problem gets solved, the Plan B process helps pursue expectations and reduces challenging behavior while building a helping relationship and assessing and practicing all kinds of problem solving skills together
- *There's no such thing as failed B!*

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CPS is Trauma Informed Care

(Perry and Ablon, 2012)

CPS:

- avoids use of power and control (Plan A) which is re-traumatizing and does developmental damage
- reduces power differential which causes arousal, dysregulation and/or dissociation
- helps children confront triggering situations safely to detoxify them slowly over time
- gives child control without sole responsibility for process

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A Helping Relationship

- Regardless of therapeutic modality, the best predictor of success in helping people change is the *relationship* between helper and helpee
- Helping is messy and takes time
- Helping is a *working alliance*, a two-way *collaborative process*, a two-person *team effort*
- Helping is not something you do *to* kids; rather, it is a process that adults and kids work through *together*

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Additional resources

- Think:Kids – www.think:kids.org
- Greene, R.W., & Ablon, J.S. [Treating explosive kids: The collaborative problem-solving approach](#). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Jeffrey D. Krukar, Ph.D., Licensed psychologist, jeffrey.krukar@geneseelakeschool.com

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