

A more compassionate, productive, effective, approach to understanding and helping behaviorally challenged kids.

Dr. Ross Greene is the originator of the research-based approach-- now called Collaborative & Proactive Solutions (CPS)-- to understanding and helping behaviorally challenging kids, as described in his books *The Explosive Child* and *Lost at School*. The CPS model has been implemented in countless families, schools, inpatient psychiatry units, therapeutic group 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 preferable to not doing well*. 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, referred to as *unsolved problems...* and to help kids solve those problems. Because unsolved problems 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 nonprofit Dr. Greene founded to help disseminate his approach (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, 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 the goal is to 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 (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 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. 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!



HINTS & TIPS FOR USING THE ALSUP

- The **Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems (ALSUP)** is best used as a discussion guide rather than as a freestanding checklist or rating scale.
- Meetings should be focused almost totally on identifying lagging skills and unsolved problems. It is not the goal of the meeting to try to explain why a child has a particular lagging skill or unsolved problem, so hypotheses and theories about cause are to be avoided. It is also counterproductive to have participants go into great detail about the behaviors that a child exhibits in response to a given unsolved problem, so story telling is to be avoided as well.
- 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.
- An unsolved problem is an expectation a child is having difficulty meeting.
- To identify unsolved problems, begin with the stem, "Can you give some examples of times when (name of child) is having difficulty..." and then restate the endorsed lagging skill.
EXAMPLE: *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.

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING UNSOLVED PROBLEMS

- They usually begin with the word Difficulty.
EXAMPLE: *Difficulty taking out the trash on Thursday mornings*
- They should contain no reference to the child's challenging behaviors, though reference to expected behaviors is fine.
EXAMPLE: *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.*
- They should contain no adult theories.
EXAMPLE: *You wouldn't write Difficulty writing the definitions of the spelling words in English... because his parents were recently divorced.*
- They should be split, not clumped.
EXAMPLE: *You wouldn't write Difficulty getting along with others, but rather, Difficulty agreeing with Chad on the rules of the four-square game during recess.*
- They should be specific. Here are two strategies that help:
 - ♦ Include details related to who, what, where, and when.
 - ♦ Ask *What expectation is the child/student having difficulty meeting?*





CHILD'S NAME _____ DATE _____

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

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 EXAMPLES

- Difficulty getting out of bed in the morning in time to get to school
- Difficulty getting started on or completing homework (specify assignment)
- Difficulty ending the video game to get ready for bed at night
- Difficulty coming indoors for dinner when playing outside
- Difficulty agreeing with brother about what TV show to watch after school
- Difficulty with the feelings of seams in socks
- Difficulty brushing teeth before bedtime

SCHOOL EXAMPLES

- 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



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 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 **mirroring 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 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 expressed 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 Adult Concerns 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 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





① 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 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?"

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 perception
- Talk about solutions yet

② DEFINE THE PROBLEM STEP | INGREDIENT/GOAL

Enter the concern of the second party (often the adult) into consideration.

WORDS | Initial Inquiry (neutral observation)

"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

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

③ INVITATION STEP | INGREDIENT/GOAL

Generate 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 | Initial Inquiry (neutral observation)

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

- Rush through this step either
- Enter this step with preordained 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



CHILD'S NAME _____ DATE _____

UNSOLVED PROBLEM #1	UNSOLVED PROBLEM #2	UNSOLVED PROBLEM #3
Adult taking the lead on Plan B:	Adult taking the lead on Plan B:	Adult taking the lead on Plan B:
Kid concerns identified: (Empathy step) DATE _____	Kid concerns identified: (Empathy step) DATE _____	Kid concerns identified: (Empathy step) DATE _____
Adult concerns identified: (Define the Problem step) DATE _____	Adult concerns identified: (Define the Problem step) DATE _____	Adult concerns identified: (Define the Problem step) DATE _____
Solution agreed upon: (Invitation step) DATE _____	Solution agreed upon: (Invitation step) DATE _____	Solution agreed upon: (Invitation step) DATE _____
Problem Solved? YES? ____ DATE _____ NO? ____ COMMENT:	Problem Solved? YES? ____ DATE _____ NO? ____ COMMENT:	Problem Solved? YES? ____ DATE _____ NO? ____ COMMENT:

