


## Collaborative & Proactive Solutions

THIS IS HOW PROBLEMS GET SOLVED

**Moving From Power and Control to Collaboration and Problem Solving**



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### SIX KEY THEMES

1. Emphasis is on **problems** (and solving them) rather than on behaviors (and modifying them)...**upstream** (not downstream)

- Challenging behavior is simply the **signal** by which a child **communicates** that he/she is having difficulty meeting certain **expectations**
- Behaviors are not the only observable, objective, quantifiable data...unsolved problems are too
- This will require different assessment practices

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### SIX KEY THEMES

2. The problem solving is **collaborative, not unilateral**

- Something you're doing with the kid rather than to him
- This will require changes to existing structures

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## SIX KEY THEMES

## 3. The problem solving is proactive, not reactive

- Unsolved problems are highly predictable, but only after we answer two questions:
  - Why are challenging kids challenging?
    - Answer: Because they're lacking the skills to not be challenging
  - When are challenging kids challenging?
    - Answer: When expectations outstrip skills
- Behaviors and diagnoses don't provide us with this information
  - There are "lucky" and "unlucky" ways of communicating that one is having difficulty meeting expectations
- This will require changes to existing structures are well

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## SIX KEY THEMES

## 4. Understanding comes before helping

- Not true:
  - He's pushing my buttons
  - He's yanking my chain
  - He could do it if he wanted to
  - He's going to have to hit rock bottom before he learns how to swim
- Things change dramatically when caregivers start to view a child's difficulties through the prism of lagging skills and unsolved problems
- Better still: challenging episodes become highly predictable, so intervention can be largely proactive

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## SIX KEY THEMES

## 5. Kids do well if they can

- If the kid could do well, he would do well
  - Not True:
    - Attention-seeking
    - Manipulative
    - Coercive
    - Unmotivated
    - Limit-testing

## 6. Doing well is preferable

- We've been focused on motivation when we should have been focused on skills

These themes lead to paradigm shifts

### A LITTLE MORE ON WHY:

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.

- Challenging kids aren't always challenging
- They're challenging in conditions in which certain skills are being demanded
- New lenses: if it's about lagging skills, then it's a developmental delay

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### WHAT SKILLS?

- ✓ Executive skills
- ✓ Language processing/communication skills
- ✓ Emotion regulation skills
- ✓ Cognitive flexibility skills
- ✓ Social skills

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### MORE SKILLS

Skills That Foster the Better Side of Human Nature

- Empathy
- Appreciating how one's behavior is affecting others
- Resolving disagreements without conflict
- Taking another's perspective
- Honesty

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## COMPASSIONATE COMMUNITIES

- Students are to be treated with respect, compassion, and empathy... everyone in the class is an important and valued member of a community of learners
- Everyone in a classroom community struggles at different times and it is our job to best support each other by working together to find solutions
- Challenging behavior does not come from a place of malice or harmful intent and is instead the means by which a child communicates that there are lagging skills and unsolved problems
- Interventions aimed at helping students should be non-punitive, non-adversarial, collaborative, proactive, and aimed at enhancing skills, communication, and relationships
- Working with kids to find collaborative solutions is more meaningful and productive than strategies involving power and control and is better preparation for adult life
- Kids and adults will disagree, and kids will have difficulty meeting expectations, but conflict does not have to be the end result
- School is a place where kids learn a range of skills, and it is important to teach and model empathy, conflict resolution, and respect for one another as well as academic skills.

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## A LITTLE MORE ON WHEN:

### The Clash of the Two Forces

"Incompatibility episodes" occur **when expectations outstrip skills**



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## ADULT ROLES IN THE LIVES OF BEHAVIORALLY CHALLENGING KIDS

- Identify lagging skills and unsolved problems
  - Changes lenses
  - Makes incompatibility episodes highly predictable and intervention proactive rather than reactive
- Solve problems collaboratively and proactively
  - Promotes a problem solving partnership
  - Engages kids in solving the problems that affect their lives
  - Produces more effective, durable solutions
  - Simultaneously teaches skills

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## ASSESSMENT OF LAGGING SKILLS AND UNSOLVED PROBLEMS (ALSUP)



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## ASSESSMENT OF LAGGING SKILLS AND UNSOLVED PROBLEMS (ALSUP)

- On the left side is a representative list of the skills frequently found lagging in challenging kids
- Unsolved problems are identified on the right side
- The ALSUP is meant to be used as a **discussion guide**...not simply a checklist or mechanism for quantifying
- 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)
- We're not trying to explain how the kid became challenging

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## USING THE ALSUP

- Participants receive a blank copy of the ALSUP
  - The kid is not present in the meeting
- Start at the top and work your way down in order...don't "cherry-pick" lagging skills
- After checking off a given lagging skill, identify the unsolved problems that spring to mind when thinking of that lagging skill
  - "Can you give me some examples of expectations Theresa is having difficulty meeting when you think of her having (repeat lagging skill)..."
- Come up with as many unsolved problems as possible for each endorsed lagging skill

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## USING THE ALSUP

### Guidelines for Wording Unsolved Problems

**A problem well stated is a problem half solved."**

—Charles Kettering

The wording of the unsolved problem on the ALSUP is going to translate into the words that are used when the unsolved problem is introduced to the child when it comes time to solve it together.

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## USING THE ALSUP

### Guidelines for Wording Unsolved Problems

- Free of challenging behaviors (**Difficulty...**)
- Free of adult theories (**no need to explain anything**)
- Split, not clumped
  - "Split early, maybe you can clump later...but if you clump early, you'll never find out"
- As specific as possible
  - STRATEGY #1: Who, What, Where/When...NOT why
  - STRATEGY #2: What expectation is the child having difficulty meeting?

Reminder: "Can you give me some examples of expectations Thomas is having difficulty meeting when you think of her having (repeat lagging skill)..."

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## USING THE ALSUP

### A Few More Guidelines

- Don't go down the entire list of lagging skills and then go back to identify unsolved problems
- Don't identify unsolved problems first and then go back to decide which lagging skills apply to that unsolved problem
- No need to write the same unsolved problem more than once
- No need to establish which lagging skill best explains a particular unsolved problem...just assume multiple lagging skills can contribute to the same unsolved problem
- Don't include the wording of the lagging skill in an unsolved problem (wording should be kid-friendly)
- You're not looking for "hundred percenters"
- A verb usually comes after the word "Difficulty"

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## USING THE ALSUP

Expect lightbulbs to go on when...

- Caregivers come to recognize that a kid is, indeed, lacking many skills
- Caregivers come to recognize why prior interventions have been ineffective
- Caregivers begin to regret the manner in which they've been interacting with a kid based on incorrect assumptions
- Caregivers become aware that unsolved problems occur under highly specific conditions
- Caregivers recognize that unsolved problems are predictable and can therefore be solved proactively

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## MORE UNSOLVED PROBLEMS

Ask the Kid

- "What are people getting on your case about?"
- "What are you getting in trouble for?"

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## NEXT GOAL

Prioritizing

- You can't work on everything at once
- Focus on the "big fish" first
  - SAFETY: Those unsolved problems contributing to unsafe behavior
  - FREQUENCY: Those unsolved problems contributing to incompatibility episodes most often
  - GRAVITY: Those unsolved problems having the greatest negative impact on the kid or others

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## THE PROBLEM SOLVING PLAN



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## KEEPING TRACK

### The Problem Solving Plan (Plan B Flowchart)

- Specify high-priority unsolved problems
- Designate person primarily responsible for solving the problem with the child
- Follow the remaining sequence to track the three steps involved in solving the problem collaboratively
- Add new unsolved problems as old ones are solved

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## OPTIONS FOR HANDLING UNSOLVED PROBLEMS

### PLAN A:

Solve the problem unilaterally

### PLAN B:

Solve the problem collaboratively

### PLAN C:

Set the problem aside for now

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**PLAN A**

Solve the problem unilaterally

- The adult decides what the solution is and imposes it, often accompanied by adult-imposed consequences
  - "I've decided that..."
- **PLAN A** causes incompatibility episodes in challenging kids
- **PLAN A** is not a partnership
- **PLAN A** does not involve kids in solving the problems that affect their lives
- **PLAN A** provides no information whatsoever about the factors making it difficult for the kid to meet a given expectations...solutions arrived at through Plan A are "uninformed"

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**PLAN C**

Set the problem aside for now

Not about giving in or capitulating... it's about prioritizing (and stabilizing)

- EMERGENCY C: "OK"
- PROACTIVE C:
  - don't bring it up
  - an agreed-upon interim plan for tabling the problem for now

Good parenting and good teaching mean  
being responsive to the hand you've been dealt

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**PLAN B**

Solve the problem collaboratively

1. Empathy Step  
(gather information so as to identify child's concerns)
2. Define Adult Concerns Step  
(identify adult concerns)
3. Invitation Step  
(collaborate on a solution that is realistic and mutually satisfactory)

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**PLAN B****The Empathy Step****GOAL:**

Gather information from the kid so as to understand his concern or perspective on a given unsolved problem

**INTRODUCTION:**

The Empathy step begins with the words "I've noticed that" followed by an unsolved problem and an initial inquiry ("What's up?")

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**PLAN B****The Empathy Step**

What happens after "What's up?"

- The kid says something
- The kid says nothing or "I don't know"
- The kid says, "I don't have a problem with that" or "I don't care"
- The kid says, "I don't want to talk about it"
- The kid responds defensively ("I don't have to talk to you!")

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**PLAN B****The Empathy Step: The Kid Says Something****DRILLING STRATEGIES:**

1. **Reflective listening** and **clarifying statements**
2. Asking about **the who, what, where/when** of the unsolved problem
3. Asking about why the problem occurs under some **conditions** and not others
4. Asking the kid what s/he's **thinking** in the midst of the unsolved problem
5. Breaking the problem down into its **component parts**
6. **Discrepant Observation**
7. **Tabling** (and asking for more concerns)
8. **Summarizing** (and asking for more concerns)

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## PLAN B

### The Empathy Step: The Kid Says Something (cont.)

#### ADDITIONAL POINTERS:

- You're not thinking about solutions yet (the Empathy step is a "Solution-Free Zone")
- Remember, "drilling" isn't "grilling"...it involves "listening," not "lessoning" or "lessening" (dismissing, trumping)
- Stay **neutral, non-defensive** throughout (suspend your emotional response...the Empathy step isn't about you)
- 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've summarized and asked for more and there is no more

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## PLAN B

### The Empathy Step: I Don't Know/Silence

#### WHAT TO DO:

- Don't freak
- Keep drilling

#### IF HE'S STILL NOT TALKING, FIGURE OUT WHY:

##### Adult Impediments

- You used Plan A
- You used Emergency Plan B instead of Proactive Plan B
- The Introduction wasn't specific, free of theories, free of maladaptive behaviors, split

##### Child Impediments

- He doesn't trust you and/or the process yet (he has a lot of experience with Plan A)
- He really doesn't know
- He's lost faith and doesn't see the point in talking anymore
- He needs time to think (adults better get comfortable with silence)
- He's having difficulty putting his thoughts into words
  - Educated guessing/hypothesis testing

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## PLAN B

### The Empathy Step: Other Responses to "What's Up?"

#### "I don't have a problem with that" or "I don't care"

- that's the beginning of his concern or perspective...start drilling!
- the kid almost certainly has a problem with all the conflict surrounding the unsolved problem

#### "I don't want to talk about it"

- first, assume he has a good reason
- next, give him permission not to talk
- see if he'll talk about why he doesn't want to talk about it
- 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 going to tell you what to do"
  - "You're not in trouble"
  - "I'm not mad at you"
  - "I'm just trying to understand"

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**PLAN B****The Define Adult Concerns Step****GOAL:**

Enter the adult's concern or perspective into consideration (possibly beginning with "The thing is..." or "My concern is...")

**WHAT'S HARD:**

Adults frequently don't know what their concerns are...adult concerns are not merely a repetition of the expectation

• 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)

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**PLAN B****The Invitation Step****GOAL:**

Collaborate on a solution that is realistic and mutually satisfactory

**WHAT'S HARD:**

• The Wording:

- 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)

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**PLAN B****The Invitation Step (cont.)**

- Goal is to demonstrate to the kid that you're as invested in getting his concern addressed as you are in getting your own concern addressed
- You don't know where the plane is landing before it takes off (no preordained solutions)
- If there are multiple concerns that cannot be addressed by the same solution, you'll need multiple solutions (and more than one Plan B)
- Before agreeing on a solution, give deliberate consideration to whether the solution is realistic and mutually satisfactory...if not, refine the original solution or think of alternatives
- 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 (don't use the word "when" in the invitation)
- Baiting over solutions define a power struggle (a win/lose proposition)...solving problems collaboratively is a win/win proposition

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## YOU'RE READY!

### ADDITIONAL POINTERS

- The Invitation ends with an agreement to return to Plan B if the first solution doesn't stand the test of time
- 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 as first thought
  - weren't as mutually satisfactory as thought
  - didn't address all the concerns (those that hadn't yet been identified or prioritized)

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## HOW ARE THE SKILLS TRAINED?

- Some skills can be trained explicitly (in the traditional sense)
  - some social skills
  - language processing/communication skills
- Skills are being taught in each of the three steps of Plan B

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## IMPLEMENTATION IN SCHOOLS AND FACILITIES

- Key Terms
  - Leaders Gotta Lead
  - Start Small/Build Capacity
- Formation of Core Group
  - Become proficient at the ALSUP and Plan B
  - Ensure that there are mentors to help others
  - Create new structures to support the model before full-scale implementation
    - time, schedule
    - paperwork
    - priorities
    - referral mechanisms
    - communication/follow-up/follow through
    - teacher evaluations

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### SOLVING PROBLEMS WITH KIDS WITH VERY LIMITED COMMUNICATION SKILLS

- Reference point is infants
  - Identifying unsolved problems (requires excellent observational skills)
  - Identifying concerns
  - Collaborating on solutions
- Important Questions:
  - Does the child need additional training on the basics?
    - The relationship between problems and solutions
    - Basic concepts of problems and concerns
  - How is the child communicating now? Can we build on existing means of communication?
    - How can we help the child communicate more easily (pictures) about the basic components of problem-solving (problems, concerns, solutions)?

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### FINAL QUESTIONS

- Why do the problems that affect kids lives so often cause conflict between us and them?
- Are the ways in which we're going about parenting, teaching, disciplining, and interacting with our kids teaching the skills on the better side of human nature?

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### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION/RESOURCES

livesinthebalance.org  
cpsconnection.com  
thebalance.com

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