

Collaborative Problem Solving

Overcoming Skills Deficits to Durably Prevent Problem Behavior

The Collaborative Problem Solving model was developed by Ross W. Greene and J. Stuart Ablon at Harvard University / MGH. Visit CCPS.org and read "Treating Explosive Kids: The Collaborative Problem Solving Approach" for more information on this innovative, empirically validated method.

The Model

- Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) is a radically different approach to managing problem behaviors in children. In contrast to the behavioral approach, which uses rewards and punishments to regulate the frequency of behaviors, CPS teaches skills in order to promote durable change in children's abilities to solve problems.
- The basic premise of CPS is that children have underdeveloped skills in executive functioning (making thoughtful decisions), language skills (such as labeling emotions), cognitive style (realistic appraisal of situations), social skills (such as empathy), and emotion regulation (such as appropriate expression of anger).
- According to the CPS model, when a child explodes or "loses it," that's evidence that the demands of the situation have exceeded his or her ability to manage conflicting expectations.
- One key goal of CPS is to teach children to be flexible, to tolerate frustration, and ultimately to solve problems on their own.

Plans

- When expectations conflict (e.g., child wants to throw rocks in the lake, but you don't want anyone to throw rocks), adults have three options:
- Plan A: Impose Adult Will (Solves problem)
- Plan B: Collaborative Problem Solving (Reduces conflict, solves problem, teaches)
- Plan C: Drop It (for now) (Reduces conflict)

Steps

- 1) CPS is *not* a quick fix or magic bullet, but in the long run it saves time over Plans A or B because it solves problems more durably. How? By teaching essential skills.
- 2) Recognize that many behavior problems are evidence of a skills deficit. This helps you be patient, observant, and measured in your approach. See: Zen Buddhism.
- 3) Try to spot what the trigger of the child's misbehavior was. Make a mental note of the trigger. Doing this helps you diagnose the skills deficit and teach preventatively.
- 4) Provide genuine empathy. This is not an optional or perfunctory step. Empathy is the key to diffusing emotional bombs and promoting physical and emotional safety.
- 5) Put 2 concerns on the table. Solutions are not concerns. You'll get to solutions next. First, both parties need to state their concerns. Kids need special guidance here. Ask, "What is your concern about that?"
- 6) Invite collaboration. Brainstorm solutions. Say, "Let's think about how we can work that out." Ask, "Do you have any ideas?"
- 7) Part of what you have done in Steps 4, 5, and 6 is to enhance the child's flexibility, frustration tolerance, and problem solving skills. Later, in a calm moment, return to your mental note about the trigger of the outburst. What skills are lacking? Executive function? Language skills? Cognitive style? Social skills? Emotion regulation? Pick one or two of these "pathways" to success and teach the child one thing at a time.
- 8) Lather, rise, repeat.



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Case Studies of Collaborative Problem Solving

Case Study #1

It is dusk at Camp Buggy and evening activity has just ended. Blake and his cabin mates are wandering back into their cabin to gather their toiletries and go wash up. As usual, Blake has left the door open on his way into the cabin, letting in a bunch of mosquitoes. "Close the door!" shout two of his cabin mates in unison. "Fine!" shouts Blake, kicking the door closed so hard that the mirror hanging on the front wall of the cabin falls and breaks. You want to tear Blake's head off, but instead...

- How do you harness your chi?
- What was Blake's trigger?
- What are Blake's underdeveloped skills?
- How can you provide genuine (not "drive by") empathy?
- Put two concerns on the table.
- Check that the concerns are not solutions. Put concerns on the table.
- How would you invite Blake to participate in problem-solving?
- Later on, how can you teach Blake something that develops his skills in executive functioning, language skills, cognitive style, social skills, or emotion regulation skills?

Case Study #2

Cabin morning at Camp Wallop is off to a rousing start with a super-competitive game of bombardment (dodge ball). Taniqua and her teammates are getting crushed by the opposing team, despite a valiant effort. Near the end of a miraculous come-back game, Taniqua is her team's only hope. Her agile dodging skills, combined with her powerful gun of an arm, put victory within reach. Just then, a ball zooms by, barely grazing her leg. "That's the game!" you shout, ready to call the team together for a cheer. "What the f**k?!" cries Taniqua, fighting back tears through her rage. "That never f**king touched me! I'm not out! You don't know s**t! What are you, blind?"

- How do you harness your chi?
- What was Taniqua's trigger?
- What are Taniqua's underdeveloped skills?
- How can you provide genuine (not "drive by") empathy?
- Put two concerns on the table.
- Check that the concerns are not solutions. Put concerns on the table.
- How would you invite Taniqua to participate in problem-solving?
- Later on, how can you teach Taniqua something that develops her skills in executive functioning, language skills, cognitive style, social skills, or emotion regulation skills?



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