

Collaborative Problem Solving for Inflexible Explosive Children (Part II)

This tip sheet is Part II of Dr. Ross Greene's work. All of this information is intended for children who have behavior problems related to their inability to manage emotions, understand information, manage social interaction and manage change. For more information see the references at the end. To obtain Part I go to the tip sheets on the Maine Kids-Kin website at www.mainekids-kin.org, or call us at 1-866-298-0896.

As stated in Part I, inflexible children come in all shapes and sizes with varying diagnoses. To use the Collaborative Problem Solving method, the diagnosis is not as important as figuring out what skills your child is lacking and prioritizing the ones you'd like to see the child work on. The child's therapist may be helpful in this process. Understanding the skills a child is lacking will help explain why he behaves inappropriately. Often the reason a child misbehaves is because he is lacking skills. For example, a child may tantrum because he does not know how to express frustration in another way. Lacking a skill can be called a skill deficit. Prioritize these deficits by thinking about which ones slow your child's development or seem to cause the most problems for him or her. In general, explosive outbursts are predictable and can tell you about other areas called: "triggers" and "pathways". "Triggers" are best considered as "problems that have yet to be solved". They come before an actual explosive episode or outburst. Examples of possible triggers are: sensory hypersensitivities, doing homework, sharing, getting ready for school or bed or interacting with a particular classmate or sibling. "Pathways" are the skills that need to be learned.

On the next page is the Pathways Inventory that lists the skills people need to manage life's challenges. But, first let's look at three different ways that people approach solving children's behavior problems. All three can be effective responses to use with children, depending on the needs and capabilities of the child and the goals of the adult.

Plan A: Imposing adult will in a situation. ("YOU WILL DO AS I SAY," "YOU MUST," "NO," "YOU CAN'T.") This is the authoritative way to handle a situation, which often causes inflexible children to "BLOW UP." Children who are lacking in skills are more prone to "blow ups." Consider staying away from this approach as much as possible. When children do not meet adults' expectations, it is very common for adults to insist even more that the children do. In ordinary children, when adults demand specific behavior, it will not result in bad reactions from the children. In the case of inflexible or explosive children, it is more likely the children will explode. Often this is because of the skills the children are lacking. Plan A is so habitual for many adults and so much a part of our culture that many do not even know they are doing it.

Plan B: Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) uses three main ingredients in helping a child solve a problem and involves engaging the child in a collaborative process of problem solving. The three main ingredients are:

- Use Empathy and Reassurance
- State the Problem
- Invitation to resolve the problem.

Empathy and reassurance help keep the child calm and gives you a chance to hear the child's concerns. If you don't know what the child's concern is you'll have to ask, "What's up?" or "What's bugging you?" Offering reassurance to the child is sometimes needed for additional calming.

Have both adult and child state what each sees as the problem and invite a solution from the child. An invitation allows you and the child to brainstorm solutions together and lets the child know you're doing this **“with”** him rather than **“to”** him (For example you might say, “Let’s think of how we can work that out,” “Let’s see if we can solve that problem.”) Give the child the first opportunity to come up with solutions but resolution is a “team approach.” CPS is a way of solving a problem by giving the child an opportunity to be involved in the process. CPS takes lots of practice to learn how to do it comfortably.

Plan C: Drop it (for now at least). Plan C involves reducing or removing expectations, at least temporarily and is highly effective at reducing a child’s level of frustration. It’s OK to use this method in the interim as long as you go back to the “problem” when the time is better. This is when you give the child some time to figure out what the problem is but don’t give in to his/her demands in that moment! It can mean, “I know this child and I know her triggers and I’m going to drop my expectations of her and wait a few minutes”. Follow up with Plan B once the child has settled down and you have the time to sit down with the child and go through the Plan B steps. Plan C is not considered as “giving in” to the child or “ignoring” the child as long as you go back to the problem.

Early on, CPS can feel like slogging through the mud! Over time a Plan B “rhythm” should develop. Very difficult problems may take more than one discussion. Sometimes it is necessary to take a break and return to it later, after both parties have had time to think further. You will probably want more than this tip sheet before you start using CPS, there are references at the bottom of the page to refer to.

Finally a few points to consider along the way:

- If a child has some of the following traits, consider finding additional interventions besides CPS to assist the child.
 - Inattention /disorganized thinking
 - Hyperactivity / impulsivity
 - irritability / obsessiveness
 - mood instability
- If you teach a child that someone always has to win and someone always has to lose, when does she learn the skill of solving problems in a way that people agree (win/win)?
- If you teach a child that “winning” depends on being bigger and stronger (“might makes right”), what do you do when he is bigger and stronger than you?
- If you teach a child that adults are the only ones with good ideas, when does the child learn that she has good ideas?

Information for this tip sheet was obtained from the Center for Collaborative Problem Solving www.ccps.info. Also from Ross Greene and Stuart Ablon’s books: Treating Explosive Kids- The Collaborative Problem Solving Approach and The Explosive Child. Both books are available through the Maine Kids-Kin library.



304 Hancock Street, Suite 2B
Bangor, ME 04401
1-866-298-0896
www.mainekids-kin.org