

Best Practices for School Safety & Student Interaction: The Collaborative Problem Solving Approach

Breakout: J. Stuart Ablon, Ph.D.



MASSACHUSETTS
GENERAL HOSPITAL

Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

Can't vs. Won't

- It is always safer to assume the problem is a result of lack of skill rather than lack of will
- This mindset helps us adults stay calm and build a relationship

Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

Expectations

Establishing (teaching) clear and realistic expectations is always important

- But what do you do if a student isn't meeting a clear expectation?

Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

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)

Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

Goals:

What are you trying to accomplish?

1. Compliance
2. Keep student calm
3. Solve the problem so it doesn't keep coming up
4. Teach skills
5. Create a helping relationship

Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

Goals Achieved by the Three Plans

GOALS	PLAN A	PLAN C	PLAN B
Compliance			
Keep kids calm			
Solve the problem			
Teach skills			
Build relationship			

Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

Three Plans

Plan A: Impose adult will

- What goals ARE being pursued:
 - *Compliance*
- What goals are NOT being pursued:
 - *Keep student calm*
 - *Solve the problem*
 - *Teach skills*
 - *Create a helping relationship*



Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

Three Plans

Plan C: Drop it (for now, at least)

Being strategic – not *giving in*

- What goals ARE being pursued:
 - *Keep student calm*
- What goals are NOT being pursued:
 - *Compliance*
 - *Solve the problem*
 - *Teach skills*
 - *Create a helping relationship*

Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

Three Plans

Plan B: Work towards solving the problem in a mutually satisfactory and realistic manner

- **What goals ARE being pursued:**
 - *Compliance*
 - *Keep student calm*
 - *Solve the problem*
 - *Teach skills*
 - *Create a helping relationship*

Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

Goals Achieved by the Three Plans

GOALS	PLAN A	PLAN C	PLAN B
Compliance	X		X
Keep kids calm		X	X
Solve the problem			X
Teach skills			X
Build relationship			X

What about safety issues?

You might have to use Plan A for acute safety issues but ...

The more severe or unsafe the behavior, the more important it is to build a helping relationship and teach the skills causing the unsafe behavior in the first place.

Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

Scenario:

A student has permission to leave school early. Five minutes after she leaves she returns to school and tells the Agent she left something in her locker.

Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

Scenario cont.:

Agent: "You aren't permitted to re-enter the school."

Student: "I have to. I need to get my stuff."

Agent: "I can't let you back in unless the Dean says its OK."

Student: "Then get the Dean."

Agent: "We can but the Dean isn't available right now."

Student: "I need to get my stuff now."

Agent: "You have to wait for a Dean."

Student: "I'm going to my fucking locker." (pushing past the Agent and up the stairs)

Agent moves to block the student.

Student shoves the agent.

Agent grabs the student and calls for assistance.

Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

Plan B Ingredients

1. **EMPATHY: Clarify child concern**
2. **SHARE adult concern**
3. **COLLABORATE: Brainstorm, assess and choose solution**

Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

Plan B Ingredients

1. **EMPATHY: Clarify child concern**
2. **SHARE adult concern**
3. **COLLABORATE: Brainstorm, assess and choose solution**

Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

Empathy: Clarify Child Concern

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



Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

Empathy: Clarify Child Concern

THE TOOLS: Use a combination of 4 tools:

- **reflective listening** * (“I hear you. You need to get your stuff.”)
- **reassurance** * (“I’m not saying you can’t get your stuff.” ... “I bet you have a good reason you need it”)
- **clarifying questions** (“How come you need it? Why right now? What stuff?”)
- **educated guessing** (“Is it something you need for where you are going?”)



* **calming tools**

Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

Plan B Ingredients

1. **EMPATHY: Clarify child concern**
2. **SHARE adult concern**
3. **COLLABORATE: Brainstorm, assess and choose solution**

Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

Share Adult Concern

THE GOAL: to make sure the your *concern / perspective* is on the table



Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

Plan B Ingredients

1. **EMPATHY:** Clarify child concern
2. **SHARE** adult concern
3. **COLLABORATE:** Brainstorm, assess and choose solution

Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

Collaborate: Brainstorm, Assess, Choose

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

Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

The Relational Process

The bad news: Plan B isn't magical and requires many repetitions!

The good news: those repetitions are how skills get built and new neural networks in the brain are developed

Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

This is Hard for us too!

More bad news: we adults have lagging skills too!

More good news: we practice our skills too every time we do Plan B

Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

CPS and Systems of Care

CPS is one of the few approaches that provides a common philosophy, language and process that can be used across settings and has shown effectiveness in:

- Correctional facilities
- Inpatient psychiatry units
- Residential treatment programs and group homes
- Day treatment programs
- Therapeutic, special and regular education classrooms and schools
- Homes

Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

RESEARCH FINDINGS



Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

Research Summary

One-stop shopping for all known **published** and **unpublished** studies of child and caregiver outcomes:

Inpatient:	Outpatient:	Residential:	Juv. Detention:	Schools:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↓ number and duration of restrictive interventions (includes restraints, short holds, and seclusions) ↓ staff turnover 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↓ disruptive behaviors (e.g., symptoms of ODD and ADHD) ↓ parent stress ↑ parent-child relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↓ restrictive interventions ↓ aggression ↑ social skills and community participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↓ restrictive interventions ↓ staff injuries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↓ teacher stress ↓ discipline referrals ↓ restrictive interventions

*Pollastri, Epstein, Heath, & Ablon (2013), Harvard Review of Psychiatry
Available at www.thinkkids.org*



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 activates the stress response (flight or fight)
- helps students confront triggering situations safely to detoxify them slowly over time
- gives students control without sole responsibility for process



Implementing in Systems: Lessons Learned

- Change in systems is a process not an event or outcome
- Takes time (3-5 years!), patience and relentless persistence, and **A TEAM EFFORT**
- Involves some discomfort
- Requires commitment and good leadership

Important Themes

- Resilient kids succeed despite very tough situations. How come?
- They can point to one adult who created a helping relationship with them

Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS



www.thinkkids.org

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.*