



Transforming School Discipline: Shifting from power and control to collaboration and problem solving

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Transforming School Discipline

Shifting from power and control to collaboration and problem solving

Education innovation is important to ensure that we are providing the best support and preparation for our children for all aspects of their lives. Therefore, it is important to examine and improve our practices in all aspects of education, including how we respond to challenging student behaviors.

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The statistics are staggering. Every school year in the United States, there are 3 million out-of-school suspensions, 3 million in-school suspensions, and dozens of millions of detentions. Every year, over 100,000 students are expelled and there are several hundred thousand paddlings, restraints, and locked- or blocked-door seclusions.

Students with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges are those most frequently on the receiving end of these increasingly archaic interventions. The most obvious distinguishing characteristic of these students is the fact that their behavior is more extreme: screaming, swearing, hitting, kicking, spitting, biting, throwing, running, destroying property, and worse. Of course, archaic discipline strategies typically aren't administered to students whose behavior is less extreme: using their

words (the holy grail of adaptive responses), whining, pouting, sulking, withdrawing, or crying. But regardless of whether a student's behavior is more or less extreme, the field of developmental psychopathology is quite clear on the fact that the behavior is communicating that the child is having difficulty meeting certain expectations. Thus, behavior is simply the signal, the fever.

Unfortunately, school discipline programs tend to focus quite heavily on the behaviors, and often have algorithms of adult-imposed consequences that are applied to modify those behaviors. In the intervention model I originated—now called *Collaborative & Proactive Solutions* (CPS)—the focus is instead on the expectations the student is having difficulty meeting. In the CPS model, those unmet expectations are referred to as *unsolved*

problems (also known as “problems that have yet to be solved” or “problems that are waiting to be solved”). One of the most crucial components involved in being more responsive to the needs of our most vulnerable (and expensive) students is shifting from focusing primarily on behaviors (and modifying them) to focusing primarily on the problems that are causing those behaviors (and solving them).

Considering the Scenario

This shouldn't be a huge transition for educators, who have always been engaged in the work of solving the *academic* problems that are interfering with students' progress. Unfortunately, educators (like just about everyone else) put behavior and academics in completely different categories. My anecdotal observation is that approximately 80% of behavior problems that occur at school can be traced back to academic difficulties, and the remaining 20% is social. In other words, academics and behavior go hand-in-glove. They cannot be separated. When we apply the same mentality to behavior challenges as we would to academic difficulties, the approach to helping behaviorally challenging students becomes a lot more compassionate and effective.

The research that has accumulated on behaviorally challenging kids over the past 40-50 years tells us that the less obvious characteristic of these kids is *lagging skills*. Not lagging motivation. That research has identified dozens of skills found to be lacking in children

with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges, and many of those skills are related to a student's capacities to be flexible and adaptable, deal well with frustration, and solve problems. Unfortunately, that research has been slow to influence school discipline practices, which are still largely oriented toward incentivizing desirable behavior and punishing undesirable behavior. But *rewards and punishments do not solve the problems that are causing challenging behavior*. And that may explain why, in every school, it is the same 20-25 students who are accounting for the lion's share of discipline referrals. The fact that these students access the school discipline program with regularity is proof that the school discipline program isn't providing them with the help they need. Instead, the penchant for rewarding and punishing often has the effect of pushing these students out of our classrooms and out of our schools, and points them down the path toward marginalization, disenfranchisement, and alienation.

This scenario isn't wonderful for the classmates of behaviorally challenging students either: they still don't feel safe, they are still having their work disrupted, and they are wondering why the difficulties of their unfortunate classmates remain unresolved. Nor is the scenario wonderful for classroom teachers, who leave the profession at a troubling rate, with student behavior problems among the paramount reasons. There is a clear and compelling need for a radical transformation of school disciplinary practices.

Related Reading

“Teaching Problem Solving: Let Students Get ‘Stuck’ and ‘Unstuck’ ”

by Kate Mills and Helyn Kim, Brookings

In the real world, students encounter problems that are complex, not well defined, and lack a clear solution and approach. They need to be able to identify and apply different strategies to solve these problems. However, problem-solving skills do not necessarily develop naturally; they need to be explicitly taught in a way that can be transferred across multiple settings and contexts.

Read full article at <http://bit.ly/millsandkim>

A Change in Focus

Of course, if we're viewing behavioral challenges through the prism of lagging skills and unsolved problems—rather than as the byproduct of poor motivation—then our language is going to change along with our disciplinary practices. Some of our most common clichés fall by the wayside: attention-seeking, manipulative, coercive, unmotivated, limit-testing. And since behavior is no longer the focal point, then psychiatric diagnoses—comprising behaviors thought to cluster together, but that provide precious little information about a student's lagging skills or the specific expectations a student is having difficulty meeting—aren't the focal point either.

Instead, schools that implement the CPS model rely heavily on an instrument called the *Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems* (ALSUP). It's free and can be found on the website of the non-profit I founded, Lives in the Balance (www.livesinthebalance.org). The ALSUP is intended to be used as a discussion guide, rather than as a freestanding checklist or rating scale. It helps those working with a particular student identify the student's lagging skills and unsolved problems. Many of those unsolved problems have been precipitating challenging behavior for a very long time, and will continue to do so until they are finally solved. If caregivers continue to focus only on modifying behaviors that are being caused by those unsolved problems, the problems will remain unsolved. Because

behaviorally challenging students tend to have a lot of unsolved problems, another free instrument—the *Problem Solving Plan*—helps caregivers prioritize the problems that will be the focal point of their initial problem-solving efforts, and track those problems until they are solved.

Once a student's lagging skills and unsolved problems have been identified—usually accomplished in a 50-minute meeting—the student's challenging behavior becomes highly *predictable*, and intervention can become almost totally *proactive*. As an added benefit, the information provided by the ALSUP can serve as the foundation for an IEP, 504 Plan, Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA), or Behavior Plan. Samples of each can be found on the Lives in the Balance website.

Finding the Solutions

And that brings us to the final big shift: the means by which those problems are being solved. Adults tend to rely heavily on problem-solving of the *unilateral* kind, where the adult decides what the solution is and imposes it on the child. In the real world, unilateral, imposed solutions tend to cause conflict and promote adversarial interactions, and that holds true with children. In the CPS model, caregivers are instead relying almost exclusively on problem-solving of the *collaborative* kind. When problems are being solved collaboratively, caregivers and students are teammates—partners—in solving the problems that are contributing to challenging behavior.

Related Reading

"Teaching Innovation and Problem Solving"

from ThoughtfulLearning.com

Just as students can learn specific strategies for convergent, analytical thinking, they can learn specific strategies for divergent, expansive thinking. Once students have gained these specific mental strategies, they can combine their critical and creative thinking to solve problems. Problem solving starts with critical thinking—analyzing a problem—and then shifts to creative thinking—imagining solutions.

Read full article at <http://bit.ly/teachinnov>

Solving a problem collaboratively involves a three-step process. The first step is called the Empathy step. Caregivers gather information from the student about his or her concern or perspective on the specific expectations he or she is having difficulty meeting, be it incomplete homework or difficulty getting along with peers on the school bus or difficulty raising one's hand during social studies discussions. We encounter many jaw-dropping moments during the Empathy step, as caregivers discover that they had the wrong idea about what was making it hard for the student to meet the expectation. In the second step, called the Define Adult Concerns step, caregivers enter their concerns into consideration. Those concerns usually center around how a given unmet expectation is affecting the child and/or others. During the third step, called the Invitation, students and caregivers collaborate on mutually satisfactory solutions; in other words, solutions that address the concerns of both parties. Through this process, children and caregivers feel heard, come to recognize that their concerns will be addressed, and anticipate that problems will get solved. Solved problems don't cause challenging behavior; only unsolved problems do.

Research has shown that the evidence-based CPS model improves children's behavior on a par with behavior modification procedures (a meaningful finding, given that the CPS doesn't primarily focus on behavior per se), and that the CPS model may be more effective at teaching kids the skills they are lacking. In schools, the CPS model has been associated with dramatic reductions in discipline referrals, detentions, and suspensions. In treatment facilities, the model has been associated with dramatic reductions in rates of recidivism; physical, chemical, and mechanical restraints; locked- and blocked-door seclusions; and injuries to staff and kids. These outcomes are better for the children, and thus better for all of us.

A Benefit for All

In fact, it is worth pondering the applications of the CPS model to *all* of our students, including the fortunate ones. Certainly, all students have unsolved problems. All students benefit from

having their voices and concerns heard. All students benefit from learning how to listen to the concerns of others. All students benefit from being engaged in solving the problems that affect their lives, rather than having solutions imposed. While it is clear that punitive school discipline practices are not helpful to behaviorally challenging students, we should be giving serious thought to whether these practices are actually helpful to *any* students. Emerging research indicates that solving problems collaboratively and proactively simultaneously teaches some very important skills: empathy, appreciating how one's actions are affecting others, resolving disagreements without conflict, taking another person's perspective, and honesty. These skills are every bit as important to teach and model as academics.

Educators have always been among the most important socialization agents in our society. Yet many educators have told me that initiatives





that have been imposed on them over the past 15-20 years—most notably, zero tolerance policies and high-stakes testing—have taken a lot of the humanity out of their jobs. It's time to put the humanity back in.

Does solving problems collaboratively take time? It does. But nowhere near the amount of time that is consumed by the behavioral challenges that are caused when those problems are perpetually unsolved. Is the CPS model only applicable to problem-solving between adults and students? No, those same three steps can be applied to problems between two students and to problems that affect an entire class. Is the CPS model applicable to interactions between school staff and parents? Of course. It turns out that challenging interactions between school staff and parents are usually attributable to some ineffective ways in which people (not just parents and teachers) interact with and solve problems with one another.

It doesn't help that some educators (not all, but enough) are inclined to blame parents for the expectations a child is having difficulty meeting at school. This is a fascinating phenomenon, since the parents didn't originate those expectations and aren't present when their child is having difficulty meeting them. It's easy to point toward perceived family dysfunction as the cause of a student's difficulties at school; certainly many students are coming to school from home situations that are far less than ideal. But it is worth remembering that many hard-working, well-behaved students come from less-than-idyllic home family situations. Also, a classroom teacher can have a tremendous impact on a student's life over six hours a day, five days a week, nine months a year—even if the student is going home to a situation that isn't ideal. Indeed, it is the students going home to such situations who most need us to be on our game. To do that, we are going to need a different game plan, one that emphasizes collaboration and problem-solving rather than power and control.

Remember, we're not just doing it for the behaviorally challenging students; we're doing it for all of us.

About the Author

Dr. Ross W. Greene is the author of *Raising Human Beings*, *Lost and Found*, *Lost at School*, and *The Explosive Child*. Dr. Greene was on the faculty at Harvard Medical School for over 20 years, and is now founding director of the nonprofit organization *Lives in the Balance* (livesinthebalance.org), which provides a vast array of free, web-based resources on the Collaborative & Proactive Solutions model described in his books. Many research papers have documented the effectiveness of his CPS model in families, schools, inpatient psychiatry units, and residential and juvenile detention facilities. He speaks widely throughout the world, and lives in Portland, Maine.