




When adults rethink **challenging kids**, amazing things can happen.


**Rethinking Challenging Kids**

J. Stuart Ablon Ph.D.  

**Kids do well if they can...**




**Your understanding of a problem determines your solution ...**



**Conventional Wisdom**

The most common over-simplified understanding:


Because of poor (passive, permissive, inconsistent) parenting, kids learn to use challenging behavior to get things (e.g., attention) or escape / avoid things (e.g., work).




**Logical Solution**

The most common over-simplified solution:

Motivate compliant behavior through intensive, consistent programs of rewards, punishments and ignoring.




**What Consequences Do and Don't**



**DO:** Teach basic lessons & provide outward motivation

**DON'T:** Teach complex thinking skills, build relationships, help kids stay regulated



## Side Effects of Rewards and Punishments

- Tangible rewards = less inner motivation
- Telling a child they aren't trying hard enough when, in fact, the difficulties relate to lagging skills, negatively impacts the child's feelings about themselves and you

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## Why Traditional Discipline Doesn't Work with our Most Challenging Kids:

Conventional wisdom is wrong!  
Challenging kids lack *skill* not will

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## Unconventional Wisdom: It's a Learning Disability

- Research in neurosciences has shown these kids are delayed in the development of crucial skills or have significant difficulty applying these skills when they are most needed

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## Unconventional Wisdom: It's a Learning Disability

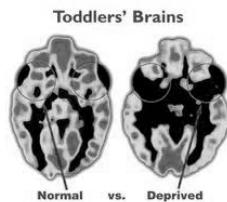
Which skills do these kids lack?

- flexibility/adaptability
- frustration tolerance
- problem-solving

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## Why the Lagging Skills?

Chronic, overwhelming stress and trauma arrests brain development which manifests itself as lagging skills



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## Logical Intervention

Treat challenging behavior like you would any other learning disability:

- Assess which skills are lagging
- Use a different approach to teach those skills in increments the kid can handle


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**The Definition of Discipline is?**



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TO TEACH!



**Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS)**


Provides a common philosophy, language, and replicable structure with clear guideposts for adults to:

- Maintain authority and compliance via collaboration rather than power and control
- Help youth (and adults!) build skills
- Build a helping relationship



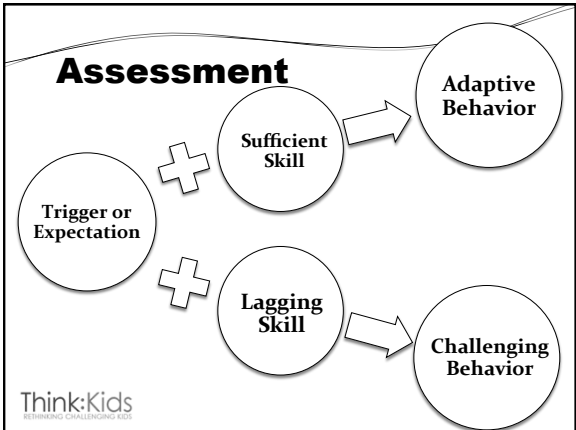


**Philosophy**

**Kids do well if they can**



ASSESSMENT

## Assessing Thinking Skills

*Explaining is not excusing!*

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## Research on Skills Deficits

Challenging behavior is linked with deficits in the following areas of neuro-cognitive skill:

- Language and communication skills
- Attention and working memory skills
- Emotion and self-regulation skills
- Cognitive flexibility skills
- Social thinking skills

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## Goals of Intervention

1. Pursue high priority expectations
2. Reduce challenging behavior
3. Solve chronic problems durably
4. Build skills
5. Create (or restore) a helping relationship

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## Planning

(Your Three Options for responding to Triggers/Unmet Expectations)

**Plan A:** Impose adult will

**Plan B:** Solve the problem collaboratively

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

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## Goals Achieved by the Three Plans

GOALS	PLAN A	PLAN C	PLAN B
Try to get your expectation met	✓	✗	✓
Reduce challenging behavior	✗	✓	✓
Build skills, confidence	✗	✗	✓
Solve problems	✗	✗	✓
Build relationship	✗	✗	✓

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## Fostering Internal Drive

- What motivates us internally? What fosters “grit?”
  - Mastery / competence
  - Autonomy / choice (vs. imposition, feeling controlled)
  - Passion / purpose
  - Relatedness / empathy

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### What Fosters Internal Drive?

Needs	PLAN A	PLAN C	PLAN B
Competence	✗	✗	✓
Autonomy	✗	✗	✓
Relatedness	✗	✗	✓

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### Intervention: Plan B Ingredients

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

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### Skills Taught while Problem Solving

- Collaborative Problem Solving is skills training!
- Skills are modeled, practiced and developed through experiential learning and a *relational* process
- The entire process naturally trains organized, reflective, flexible thinking and problem solving

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### The Neurobiologic Sequence of Plan B

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### RESEARCH FINDINGS

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### Research Summary

All known published and unpublished studies of child and caregiver outcomes:

Inpatient:	Outpatient:	Residential:	Juv. Detention:	Schools:
↓ duration of restrictive interventions (includes restraints, short holds, and seclusions)	↓ disruptive behaviors (e.g., symptoms of ODD and ADHD)	↓ <span style="color: red;">restrictive</span> interventions	↓ restrictive interventions	↓ teacher stress
↓ staff turnover	↓ parent stress	↓ aggression	↓ staff injuries	↓ discipline referrals
	↑ parent-child relationships	↑ social skills and community participation		↓ restrictive interventions
				↓ staff and student injury
				↓ in-school arrests and summonses
				↓ violent crimes committed

Adapted from Pollastri, Epstein, Heath, & Ablon (2013), Harvard Review of Psychiatry

