

Redefining Challenging Behaviour

Working
Collaboratively
With
Students to
Change Behaviours

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‘Kids do well if they can and doing well is preferable’ is a comment you will hear Dr. Ross Greene say at every one of his workshops or presentations. It’s a key theme in his books and life work supporting children with emotional and behavioural challenges. His approach to working with children – **Collaborative and Proactive Solutions (CPS)** – creates a model in which we work collaboratively with children to solve their unsolved problems that are causing them difficulty when meeting expectations in the classroom, on the playground, at home and really anywhere in their life due to lagging skills. Acting with the belief that ‘Children do well if they can and doing well is preferable’ is – in my opinion – a far better way to approach supporting kids who are struggling, rather than assuming that they are manipulative; they are choosing to be disrespectful; or they like the attention (*or, insert any other reasons adults assign to children who are not meeting their expectations*). I’m not sure there is a greater time than now to look at how we will support our students who are struggling to meet school expectations as they return to school during this challenging time of COVID-19.

As a high school Vice-Principal early in my administrative career, wearing the ‘Principal hat’ when dealing with student behaviour was mainly comprised of adult-imposed consequences based on the ‘decisions’ students made. Even as I write that now, it still doesn’t

sit well with me. Students who were already struggling to meet the expectations the school placed upon them were now missing even more school and losing connections, and our relationships struggled as a result. As I learned quickly, imposing our will on behaviourally-challenging students often results in more challenging behaviours.

Needless to say, my reason for writing this article is to share with you a better way. In my opinion, it really should become *THE WAY*. The best comparison I can offer is if a Grade 1 student is struggling to read, we don’t send them to the Principal’s office for a telephone call home. Instead, we find the strategies that will work to support the student in learning that skill. So, why do we do we take a different approach with student behaviour? Meeting the expectations that a teacher or a school creates is a skill that many of our children learn as they progress through school. If students struggle to meet expectations, then isn’t it our job to teach them the lagging skills they need in order to meet the expectations and be successful? If ‘kids do well if they can and doing well is preferable’, then it isn’t a choice on the part of students to not meet the expectations we place on them. They simply need some help.

My first year as an Elementary Principal was a steep learning curve. The biggest piece of learning I encountered

was through a book study of *Lost and Found – Helping Behaviorally Challenging Students (and While You're At It, All the Others)* by Dr. Ross Greene. When I arrived, the school community I was serving was struggling to support a few students that had impacted the school in less than positive ways. Staff were looking for a new way; I'd even say that staff **needed** a new way. My resource teacher – Ms. Christine Thygesen, who just recently joined our Association – brought forth *Lost and Found* as a book study, and off we went.

For those who have not read Dr. Greene's books (*The Explosive Child, Lost at School, Lost and Found, Raising Human Beings*), his mantra 'Kids do well if they can, and doing well is preferable' is woven through his writing. The work starts there. We no longer view behaviour as

a choice, but as the result of a student failing to meet the expectations that a school or adult has placed on them. The behaviour is a manifestation of the child's struggle to meet the expectation, and it is our job – to paraphrase Dr. Greene – to look as far upstream as possible to find out what it is about the expectation that the student is finding difficulty in meeting, and then work collaboratively with the student to solve the problem. Hence, the process is called Collaborative and Proactive Solutions (CPS).

Two and half years into this model, our school has implemented CPS throughout all grades in our school and students are now receiving support though CPS to meet previously unmet expectations or solve previously unsolved problems. It is part of our school's ethos and daily programming.

Dr. Ross Greene (*Lost and Found*, 2016)
helps readers understand three approaches
we use to dealing with behaviour:

Plan A, Plan B and Plan C.

- **Plan A** is the adult imposed, unilateral consequence, *done to the child*
- **Plan B** is the collaborative, problem solving process *done with the child*
- **Plan C** is making a conscious decision to let some behaviours go right now, as we will address them at a later date. This is not 'ignoring' the behaviours, but could be because we can't deal with behaviour in the heat of the moment, or because we have 'bigger fish to fry' (Dr. Ross Greene likes this term).

Plan B conversations are where the magic lies, and involve three steps:

Empathy Step:

The aim of this step is understanding what the child's experience is, and what is making it difficult for them to meet the expectation. It begins with an empathy question to initiate the conversation, "*I noticed that you were having difficulty (insert the unmet expectation), what's up?*" And then the adult 'drills' for upstream information about what is causing the student difficulty in meeting the expectation, using a number of drilling strategies to determine the child's biggest concern.

Adult Concern Step:

The adult gets their turn to give their biggest concern, which begins with the words "*My concern is...*"

This concern will likely explain how not meeting the expectation is affecting the child or others.

Invitation Step:

Both concerns are placed together, and the student gets first crack at the opportunity to try to solve the problem. However, it is a collaborative effort as the adult and the student engage in respectful discussion while they seek a solution to the problem. The solution must be both mutually satisfactory and realistic **for both the child and the adult**.

The adult would say "*I wonder if there is a way (insert child concern) and (insert adult concern) ...*" then the problem solving ensues.

It is important to note that this model begins with a strategy to identify empathy step questions through the use of an ALSUP (Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems).

ALSUPs, Plan B cheat sheets, drilling cheat sheets and support information about CPS can all be found at livesinthebalance.org/paperwork

The outcome of a Plan B conversation is the creation of a plan to move forward for that student to begin to meet the expectation that has been placed on them. They feel listened to, respected and valued in the process. They are learning skills of empathy, understanding other points of view and the impact their actions have on others, and learning agency to solve their own problems (with support).

Finally, I was able to find a way to support students who are struggling with meeting school expectations without destroying relationships in the process. We move away from reactive, adult-imposed, unilateral consequences, and instead work *with* students to identify what is causing them difficulty in meeting an expectation; we come up with a plan together, collaboratively and proactively, and help students learn the lagging skills.

Lost and Found (Dr. R.W. Greene, 2016) and CPS will formatively change the way you view behaviour, and the strategies you approach to support behaviourally-challenging students.

Let me share with you some successful examples, and how we approached students who were not meeting expectations by using CPS.

Example #1

A lunch-time playground hockey game results in a Grade 5 student (H designation) engaging in unsafe actions towards others, throwing and smashing his stick on the pavement and swearing at adults and students.

(On the following day – not in the heat of the moment)

Empathy Step: *“I realized that you are having difficulty playing hockey safely at lunchtime yesterday, what’s up?”*
The student’s biggest concern is that no one knows the rules, so he is getting frustrated and angry.

Adult Concern Step: *“When you are not playing safely and getting upset, someone will get hurt.”*

Invitation Step: *“I wonder if there is a way that everyone would know the same rules, and that no-one would get hurt?”* The plan created by the student is that we could create a set of rules that we would put up in the hockey box so that everyone would know and follow the same set. Problem solved. The student now has the ability to meet the expectation, and no suspension or relationship was destroyed in the process. See Image 1. We have had zero hockey issues with this student since the rules were put up in the hockey box.

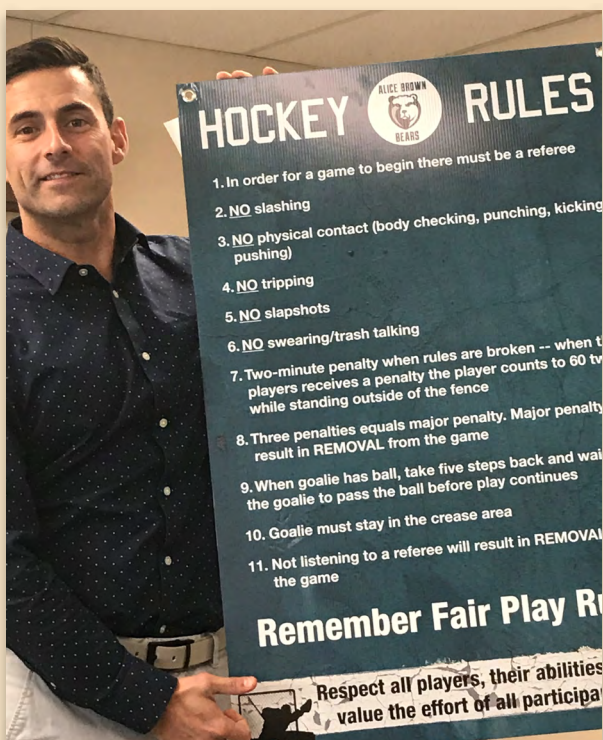


Image 1

Example #2

A Grade 1 student is hiding under his desk, upset during writing center in Daily 3 and continuing to draw pictures instead of writing three sentences in his journal.

Empathy Step: “I realized that you are having difficulty writing three sentences in your journal during daily 3, what’s up?” The student’s biggest concern is that he doesn’t like the way his letters look because all the pencils aren’t sharp enough (who would have guessed that?)

Adult Concern Step: “When you are not writing, Ms. Smith does not see how your writing is progressing and where she can help you.”

Invitation Step: “I wonder if there is a way that you could have sharper pencils so that your letters would look better and, that Ms. Smith could see how well you are progressing in your writing”. The plan created by the student was to have his own pencil sharpener and to sharpen the shared pencils on the desk before writing. I know this plan seems a little simple, but this is a student who has big emotions and was on his way to a behavioural assessment. See image 2 and 3 for the before-and-after Plan B conversation evidence. *Magic.*

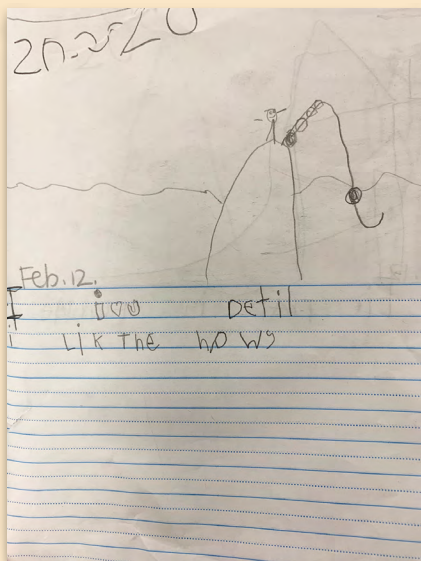


Image 2

To be honest, implementation of CPS is challenging as it is a process-oriented approach. One must show fidelity to the process for positive results. It takes time and practice to support CPS and to be confident in the process. I truly believe it is worth the effort. It has formatively changed the way that I approach student behaviour, and subsequently my relationships as a Principal. If you have the opportunity to read *Lost and Found*, which describes a roadmap for CPS in your school, or to participate in Dr. Ross Greene’s three-day advanced training workshop, I would strongly recommend it.

I think the following quote from *The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child’s Developing Mind* (Daniel J. Siegel and Tina P. Bryson, 2011) said it best: “We can impact the future of our world by caring well for our children and by being intentional in giving them the kinds of relationships we value and that we want them to see as normal” (pg 127). Having collaborative, respectful conversations with students will show them that we care, we value their perspectives, see how their actions affect others and recognize that they have the ability to make school better for themselves. Respect, empathy and self-efficacy skills are developed in the process, skills they can use to improve their relationships. CPS gives you the opportunity to model and build positive relationships with kids who are struggling to meet the expectations of school, even the most behaviourally challenging students.

We all have students who struggle to meet the expectations placed on them. Sometimes we feel that we have tried everything and that all hope is lost. If you have not implemented CPS, then I know there is still hope.

I have recently completed Dr. Greene’s 24 week certification training and now I am a trained provider of CPS <http://www.cpsconnection.com/providers>. I would gladly provide any support you need. Please reach out if you have any questions: mcarlyle@sd35.bc.ca

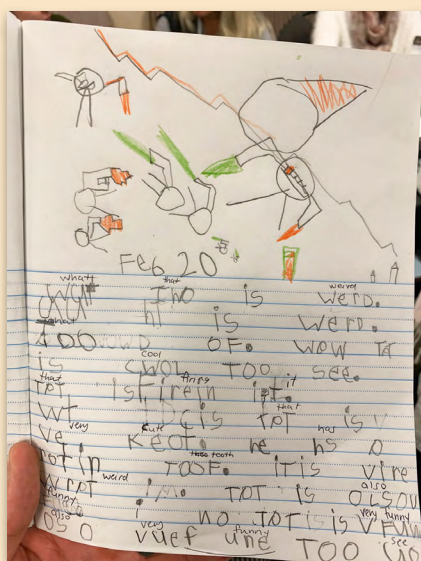


Image 3