

Collaborative Problem Solving

When children present with behaviour that we find challenging – anything from not being able to get ready on time in the morning to tantrums or fights with siblings – we often revert to how we were handled as children. In most cases this is what psychologist Ross Greene calls “Plan A”. We become stern. We use either the threat of a consequence or in some cases offer an incentive or reward in order to attempt to modify the behaviour we want to change.

Sometimes when things are too heated, we may let the behaviour “slide”. We have all “picked our battles” when our child is tired and hungry at the end of a long day. Ross Greene calls this picking your battles “Plan C” - letting the child take the lead on a low priority goal. Plan C is a short term solution. Letting things slide in terms of managing difficult behaviour is not a viable way in which to address behaviour management long term. It will lead to children who are unruly, entitled and who lack basic social and self-management skills.

Plan A then seems to be the way in which to handle discipline and manage behaviour. It is, after all, the way in which the world works. If as adults we break the rule and skip a traffic light we can be fined and that acts as a deterrent to further law breaking. As adults we also understand that the rules are actually there to protect us. Jumping traffic lights is dangerous and can cause accidents.

What do we do, however, when “Plan A” is not working to modify children’s behaviour? The consequences and rewards may not be having the desired effect. The temptation is to ramp them up, become more punitive or offer a more attractive reward BUT when we are using plan A it is essential to understand that corporal punishment is NOT a solution and that emotional manipulation can be just as harmful.

What then is the solution?

When working with children it is essential to remember that for them doing well is always preferable to not doing well and that children will do well IF THEY CAN.

Plan A presupposes that children have skills which they will utilise when we tell them how we want them to behave. It operates on the understanding that all children need in order to use their skills to modify their behaviour is the correct motivation i.e. a reward or a consequence/punishment.

What if we are seeing challenging behaviour because our children do not have the skills that they need to modify their behaviour in an adaptive way? For example do they have the skills to manage their frustration in order to speak respectfully to their sibling when they have a disagreement? Will the offer of a reward or the threat of a punishment teach the lagging skill?

Food for thought:

The essential function of challenging behaviour is to communicate that the demands being placed on a child exceed his capacity to respond adaptively. In other words, challenging behaviour tells us that life is demanding thinking skills that the child lacks.

Enter “Plan B” or Collaborative Problem Solving. This is an approach developed specifically to help children to learn the skills that they lack.

Plan B asks us to identify our child’s lagging skills. These are more often than not in the areas of frustration tolerance, flexibility/adaptability, problem solving and social interaction.

There are also likely triggers – situations in which the bad behaviour is bound to occur.

When we use Plan B we do so proactively. We think of a trigger (an interaction with a sibling) and a lagging skill (for example, difficulty seeing something from someone else’s perspective) and we approach our child when they are calm and relaxed.



The steps are as follows (using the sibling disagreement as an example)

Step 1: (Empathy Step) – Child’s concern or perspective is on the table

“I’ve noticed that when you and your sister are playing you often get into disagreements and end up fighting. You like to be the one to decide what game you will play. Talk to me... Can you tell me a bit more about what happens?”

In step one we LISTEN to the child’s perspective, we gather information and clarify their point of view. We empathise if necessary – e.g. “That must be really frustrating for you”

Step 2: (Define the Problem Step) – Adult concern or perspective is on the table

“My concern is that you and your sister are fighting a lot of the time. It is nice to take turns when choosing what to play but it would seem that you are struggling to do this and are not able to solve your problems with respectful words. This is resulting in a lot of tears. We need to find a way for you to both be happy and play nicely together.”

In step two we are putting our adult concern (often the rule) on the table and making the child aware that something needs to be addressed.

Step 3: (Invitation Step) Inviting the child to collaborate with you on a solution

“I wonder how we can solve this problem? Do you have any ideas?”

In step three we are collaborating with the child on a solution to the problem. We invite them to think of ways to solve the problem. The solution must meet both concerns and be **DOABLE and MUTUALLY AGREEABLE**. In this collaborative process they learn the skills they lack e.g. seeing something from someone else’s perspective, the social skill of getting your needs met through verbalising them rather than acting out etc. In our example you might agree that the children take turns to decide what game will be played or that one child decides on Monday the next on Tuesday. It is important to listen to the child’s solution and try it out. This gives them a sense of agency. They also have really good ideas – ones we may not have thought of!

Plan B means that you relinquish your position of power – you do not decide alone on what will happen. It is also not “giving in” to your child because your concern is on the table. Rather you collaborate with the child on a solution. This process builds the relationship between you and the child. They feel heard and understand that their perspective is important. They learn the thinking skills they need to solve problems in other contexts.