



Empathy, defining the problem, inviting collaboration

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In my last article I introduced three principles that Dr. Ross Greene, associate clinical professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, promotes if you want to prevail when working with challenging children: establishing empathy, defining the problem, and inviting collaboration.

I encouraged you to take a closer look at your approach and strategies to working with these children and assess the success rate you were having.

I realized — especially after listening to Dr. Greene speak — that I needed to narrow my approach and get back to the basics, a collaborative approach to solving problems without bargaining, pleading and avoiding, three pitfalls I found in my own self-assessment. Doing this is easier said than done but, with practice and a commitment to following steps, I am confident we can succeed.

The first step is to gather information from your child so that you can develop a clear understanding of the child's concern about the unsolved problem. Rather than focusing on the behavior at hand ("This is the third time you have cursed at the bus driver"), spend time instead asking questions which provide information as to why and when the unsolved problem occurs. For example, you might say, "I noticed that you are getting more write-ups on the bus. What is up?"

Keeping it simple is the key. Allow the child to respond in a way that will help the child feel you truly empathize with him and see the situation from his perspective. You might find out that he

is sitting next to a child who continually bullies him and, when he reacts to this, he is called out by the bus driver, subsequently leading to an argument and cursing out the driver.

After empathizing and gaining a better understanding of the lagging skills, you may now be able to define the problem (step two) in the context of how the unsolved problem is impacting others.

In step two, an adult might say, "My concern is you are displacing your anger from the bully onto the bus driver and this is causing an unsafe situation on the bus — you are distracting the bus driver."

In this situation, there was a lagging skill (difficulty managing bullies on the bus) which is the root cause of the unsolved problem (unsafe condition on the bus). If normal course holds, the child would be kicked off the bus for three days, only to return to a problem which remains unsolved.

By empathizing, then defining the problem and addressing skills associated with managing bullies, the adult is then ready to invite the child to brainstorm solutions to the problem.

Identifying lagging skills is vital to the CPS process, and for more information on this, you can visit The Paperwork section of the website Lives in the Balance, a nonprofit founded by Greene. View the "ALSUP," Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems, which will guide you in detail on how to identify lagging skills and unsolved problems.

The third and final step is to work

collaboratively on a solution which addresses the concerns of the child and adult. Allowing the child to share first generally is considered best practice, but the final solution needs to represent concerns of both parties and as a general rule should have a 60 to 70 percent chance of success — or it is back to the drawing table.

A useful statement from the adult might be, "I wonder if there is a way to stop the bullying on the bus." A solution from the child might be that one of them could ride a different bus home. Suspension hardly fits the bill when compared to this solution.

Countless family members, schools, inpatient psychiatric units, group homes and juvenile detention centers have implemented the Collaborative Problem Solving model with great success. For more details and other creative ways to help foster a collaborative environment for children in your community, visit www.livesinthebalance.org. You can even send an anonymous care package from the website to an organization your children belongs to which includes a copy of Greene's book and materials needed to create a CPS program.

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