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Calling All Frequent Flyers

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Your school discipline program isn't working. If you're ready to rethink and retool, then you're ready for collaborative problem solving.

When I met with an assistant principal last year, he showed me the statistics he had compiled on the astronomical rates of disciplinary referrals, detentions, and suspensions in his school the previous year. "This is just not OK," he said.

And then he showed me another statistic. "Do you know that 75 percent of those disciplinary referrals, suspensions, and detentions were accounted for by only 20 students in my school? Those are my frequent flyers. If I'm seeing those students constantly, then what I'm doing isn't working. These students really need me—I mean *us*—to do something different around here."

If you fly a lot, like I do, the term *frequent flyer* probably has a positive connotation. It means that you get upgraded to first class (sometimes); that you're among the first to board the plane, thereby ensuring much-prized space for your bags in the overhead bins; and that you get lots of bonus miles so you can fly for free every now and again (assuming you still feel like flying after all that flying).

But when it comes to school discipline, *frequent flyer* has a different meaning. These are the kids who aren't responding to all those referrals, detentions, and suspensions; who aren't benefiting from the school discipline program as it's currently configured. These are the kids we lose.

First Things First

The unfortunate reality is that, in many places, school discipline hasn't kept pace with what we now know about why some students have behavioral challenges and why traditional approaches to school discipline are often counterproductive and expensive.

One effective approach I've developed—Collaborative Problem Solving—represents a radical departure from traditional school discipline practices.[1] It can help school staff view challenging behavior through more compassionate, accurate, and productive lenses. It can clarify what they need to focus on to help challenging students. And it can provide them with the tools they need. But it's not easy. It's hard work.

To better understand and help behaviorally challenging students, we first need to answer two crucial questions.

Why Are Challenging Students Challenging?

In the past 30 years, research has told us that challenging kids are challenging because they lack the skills *not* to be challenging (see Greene et al., 2002; Greene, 2010a). The skills they lack include crucial cognitive skills, especially in the domains of flexibility/ adaptability, frustration tolerance, and problem solving. If they had these skills, they'd use them—because they'd prefer *not* to be behaviorally challenging. That's because doing well is preferable to not doing well. These students don't lack motivation; they lack skills.

Much of this research has been conducted on kids categorized by specific diagnoses, such as attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); oppositional defiant disorder (ODD); conduct disorder; nonverbal learning disability; autism spectrum disorders (such as Asperger's syndrome); and mood and anxiety disorders. However, it's the lagging skills, rather than the disorders, that tell us the most about why a student is behaviorally challenging.

If challenging behavior is the result of lagging skills, then we can understand such behavior as a form of developmental delay, no different from any other. Students with reading inefficiencies lack the skills required for being proficient readers. Kids with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges lack the skills required for proficiently handling life's social, emotional, and behavioral challenges.

This is exciting knowledge, a breath of fresh air. For a long time, we've been thinking that challenging behavior was the result of poor motivation or lax parental discipline. Consequently, many school discipline programs are geared toward giving challenging students the incentive to do well. Detention and suspension are forms of punishment, and rewards are cut from the same bolt of cloth. But if these interventions were working, the frequent flyers wouldn't be getting punished and losing anticipated rewards so often.

When we view frequent flyers through the prism of lagging skills, it's easy to understand why rewards and punishments haven't been getting the job done: These interventions don't teach kids the skills they lack. This is akin to taking antibiotics or administering chemotherapy for ailments that antibiotics and chemotherapy don't fix.

When Are Challenging Students Challenging?

When the demands we place on students exceed their ability to adapt, a clash occurs between the lagging skills and the demands for those skills, what I call the *clash of the two forces*. Of course, if the environment demands certain skills and a kid has those skills, the clash doesn't occur and challenging behavior doesn't happen. By the same token, if a kid lacks skills but the environment doesn't demand those skills, there is no clash and no corresponding challenging behavior (this explains why kids who lack skills aren't challenging all the time). But when the environment demands skills that a kid lacks, the clash of the two forces occurs and the likelihood of challenging behavior increases.

In each challenging student, this clash occurs under highly predictable conditions, which we sometimes refer to as *antecedents*, *triggers*, or *situations*. I refer to them as *unsolved problems*.

For example, participating appropriately in circle time requires skills. If a student lacks those skills, then this clash of the two forces heightens the likelihood of challenging behavior. Circle time is, therefore, a problem waiting to be solved. Similarly, completing various class assignments requires skills. If a student lacks these skills, then this clash of the two forces increases the likelihood of challenging behavior. Thus, the accumulation of class assignments that a student lacks the skills to complete is an unsolved problem.

Each challenging kid has a "pile" of unsolved problems that reliably and predictably precipitate challenging behavior. The goal of intervention is to move problems from the unsolved pile to the solved pile. Solved problems don't cause challenging behavior; only unsolved problems do.

Although flexibility and adaptability, frustration tolerance, and problem solving are the general domains in which behaviorally challenging students lack skills, we can identify a variety of more specific skills using a tool called the Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems, or ALSUP (see fig. 1, p. 32).

Figure 1. Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems

Student's Name _____ Date _____

Lagging Skills

Score

Scoring Key
0 – Never
1 – Sometimes
2 – Often
3 – Always

____Difficulty handling transitions, shifting from one mind-set or task to another
____Difficulty doing things in a logical sequence or prescribed order
____Difficulty persisting on challenging or tedious tasks
____Poor sense of time
____Difficulty reflecting on multiple thoughts or ideas simultaneously
____Difficulty maintaining focus
____Difficulty considering the likely outcomes or consequences of actions (impulsive)
____Difficulty considering a range of solutions to a problem
____Difficulty expressing concerns, needs, or thoughts in words
____Difficulty understanding what is being said
____Difficulty managing emotional response to frustration so as to think rationally
____Chronic irritability and/or anxiety that significantly impede capacity for problem-solving or heighten frustration
____Difficulty seeing the "grays"; concrete, literal, black-and-white thinking
____Difficulty deviating from rules, routine
____Difficulty handling unpredictability, ambiguity, uncertainty, novelty
____Difficulty shifting from original idea, plan, or solution
____Difficulty taking into account situational factors that would suggest the need to adjust a plan of action
____Inflexible, inaccurate interpretations; cognitive distortions or biases (for example, "Everyone's out to get me," "Nobody likes me," "You always blame me," "It's not fair," "I'm stupid")
____Difficulty attending to or accurately interpreting social cues; poor perception of social nuances
____Difficulty starting conversations, entering groups, connecting with people; lack of other basic social skills
____Difficulty seeking attention in appropriate ways
____Difficulty appreciating how his or her behavior is affecting other people
____Difficulty empathizing with others, appreciating another person's perspective or point of view
____Difficulty appreciating how he or she is coming across or being perceived by others

Unsolved Problems

Home
Score
____Waking up or getting out of bed in the morning
____Completing morning routine/getting ready for school
____Sensory hypersensitivities
____Starting or completing homework or a particular academic task
____Food quantities, choices, preferences, or timing
____Time spent in front of a screen (TV, video games, computer)
____Going to or getting ready for bed at night
____Boredom
____Sibling interactions
____Cleaning room or completing household chores
____Taking medicine
____Riding in car or wearing seatbelt

School
Score
____Shifting from one specific task to another (specify)
____Getting started on or completing class assignment (specify)
____Interactions with a particular classmate or teacher (specify)
____Behavior in hallway, at recess, in cafeteria, on school bus, waiting in line (specify)
____Talking at appropriate times
____Specific academic tasks or demands, for example, writing assignments (specify)
____Handling disappointment for losing at a game, not coming in first, not being first in line, and so on (specify)

Others (list)
1. _____
2. _____

Source: Website for *Lost at School*, by R. Greene, wwwlostatschool.org/ALSUP.pdf © Center for Collaborative Problem Solving, 2008. Adapted with permission.

The ALSUP helps educators identify the various lagging skills that set the stage for challenging behavior, such as having difficulty shifting from one task to another, maintaining control over one's emotions so as to think clearly, and appreciating the effect of one's behavior on others. It also helps reveal the specific unsolved problems that are setting challenging behavior in motion, such as being unable to start or complete a particular class assignment, work cooperatively with a classmate, raise one's hand during class discussions, handle teasing on the school bus, or handle disappointment at losing a game during recess.

If you're cringing at the thought of more paperwork, you'll take some comfort in the fact that the ALSUP is one single-sided sheet of paper. It's intended to be used as a discussion guide to ensure that school staff members are wearing the right lenses in their views of behaviorally challenging students and that they are identifying information (unsolved problems) that will lead them directly to what they should be doing next (helping students solve those problems).

The Spectrum of Looking Bad

Let's turn our attention briefly to a question that, unfortunately, consumes far more time and thought than it

should: What do kids do when the clash of the two forces occurs? Something that we—and they—wish they wouldn't do. Something on what I call the Spectrum of Looking Bad.

To be clear about where I'm heading, I'm not a very diagnostically oriented mental health professional. I don't think that diagnoses give us much information about the skills a kid lacks or about the unsolved problems that set in motion his or her challenging behavior. Thus, I don't think that diagnoses are the best litmus test for determining whether a student qualifies for special services at school—especially because mental health professionals often can't even agree on what diagnosis makes the most sense for a given kid. That's why challenging kids often accumulate quite a few diagnoses. Unfortunately, diagnoses scare away potential "helpers" who feel that they lack the expertise to help. Diagnoses *pathologize* kids. But the clash of the two forces tells us that it takes two to tango.

What behaviors are on the Spectrum of Looking Bad? At the less objectionable end are behaviors such as whining, pouting, sulking, crying, and withdrawing. Moving in the more objectionable direction are behaviors that set the stage for a student to be referred into the school discipline program, such as screaming, swearing, hitting, spitting, biting, kicking, throwing, and destroying. At the extreme end of the spectrum are behaviors that are severely injurious to the student or others, such as head-banging, cutting, stabbing, and shooting. But they all occur when the demands placed on a student exceed that student's capacity to adapt.

Although adults tend to focus on what a student *did* when he or she was looking bad, I'm much more focused on *why* and *when* that student did it. The answers to these questions set the stage for effective intervention.

Actionable Information

It's easy to become overwhelmed with all the information available about behaviorally challenging students. They tend to accumulate lots of paper: reports, evaluations, placements, behavior plans, functional assessments, and so on. Of course, that's often an indication that all that paper hasn't led to a positive outcome.

Moreover, the discussions that often take place about challenging students aren't as productive as they could be because they tend to focus on things that we can do nothing about. Too often, adults focus on the bad things that have happened in a student's history and invoke those historical facts as causal:

- His parents are divorced. (Yes, but so are the parents of many of your well-behaved students—and what can you do about it anyway?)
- Her mother has some "issues." (Yes, but so do the mothers of many of your well-behaved students.)
- He comes from *that* neighborhood. (Yes, but so do a lot of kids in your building who are well behaved.)
- She was exposed to substances in utero. (You're too late.)
- He had a forceps delivery. (You're still too late.)
- She's adopted.
- He comes from that foreign country or that neighboring state.
- Her father's in jail.
- His older brother was a bad egg, too.
- She's rich.
- He's poor.

These factors aren't completely irrelevant, of course, but if you spend a lot of time in meetings talking

about things about which you can do nothing, staff members may come to the conclusion that they cannot help the student. If you focus on lagging skills and unsolved problems, however, staff members will emerge with a clear sense of the problems they need to solve to reduce a student's challenging behavior. You want to spend most of your time homing in on and clarifying *actionable information*—things you can actually do something about.

Solving Problems

So what are we going to do differently in our school discipline program, now that we know why and when challenging kids are challenging?

If we've completed the ALSUP for a particular student, then we're already looking through the appropriate lenses, and we've identified the unsolved problems that are reliably and predictably setting in motion the student's challenging behavior. There's only one thing left to do, and it's the hardest part: We need to start solving those problems.

There are three ways in which adults solve problems with kids. I call those options Plans A, B, and C.

Plan A

Plan A—which is very popular in schools (and in lots of other places)— involves solving problems *unilaterally*, through the imposition of adult will (and often accompanied by adult-imposed consequences). Unilateral problem solving actually *heightens* the likelihood of challenging behavior in many students. That's because when someone imposes his or her will on you (something about which most of us aren't all that enthusiastic) it requires skills to handle the situation well—skills that challenging students often lack. Adding rewards (for complying with adult will) and punishments (for failing to do so) to the mix often just adds fuel to the fire. Moreover, unilateral problem solving frequently doesn't solve problems in the long run and doesn't teach challenging kids the skills they lack.

Plan B

Plan B involves solving problems collaboratively. I'm much more enthusiastic about this approach. Plan B is composed of three basic steps. The first—Empathy—involves gathering information from a student to achieve the clearest possible understanding of his or her perspective on a given unsolved problem. The second—Define the Problem—involves entering the adult's concern or perspective on the same unsolved problem into consideration. The third—Invitation—is where student and adult brainstorm solutions that are realistic and mutually satisfactory.

Research indicates that the Collaborative Problem Solving model is highly effective (Greene, 2004; Greene, Ablon, & Martin, 2006; Greene, 2010b) at reducing office referrals, detentions, and suspensions. The hard part is getting good at Plan B, which requires bravery, practice, continuity, and excellent communication. And there are many ways in which Plan B can go awry. Sometimes adults are certain they already know what a kid's concerns are, so they don't put any effort into figuring them out. Sometimes the concerns of the two parties aren't clear enough to begin considering potential solutions. You can't solve a problem until you've adequately identified both parties' concerns. And sometimes adults do a great job of empathizing with the kid and getting concerns on the table, but then they suddenly fall back on Plan A and unilaterally "solve" the problem themselves.

Plan C

Plan C involves dropping some unsolved problems, at least for now. The unsolved problems of behaviorally challenging students have piled up over time, and we can't solve them all in one fell swoop. Some prioritization is necessary, and low-priority unsolved problems—the ones that the adults have decided they don't need to work on right now—fall into Plan C. This keeps everyone from becoming overwhelmed and helps adults and students focus on a few unsolved problems at a time.

It Takes a Team

The behaviorally challenging students being sent with great regularity to the office aren't the only frequent flyers in the building. The teachers sending them are frequent flyers, too. These teachers are going to need help trying on new lenses, coming to the recognition that it takes two to create an unsolved problem and two to solve it, realizing that the assistant principal can't do it alone, and trying out and practicing unfamiliar strategies. Transforming school discipline is a team effort that must be led by administrators with vision, energy, focus, perseverance, a willingness to self-reflect, and an ability to bring people together.

Are you wondering about that assistant principal who wanted to make a significant dent in the discipline referrals, suspensions, and detentions in his building? He gathered a core group of staff members and met weekly to discuss frequent flyers and review the week's attempts at Plan B. By the end of the school year, he had a group of teachers who had become proficient— as he had done—at using Plan B and had solved a lot of problems along the way. This year's project? To expand the program to other frequent flyers in the building.

The cost of doing things the way we have always done them is high. Both types of frequent flyers badly need us to change course.

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Endnote

[1] See *The Explosive Child* (Harper Collins, 2010) and *Lost at School* (Scribner, 2009) for an in-depth discussion of Collaborative Problem Solving.

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