



Collaborative & Proactive Solutions  
**THIS IS HOW PROBLEMS GET SOLVED**

# Understanding and Helping Kids with Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Challenges

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# SIX KEY THEMES

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1. Emphasis is on **problems** (and solving them) rather than on behaviors (and modifying them)...**upstream** (not downstream)
  - Behaviors are not the only observable data... unsolved problems are observable too



# SIX KEY THEMES

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2. The problem solving is **collaborative** rather than unilateral...something you're doing *with* the kid rather than *to* him
3. The problem solving is **proactive** rather than emergent
  - This is possible if we answer two important questions: **why** and **when** is this kid challenging?
4. Understanding comes before helping



# SIX KEY THEMES

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5. Kids do well if they can
  - If the kid could do well, he would do well
6. Doing well is preferable
  - We've been focused on motivation when we should have been focused on skills



# ANSWER TO THE QUESTION WHY:

## Challenging Kids are Lacking Skills

Challenging kids are challenging because they're lacking the skills not to be challenging... they are delayed in the development of crucial cognitive skills, such as flexibility/adaptability, frustration tolerance, and problem-solving.

- Challenging kids aren't always challenging
- They're challenging in conditions in which certain skills are being demanded
- It's a developmental delay



# ANSWER TO THE QUESTION WHY:

## Challenging Kids are Lacking Skills

Challenging behavior *communicates* that the kid doesn't have the skills to meet certain demands and expectations...behavior is simply the signal...the fever...the byproduct.



# WHAT SKILLS ARE BEHAVIORALLY CHALLENGING KIDS LACKING?

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- ✓ Executive skills
- ✓ Language processing/communication skills
- ✓ Emotion regulation skills
- ✓ Cognitive flexibility skills
- ✓ Social skills



# THE TOP 5

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## Skills That Foster the Better Side of Human Nature

- Empathy
- Appreciating how one's behavior is affecting others
- Resolving disagreements without conflict
- Taking another's perspective
- Honesty



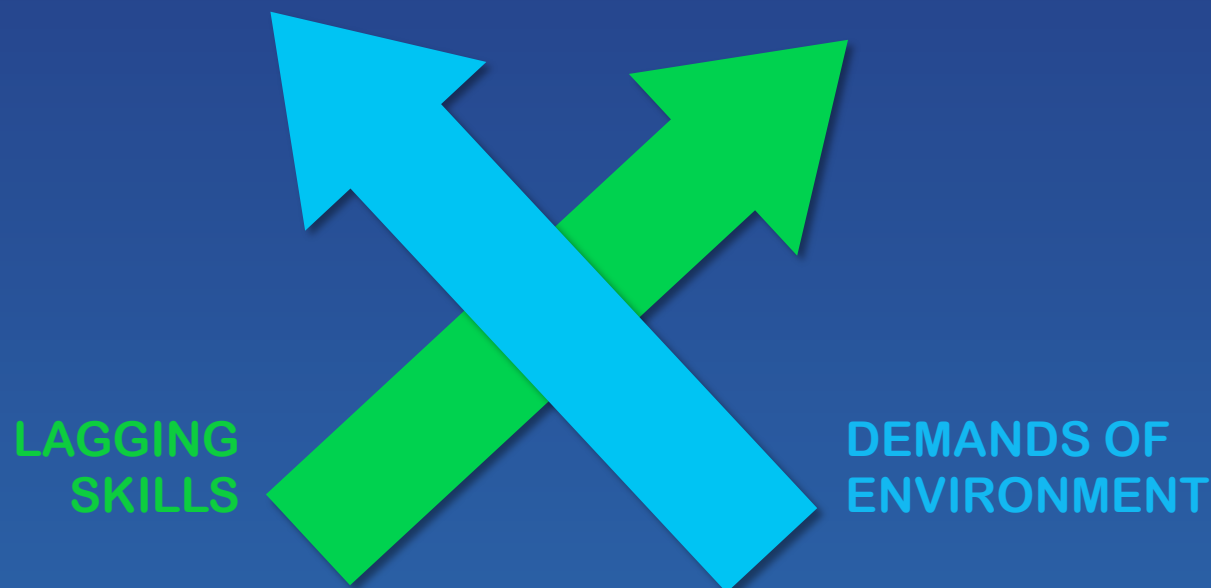


# ANSWER TO THE QUESTION WHEN:

## *The Clash of the Two Forces*

Challenging episodes occur when the demands being placed upon a person outstrip his or her skills

- “unmet expectations” = “unsolved problems”
- results in “incompatibility episodes”



# ADULT ROLES IN THE LIVES OF BEHAVIORALLY CHALLENGING KIDS

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- Identify lagging skills and unsolved problems
- Solve problems collaboratively and proactively
  - *Promotes a problem solving partnership*
  - *Engages kids in solving the problems that affect their lives*
  - *Produces more effective, durable solutions*
  - *Simultaneously teaches skills*



# ASSESSMENT OF LAGGING SKILLS AND UNSOLVED PROBLEMS (ALSUP)


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**ALSUP** ASSESSMENT OF LAGGING SKILLS & UNSOLVED PROBLEMS

CHILD'S NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

**INSTRUCTIONS:** The ALSUP is intended for use as a discussion guide rather than as a freestanding check-list or rating scale. It should be used to identify specific lagging skills and unsolved problems that pertain to a particular child or adolescent. If a lagging skill applies, check it off and then (before moving on to the next lagging skill) identify the specific expectations the child is having difficulty meeting in association with that lagging skill (unsolved problems). A non-exhaustive list of sample unsolved problems is shown at the bottom of the page.

LAGGING SKILLS	UNSOLVED PROBLEMS
<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty handling transitions, shifting from one mindset or task to another	
<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty doing things in a logical sequence or prescribed order	
<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty persisting on challenging or tedious tasks	
<input type="checkbox"/> Poor sense of time	
<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty maintaining focus	
<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty considering the likely outcomes or consequences of actions (Impulsive)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty considering a range of solutions to a problem	
<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty expressing concerns, needs, or thoughts in words	
<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty managing emotional response to frustration so as to think rationally	
<input type="checkbox"/> Chronic irritability and/or anxiety significantly impede capacity for problem-solving or heighten frustration	
<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty seeing "grays"/concrete, literal, black & white, thinking	
<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty deviating from rules, routine	
<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty handling unpredictability, ambiguity, uncertainty, novelty	
<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty shifting from original idea, plan, or solution	
<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty taking into account situational factors that would suggest the need to adjust a plan of action	
<input type="checkbox"/> Inflexible, inaccurate interpretations/cognitive distortions or biases (e.g., "Everyone's out to get me," "Nobody likes me," "You always blame me, it's not fair," "I'm stupid")	
<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty attending to or accurately interpreting social cues/poor perception of social nuances	
<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty starting conversations, entering groups, connecting with people/lacking other basic social skills	
<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty seeking attention in appropriate ways	
<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty appreciating how his/her behavior is affecting others	
<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty empathizing with others, appreciating another person's perspective or point of view	
<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty appreciating how s/he is coming across or being perceived by others	
<input type="checkbox"/> Sensory/motor difficulties	

**UNSOLVED PROBLEMS GUIDE:**  
Unsolved problems are the specific expectations a child is having difficulty meeting. Unsolved problems should be free of maladaptive behavior, free of adult theories and explanations, "split" (not "clumped"), and specific.

**HOME EXAMPLES**

- Difficulty getting out of bed in the morning in time to get to school
- Difficulty getting started on or completing homework (specific assignment)
- Difficulty coming indoors for dinner when playing outside
- Difficulty agreeing with brother about what TV show to watch after school
- Difficulty with the feelings of seams in socks
- Difficulty brushing teeth before bedtime

**SCHOOL EXAMPLES**

- Difficulty moving from choice time to math
- Difficulty sitting next to Kyle during circle time
- Difficulty raising hand during social studies discussions
- Difficulty getting started on project on tectonic plates in geography
- Difficulty standing in line for lunch

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# ASSESSMENT OF LAGGING SKILLS AND UNSOLVED PROBLEMS (ALSUP)

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- On the left side is a representative list of the skills frequently found lagging in challenging kids
- Unsolved problems are identified on the right side
- The ALSUP is meant to be used as a **discussion guide**...not simply a checklist or mechanism for quantifying
- The ALSUP helps caregivers focus on things they can actually do something about (if we only focus on things we can't do anything about, we are likely to come to the conclusion that we can't do anything to help)
- We want to avoid the “correlation equals causation error”



# USING THE ALSUP

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- Participants receive a blank copy of the ALSUP
  - The kid is not present in the meeting
- Start at the top...don't "cherry-pick" lagging skills
- After checking off a given lagging skill, identify the unsolved problems that spring to mind when thinking of that lagging skill
  - "Can you give me some examples of times when Theresa is having difficulty..."
- Come up with as many unsolved problems as possible for an endorsed lagging skill



# USING THE ALSUP

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## Guidelines for Identifying Unsolved Problems

*"A problem well stated is a problem half solved."*

*-Charles Kettering*

The wording of the unsolved problem on the ALSUP is going to translate into the words that are used when the unsolved problem is introduced to the child when it comes time to solve it together. The wording should be kid-friendly and...



# USING THE ALSUP

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## Guidelines for Identifying Unsolved Problems

- Free of challenging behaviors (Difficulty...)
- Free of adult theories (no need to explain anything)
- Split, not clumped
  - *“Split early, maybe you can clump later...but if you clump early, you’ll never find out”*
- As specific as possible
  - STRATEGY #1: Who, What, Where/When...NOT why)
  - STRATEGY #2: What expectation is the child having difficulty meeting?



# USING THE ALSUP

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## A Few More Guidelines

- Don't go down the entire list of lagging skills and then go back to identify unsolved problems
- Don't identify unsolved problems first and then go back to decide which lagging skills apply to that unsolved problem
- No need to establish which lagging skill best explains a particular unsolved problem...just assume multiple lagging skills can contribute to the same unsolved problem
- No need to write the same unsolved problem more than once
- You're not looking for "hundred percenters"
- Very important to consider whether the kid is actually capable of meeting a given expectation





# USING THE ALSUP

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## Expect lightbulbs to go on when...

- Caregivers come to recognize that a kid is, indeed, lacking many skills
- Caregivers come to recognize why prior interventions have been ineffective
- Caregivers begin to regret the manner in which they've been interacting with a kid based on incorrect assumptions
- Caregivers become aware that unsolved problems occur under highly specific conditions
- Caregivers recognize that unsolved problems are predictable and therefore be solved proactively
- Caregivers begin pondering how they're going to create mechanisms for changing practices given what they now know about a kid's difficulties



# MORE UNSOLVED PROBLEMS

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## Ask the Kid

- “What are people getting on your case about?”
- “What are you getting in trouble for?”



# NEXT GOAL

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## *Prioritizing*

- You can't work on everything at once
- Focus on the “big fish” first
  - **SAFETY:** Those unsolved problems contributing to unsafe behavior
  - **FREQUENCY:** Those unsolved problems contributing to incompatibility episodes most often
  - **GRAVITY:** Those unsolved problems having the greatest negative impact on the kid or others



# THE PROBLEM SOLVING PLAN (Plan B Flowchart)

**PROBLEM SOLVING PLAN**

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CHILD'S NAME \_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_

UNSOLVED PROBLEM #1

Adult taking the lead on Plan B: \_\_\_\_\_

Kid concerns identified: (Empathy step)  
DATE \_\_\_\_\_

Adult concerns identified: (Define the Problem step)  
DATE \_\_\_\_\_

Solution agreed upon: (Invitation step)  
DATE \_\_\_\_\_

Problem Solved?  
YES?  DATE \_\_\_\_\_  
NO?  COMMENT: \_\_\_\_\_

UNSOLVED PROBLEM #2

Adult taking the lead on Plan B: \_\_\_\_\_

Kid concerns identified: (Empathy step)  
DATE \_\_\_\_\_

Adult concerns identified: (Define the Problem step)  
DATE \_\_\_\_\_

Solution agreed upon: (Invitation step)  
DATE \_\_\_\_\_

Problem Solved?  
YES?  DATE \_\_\_\_\_  
NO?  COMMENT: \_\_\_\_\_

UNSOLVED PROBLEM #3

Adult taking the lead on Plan B: \_\_\_\_\_

Kid concerns identified: (Empathy step)  
DATE \_\_\_\_\_


Adult concerns identified: (Define the Problem step)  
DATE \_\_\_\_\_

Solution agreed upon: (Invitation step)  
DATE \_\_\_\_\_

Problem Solved?  
YES?  DATE \_\_\_\_\_  
NO?  COMMENT: \_\_\_\_\_

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# KEEPING TRACK

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## *The Problem Solving Plan (Plan B Flowchart)*

- Specify high-priority unsolved problems
- Designate person primarily responsible for solving the problem with the child
- Follow the remaining sequence to solve the problem
- Add new unsolved problems as old ones are solved



# OPTIONS FOR HANDLING UNSOLVED PROBLEMS

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## PLAN A:

Solve the problem unilaterally

## PLAN B:

Solve the problem collaboratively

## PLAN C:

Set the problem aside for now



# PLAN A

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## *Solve the problem unilaterally*

- The adult decides what the solution is and imposes it, often accompanied by adult-imposed consequences
  - *“I’ve decided that...”*
- **PLAN A** causes incompatibility episodes in challenging kids
- **PLAN A** is not a partnership
- **PLAN A** does not involve kids in solving the problems that affect their lives
- **PLAN A** provides no information whatsoever about the factors making it difficult for the kid to meet a given expectations...solutions arrived at through Plan A are **“uninformed”**



# TIMING IS EVERYTHING

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## INCOMPATIBILITY EPISODES ARE HIGHLY PREDICTABLE

**CRISIS MANAGEMENT:** Intervention is reactive and occurs emergently, in the heat of the moment (“What should I do *when?*”)

**CRISIS PREVENTION:** Intervention is planned and occurs proactively, well before highly predictable incompatibility episodes occur again (“What am I going to do *before?*”)





# PLAN C

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*Set the problem aside for now*

Not about giving in or capitulating... it's about prioritizing

- EMERGENCY C: “OK”
- PROACTIVE C:
  - don't bring it up
  - an agreed-upon interim plan for tabling the problem for now

*Good parenting and good teaching mean  
being responsive to the hand you've been dealt*



# PLAN B

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*Solve the problem collaboratively*

1. **Empathy Step**  
(gather information so as to identify child's concerns)
2. **Define Adult Concerns Step**  
(identify adult concerns)
3. **Invitation Step**  
(collaborate on a solution that is realistic and mutually satisfactory)



# PLAN B

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## *The Empathy Step*

### GOAL:

Gather information from the kid so as to achieve the clearest possible understanding of his concern or perspective on a given unsolved problem

### INTRODUCTION:

The Empathy step begins with the words “I’ve noticed that” followed by an unsolved problem and an initial inquiry (“What’s up?”)



# PLAN B

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## *The Empathy Step*

What happens after “What’s up?”

- The kid says something
- The kid says nothing or “I don’t know”
- The kid says, “I don’t have a problem with that” or “I don’t care”
- The kid says, “I don’t want to talk about it”
- The kid responds defensively (“I don’t have to talk to you!”)



# PLAN B

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## *The Empathy Step:* The Kid Says Something

### DRILLING STRATEGIES:

- **Reflective listening** and **clarifying statements**
- Asking about **the who, what, where/when** of the unsolved problem
- Asking about why the problem occurs under some **conditions** and not others
- Asking the kid what s/he's **thinking** in the midst of the unsolved problem
- Breaking the problem down into its **component parts**
- **Discrepant Observation**
- **Tabling** (and asking for more concerns)
- **Summarizing** (and asking for more concerns)



# PLAN B

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## *The Empathy Step:* The Kid Says Something (cont.)

### ADDITIONAL POINTERS:

- You're not thinking about solutions yet (the Empathy step is a "Solution-Free Zone")
- Remember, "drilling" isn't "grilling"...it involves "listening," not "lessoning" or "lessening" (dismissing, trumping)
- Stay **neutral, non-defensive** throughout (suspend your emotional response...the Empathy step isn't about you)
- Don't rush (the Empathy step is not a mechanical formality...you're really curious...you really want to know!)
- You're not ready to leave the Empathy step until you've summarized and asked for more and have a clear understanding of the kid's concern or perspective



# PLAN B

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## *The Empathy Step: I Don't Know/Silence*

### WHAT TO DO:

- Don't freak
- Keep drilling

### IF HE'S STILL NOT TALKING, FIGURE OUT WHY:

- You used Plan A or Emergency Plan B instead of Proactive Plan B
- The Introduction wasn't specific, free of theories, free of maladaptive behaviors, split
- He doesn't trust you and/or the process yet (he has a lot of experience with Plan A)
- He really doesn't know
  - Maybe he's never thought about it before
  - Maybe you've never asked before
  - Maybe he hasn't thought about his concerns for a very long time
- He needs the problem broken down into its component parts
- He needs time to think (adults better get comfortable with silence)
- He's having difficulty putting his thoughts into words

### WHAT IF HE'S STILL NOT TALKING?

- Educated guessing/hypothesis testing



# PLAN B

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## *The Empathy Step:* Other Responses to “What’s Up?”

*“I don’t have a problem with that” or “I don’t care”*

- *that’s the beginning of his concern or perspective...start drilling!*
- *the kid almost certainly has a problem with all the conflict surrounding the unsolved problem*

*“I don’t want to talk about it”*

- *first, assume he has a good reason*
- *next, give him permission not to talk*
- *see if he’ll talk about why he doesn’t want to talk about it*
- *don’t do anything today that will reduce the likelihood of the kid talking to you tomorrow*

*Defensiveness (“I don’t have to talk to you!”)*

- *he may need reassurance that you’re not using Plan A*
  - *“I’m not telling you what to do”*
  - *“You’re not in trouble”*
  - *“I’m not mad at you”*
  - *“I’m just trying to understand”*



# PLAN B

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## The Define Adult Concerns Step

### GOAL:

Enter the adult's concern or perspective into consideration (possibly beginning with “The thing is...” or “My concern is...”)

### WHAT'S HARD:

Adults frequently don't know what their *concerns* are (though they do often know what their *solutions* are)...adult concerns are not merely a repetition of the expectation

- Adult concerns typically fall into one of two categories:
  - How the problem is affecting the kid (e.g., health, safety, learning)
  - How the problem is affecting others (e.g., health, safety, learning)
- The Define Adult Concerns step is a Solution-Free Zone, too...the first two steps are reserved exclusively for concerns



# PLAN B

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## The Invitation Step

### GOAL:

Collaborate on a solution that is **realistic** and **mutually satisfactory**

### WHAT'S HARD:

#### ▪The Wording:

- Should recap two concerns so as to summarize the problem to be solved (Starts with: “**I wonder if there’s a way...**”)
- The kid is given the first opportunity to generate solutions (“**Do you have any ideas?**”), but resolution of the problem is a team effort (collaborative)



# PLAN B

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## The Invitation Step (cont.)

- Goal is to demonstrate to the kid that you're as invested in getting his concern addressed as you are in getting your own concern addressed
- You don't know where the plane is landing before it takes off (no preordained solutions)
- If there are multiple concerns that cannot be addressed by the same solution, you'll need multiple solutions (and more than one Plan B)
- Before agreeing on a solution, give deliberate consideration to whether the solution is realistic and mutually satisfactory...if not, refine the original solution or think of alternatives
- Goal is to come up with a solution so the problem doesn't come up again...not to come up with a solution for what to do in the heat of the moment when the problem recurs (don't use the word "when" in the Invitation)
- Battling over solutions define a power struggle (a win/lose proposition)... solving problems collaboratively is a win/win proposition



# YOU' RE READY!

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## ADDITIONAL POINTERS

- The Invitation ends with an agreement to return to Plan B if the first solution doesn't stand the test of time
- Solving problems tends to be incremental...**the first solution seldom solves the problem durably**...most problems require more than one discussion
- Solutions that don't stand the test of time:
  - weren't as realistic as first thought
  - weren't as mutually satisfactory as thought
  - didn't address concerns that hadn't yet been identified or prioritized



# HOW ARE THE SKILLS TRAINED?

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- Some skills can be trained explicitly (in the traditional sense)
  - some social skills
  - language processing/communication skills
- Skills are being taught in each of the three steps of Plan B



# IMPLEMENTATION IN SCHOOLS AND FACILITIES (Start Small)

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- Leadership commitment
  - Time, continuity, participation
- Formation of Core Group (start small)
  - Practice using ALSUP and Plan B
  - Ensures that there are mentors to help others
  - Ensures structures that support the model are in place before full-scale implementation
  - Integrate paperwork into existing systems
  - Create new mechanisms for communication, follow-up
- Create a plan for spreading, training, coaching
  - Helping those who are having trouble
  - Revisiting/revising existing policies/procedures



# IS PLAN B RELEVANT FOR KIDS WITH VERY LIMITED COMMUNICATION SKILLS?

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- Reference point is **infants**
  - Identifying unsolved problems (requires excellent observational skills)
  - Identifying concerns
  - Collaborating on solutions
- Important Questions:
  - Does the child need additional training on the basics?
    - The relationship between problems and solutions
    - Basic concepts of problems and concerns
  - How is the child communicating now? Can we build on existing means of communication?
    - How can we help the child communicate more easily (pictures) about the basic components of problem-solving (problems, concerns, solutions)?



# FINAL QUESTIONS

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- Why do the problems that affect kids lives so often cause conflict between us and them?
- Are the ways in which we're going about parenting, teaching, disciplining, and interacting with our kids teaching the skills that foster the display of the characteristics on the more positive side of human nature?





# ADDITIONAL INFORMATION/RESOURCES

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