Collaborative Problem Solving

A Neurodevelopmentally Sensitive and Trauma-Informed Approach

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Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

MGH 1811

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Kids do well if they can...

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Kids do well if they can...

...if they can't,
something is getting in the way.
We need to figure out what
so we can help.

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Your understanding of a problem determines your solution ...

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Conventional Wisdom

The most common over-simplified understanding:

Because of poor (passive, permissive, inconsistent) parenting, kids learn to use challenging behavior to get things (e.g., attention) or escape / avoid things (e.g., work).

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Logical Solution

The most common over-simplifiedsolution:

Motivate compliant behavior through intensive, consistent programs of rewards, punishments and ignoring.

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Specific Components of Operant Approach

List of Target Behaviors
(priority is compliance)

Menu of Rewards and Punishments
(differential reinforcement)

Currency System

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What Consequences Do and Don't

Rewards, Punishments and Ignoring

DO:
Teach basic lessons & provide external motivation

DON'T:
Teach complex thinking skills, build relationships, help kids stay regulated

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Why Traditional Discipline Doesn't Work with our Most Challenging Kids:

Conventional wisdom is wrong!

Challenging kids lack *skill* not will

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Unconventional Wisdom: It's a Learning Disability

- Research in neurosciences has shown these kids are delayed in the development of crucial skills or have significant difficulty applying these skills when they are most needed

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Unconventional Wisdom: It's a Learning Disability

Which skills do these kids lack?

- flexibility/adaptability
- frustration tolerance
- problem-solving

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But if I've seen him do it sometimes!
So I know he can.

Applying a skill is dependent on ***state*** and ***context***

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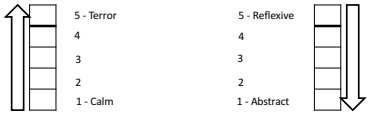
Threat Response

Mental State | **Cognition**



Adapted from Child Trauma Academy
Bruce Perry, MD

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What causes skill delays?

- Many different things!
  - Genetics
  - Environment
  - Trauma

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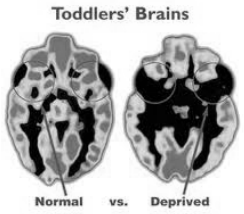
What causes lagging skills?

Chronic, overwhelming stress and trauma arrests brain development which manifests itself as lagging skills



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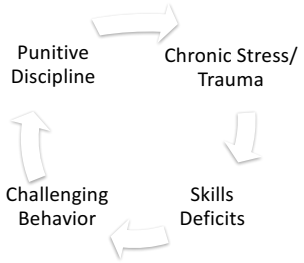
Cycle of Chronic Stress/ Trauma and Punitive Discipline



Adapted from Ablon and Pollastri,The School Discipline Fix, 2018

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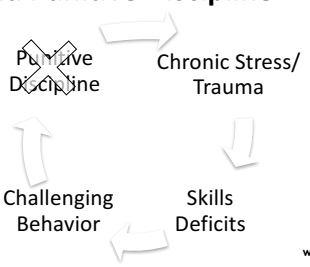
The Cycle of Chronic Stress/Trauma and Punitive Discipline

Ending



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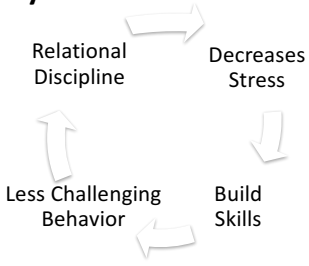
Positive Cycle of Relational Discipline



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Logical Intervention

Treat challenging behavior like you would any other learning disability:

- Assess which skills are lagging
- Use a different approach to teach those skills in increments the kid can handle

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Conventional Wisdom and Collaborative Problem Solving® (CPS):

Challenging Behavior

Conventional wisdom:
"Kids do well if they want to"
- Passive, permissive, inconsistent parenting
- Child trying to get or avoid things

Intervention:
Rewards, Punishments, Ignoring

Collaborative Problem Solving®:
"Kids do well if they can"
- Lagging 'thinking skills.
- Child has a kind of learning disability

Intervention:
Building skills through relational, collaborative problem solving process

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Phases of Approach

1. **Assessment:** identify the specific *problems to be solved* and *lagging thinking skills* precipitating the challenging behavior
2. **Planning:** Know your options for responding to these problems and what each option accomplishes
3. **Intervention:** Solve problems while building skills, confidence and relationships

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Assessment

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Equation of Challenging Behavior

Skills ≥ Problem = **Adaptive Behavior**

Skills < Problem = **Challenging Behavior**

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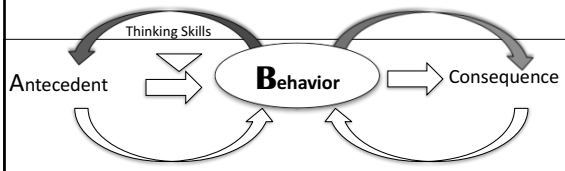
Functional Analysis of Cognition vs. Behavior



CPS **Conventional Wisdom**

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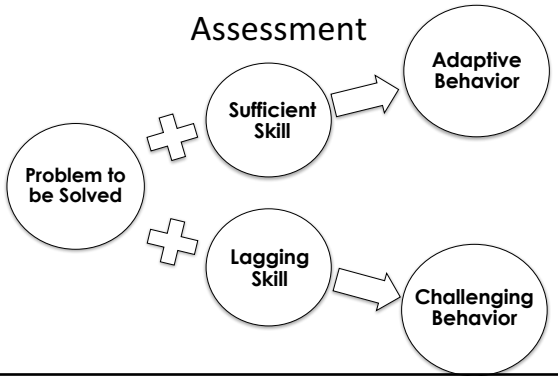
Assessment



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Assessment

Goal of assessment is to create 3 lists:

1. **Challenging behaviors**
   - The behavior you want to change
2. **Problems to be solved**
   - The situations in which the child is challenging
3. **Lagging skills**
   - Reasons why the child is challenging

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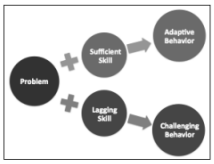
MASSACHUSETTS GENERAL HOSPITAL

Collaborative Problem Solving
Assessment and Planning Tool (CPS-APT)

Youth's Name _____ Date _____

ASSESSMENT: Identifying Challenging Behaviors, Problems to be Solved and Lagging Skills

Responding to life's demands requires a lot of thinking skills.
If a youth doesn't have the skills to handle a problem, it is likely to result in some form of challenging behavior.
Use this tool to make 3 lists:
List #1: Challenging behaviors.
List #2: Specific problems that lead to challenging behaviors.
List #3: Thinking skills to be developed (see following page).



PLAN A, B or C to be used	PROBLEMS TO BE SOLVED The situations **WHEN** the child has difficulty. Also known as expectations, precipitants, antecedents, triggers or contexts that can lead to challenging behavior. When making your list, describe the who, what, when and where and be specific! #2	LAGGING SKILLS The reasons the child is having difficulty handling these specific situations. Use the list of problems as your clues and refer to the list of lagging skills on the next page. If the problems to be solved are the WHEN, the lagging skils are the **WHY**. #3	CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS The challenging behaviors are the observable responses that often bring up the greatest concerns for adults and parents. Examples are yelling, swearing, refusing, hitting, crying, shutting down etc. #1

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Research on Skills Deficits

Challenging behavior is linked with deficits in the following areas of neuro-cognitive skill:

- Language and communication skills
  (e.g., Willcutt 2008)
- Attention and working memory skills
  (e.g., Cohen 2003)
- Emotion and self-regulation skills
  (e.g., Stieben et al., 2007)
- Cognitive flexibility skills
  (e.g., Van Goozen et al., 2004)
- Social thinking skills
  (e.g., Dodge et al., 2003)

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Assessing Thinking Skills

Explaining is not excusing!

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Phases of Approach

1. **Assessment:** identify the *problems to be solved* and *lagging thinking skills* precipitating the challenging behavior
2. **Planning:** Know your options for responding to these problems and what each option accomplishes
3. **Intervention:** Solve problems while building skills, confidence and relationships

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Goals of Intervention

1. Pursue high priority expectations
2. Reduce challenging behavior
3. Solve chronic problems durably
4. Build skills, confidence (ie, *intrinsic* motivation)
5. Create (or restore) a helping relationship

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Three Plans

(Your Options for responding to Problems)

Plan A: Impose adult will

Plan B: Solve the problem collaboratively

Plan C: Drop it (for now, at least)

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Three Plans

Plan A: Impose adult will

- **What goals ARE being pursued:**
  - *Pursuing expectations*
- **What goals are NOT being pursued:**
  - *Reducing challenging behavior*
  - *Solving problems durably*
  - *Building skills, confidence*
  - *Creating (or restore) a helping relationship*

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Three Plans

Plan C: Drop it (for now, at least)

Being strategic – not *giving in*

- **What goals ARE being pursued:**
  - *Reducing challenging behavior*
- **What goals are NOT being pursued:**
  - *Pursuing expectations*
  - *Solving problems durably*
  - *Building skills, confidence*
  - *Creating (or restore) a helping relationship*

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Three Plans

Plan B: Work towards solving the problem in a mutually satisfactory and realistic manner

- **What goals ARE being pursued:**
  - *Pursuing expectations*
  - *Reducing challenging behavior*
  - *Solving problems durably*
  - *Building skills, confidence*
  - *Creating (or restore) a helping relationship*

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Goals Achieved by the Three Plans

GOALS	PLAN A	PLAN C	PLAN B
Try to get your expectation met	✔	✖	✔
Reduce challenging behavior	✖	✔	✔
Build skills, confidence	✖	✖	✔
Solve problems	✖	✖	✔
Build relationship	✖	?	✔

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Factors to Consider when Prioritizing Problems to Solve

1. Degree of Relationship
2. Youth's Stress Tolerance

Both Strong?

You can work on harder problems that will be more dysregulating (*higher dose*)

Both Weak?

Start with easier problems that will be less dysregulating (*lower dose* = problems the child is more invested in / you are more flexible with)

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Planning

After you decide which problems you want to work on first using Plan B, you will need to decide what Plan you will use for the other problems in the meantime

You only have two other options: Plan A or Plan C
- Neither Plan A nor Plan C will solve the problem, build skills or a helping relationship
- What's more important to you in the meantime: Pursuing your expectation (Plan A) or keeping the kid calm (Plan C)?

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Phases of Approach

1. **Assessment:** identify the specific *problems to be solved* and *lagging thinking skills* precipitating the challenging behavior
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Managing Expectations

- A helping relationship isn't built overnight
- Neither are skills (just like any other type of learning disability)

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Reminder!

Challenging behaviors are highly predictable.

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Plan B Timing

EMERGENCY B

Takes place in the midst of challenging behavior occurring (yet again): crisis management/de-escalation

PROACTIVE B

Takes place well before challenging behavior recurs: (crisis prevention)

A prepared adult and a calm child are more likely to understand and solve problems

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Plan B Ingredients

1. **EMPATHIZE:** Clarify child concern
2. **SHARE** adult concern
3. **COLLABORATE:** Brainstorm, assess and choose solution

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Plan B Ingredients

1. EMPATHIZE: Clarify child concern
2. SHARE adult concern
3. COLLABORATE: Brainstorm, assess and choose solution

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Empathize: Clarify Child Concern

THE GOAL: Gather information to understand the kid's ***specific concern or perspective (what's going on for them) or what is hard for them*** about the situation

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Empathize: Clarify Child Concern

THE SCRIPT: Start with a ***neutral*** observation like

- **"I've noticed that…"**
- **"It seems like…"**
- **"It looks as if …"**

Followed by an inquiry:

- **"What's up?"**

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Empathize: Clarify Child Concern

TIPS for starting off on the right foot:

DO:

- State the *problem to be solved*
- Stick with the facts or externalize the problem

DO NOT:

- Start with the challenging behavior
- Blame or assume

But its not all about the words: body language, tone etc matter!

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Empathize: Clarify Child Concern

THE TOOLS: Detective work to clarify concerns requires probing and drilling down using a combination of 4 tools:

- clarifying questions
- educated guessing
- reflective listening*
- reassurance*

*** Regulating tools**

THE FEELING: EMPATHIC, patient, open-minded listening

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Empathize: Clarify Child Concern

How do you know when you are READY TO MOVE ON?

- Do you have a clear understanding of the child's concern or perspective?
- Have you learned something new?
- Are you wanting to suggest a solution?
- Is the child calm (regulated) and accessible (because the next ingredient isn't calming!)?

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Plan B Ingredients

1. **EMPATHIZE:** Clarify child concern
2. **SHARE** adult concern
3. **COLLABORATE:** Brainstorm, assess and choose solution

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Share Adult Concern

THE GOAL: to make sure the adult's ***concern / perspective*** is on the table

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Share Adult Concern

How do you know when you are READY TO MOVE ON?

- Do you have *two* sets of *concerns* / perspectives on table? (not two sets of *solutions* = a power struggle ("dueling solutions")
- Is child still calm and accessible (regulated)? If not, re-empathize!

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Plan B Ingredients

1. **EMPATHIZE:** Clarify child concern
2. **SHARE** adult concern
3. **COLLABORATE:** Brainstorm, assess and choose solution

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Collaborate: Brainstorm, Assess, Choose

THE GOAL: to ***brainstorm*** solutions together so as to address both concerns, assess them and choose one to try

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Collaborate: Brainstorm, Assess, Choose

THE SCRIPT: Recap the concerns to summarize the problem to be solved:

- *"I wonder if there's a way that* (insert both concerns)*" or "I bet we can think of something so that* (insert both concerns)"

Then bite your tongue and ask:

- *"Do you have any ideas?" (WAIT first but its ok to suggest some if the child can't)*

Any idea is a good idea!

- *"That's an idea. Let's think it through together."*

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Collaborate: Brainstorm, Assess, Choose

THE TOOLS: *Ask the child to think it through together with this "litmus test":*

- Does it address {insert youth concern(s)}?
- Does it address {my/our concern(s)}?
- Is it doable / realistic (*think* skills!)?
- If we do it, will it bring up any additional concerns?
- When can we talk again to see how it worked?

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Collaborate: Brainstorm, Assess, Choose

How do you know when you are READY TO MOVE ON?

- When you have a mutually satisfactory and realistic solution
- And a follow-up plan to enact the solution and revisit the problem if the solution doesn't work

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Plan B: Skills Modeled and Practiced

1. **EMPATHIZE: Clarify child concern**
   Identifying, clarifying and expressing concerns, regulating emotions
2. **SHARE adult concern**
   Perspective-taking, recognizing impact on others, empathy, impulse control
3. **COLLABORATE: Brainstorm, assess and choose solution**
   Generating solutions, reflecting on multiple thoughts, considering outcomes, moving off original idea

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Activating the Stress Response Naturally

- Doesn't require transfer of skills to "real world" (e.g., DuPaul et al., 1994;Gresham, 1985, 1998)
- Respects specificity principle of neuro-plasticity: activates the specific neural network involved in applying skills (artificial circumstances don't recruit those specific systems)

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Activating the Stress Response Naturally

- Practices multiple skills at the same time and the integration of those skills
- All occurs in a *relational* context – you can't change a relational pattern unless you are engaged in a relational interaction

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Activating the Stress Response Safely

- You can't change a neural network without activating that specific network
- You have to activate the stress response (stress the child) in order to change the stress response
- Dilemma: how do you activate the stress response safely?
  - With the right DOSE and PATTERN: moderate, predictable and controlled (Perry & Ablon, 2019)

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Plan B Pattern

- **Moderate: choice of problem and how you approach it**
- Predictable: same 3 ingredients in same order
- Controlled: returning to regulating ingredients whenever needed

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Three Plans

Plan A: Impose adult will

- Activates stress response
- Increases power differential risking dysregulation
- Dose too intense to change stress response

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Three Plans

Plan C: Drop it (for now, at least)

- Decreases power differential
- Does not trigger child or activate stress response
- No dosing to change stress response

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Three Plans

Plan B: Work towards solving the problem in a mutually satisfactory and realistic manner

- Activates stress response
- Decreases power differential
- Moderate dosing to change stress response

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Factors to Consider when Choosing Problems to Solve

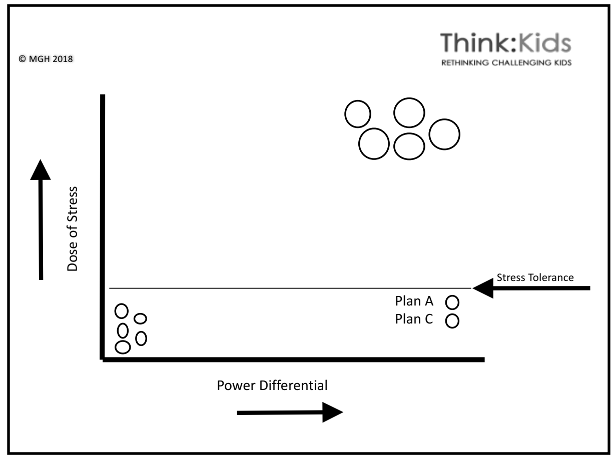
1. Degree of Relationship
2. Youth's Stress Tolerance

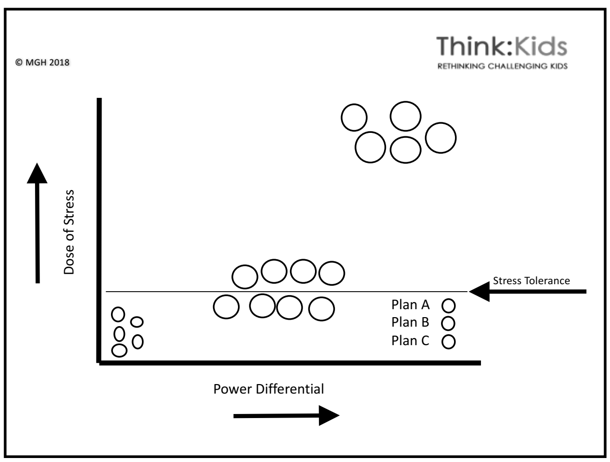
Both Strong?

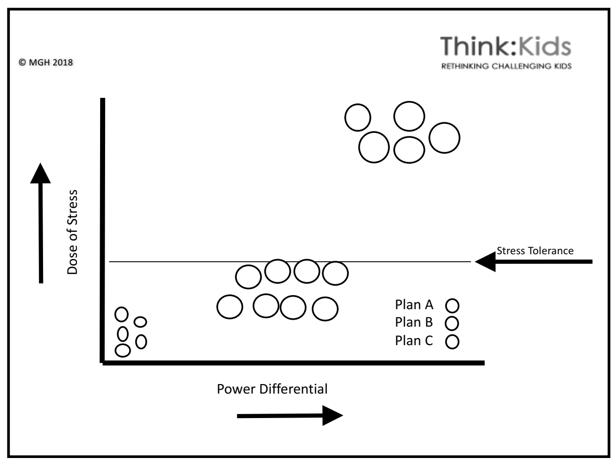
You can work on harder problems that will be more dysregulating (*higher dose*)

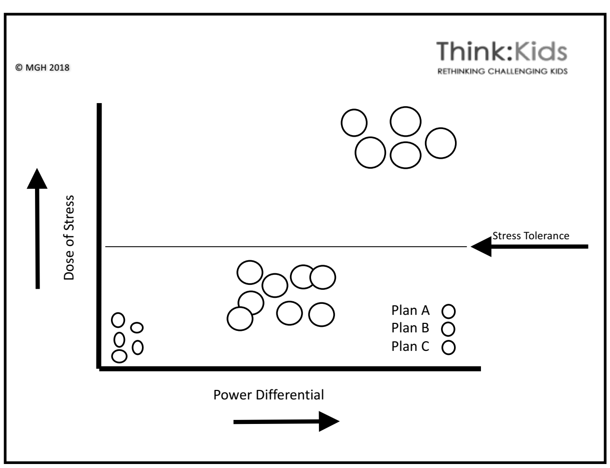
Both Weak?

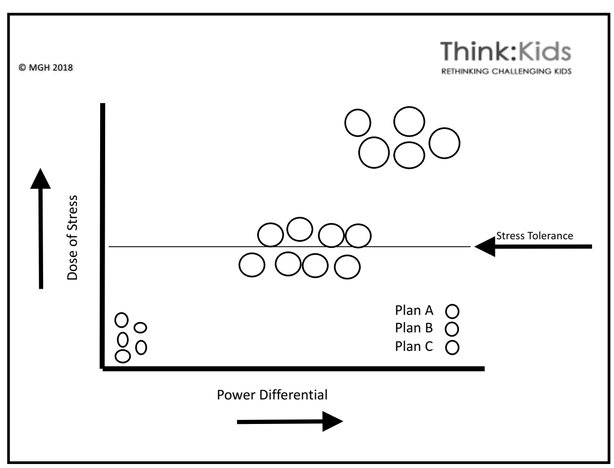
Start with easier problems that will be less dysregulating (*lower dose* = problems the child is more invested in / you are more flexible with)

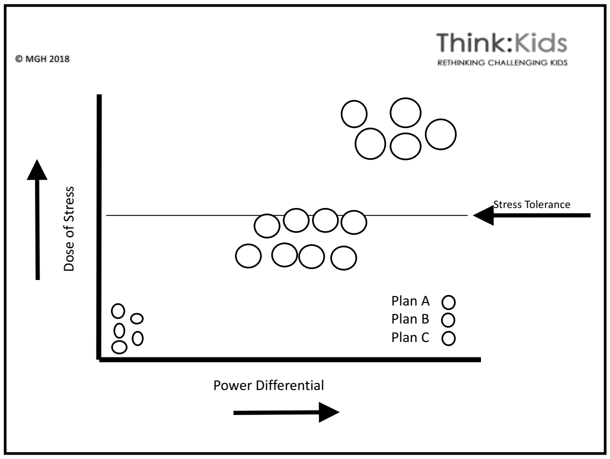








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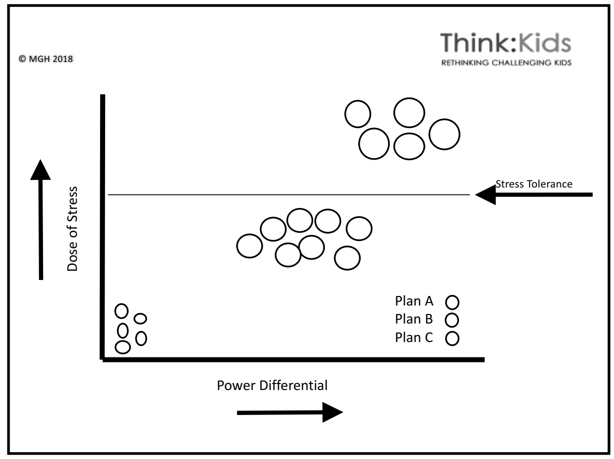
Dose of Stress
Stress Tolerance
Plan A
Plan B
Plan C
Power Differential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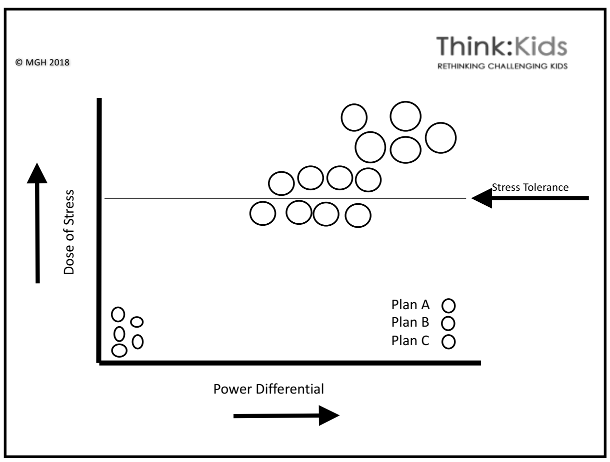
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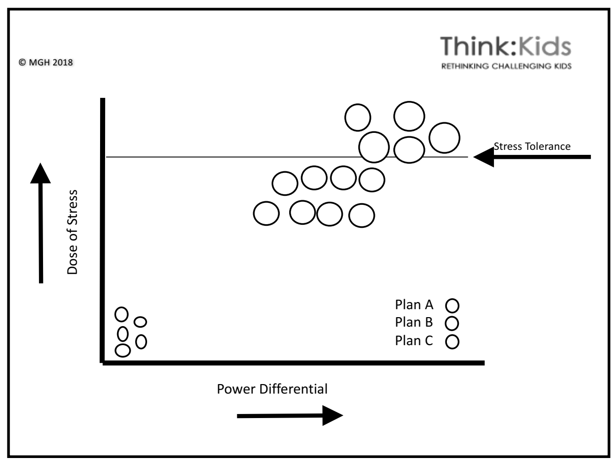
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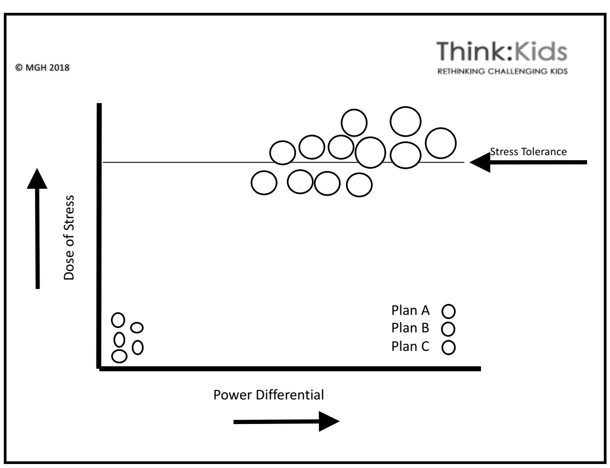
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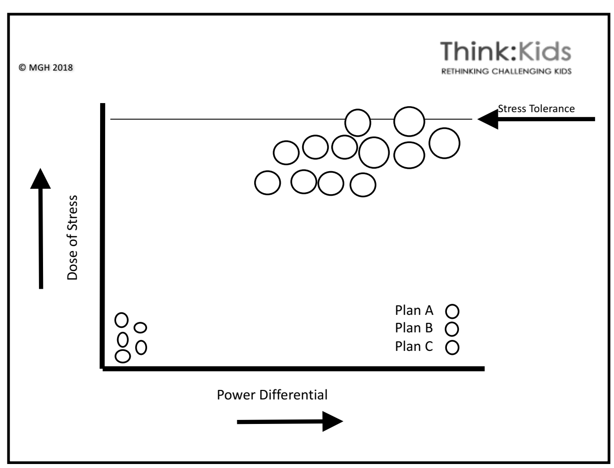
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Dose of Stress
Stress Tolerance
Plan A
Plan B
Plan C
Power Differential

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Plan B Pattern

- Moderate: choice of problem and how you approach it
- **Predictable: same 3 ingredients in same order**
- Controlled: returning to regulating ingredients whenever needed

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Plan B Pattern

1. **EMPATHIZE:** regulating
2. **SHARE:** dysregulating
3. **COLLABORATE:** regulating

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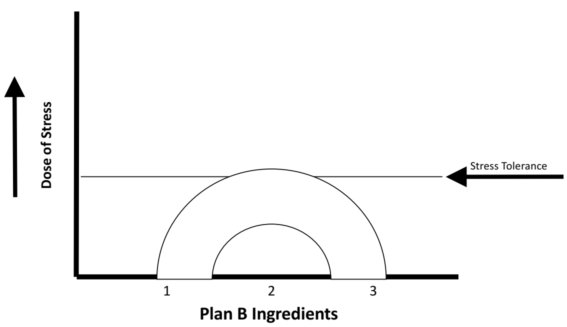

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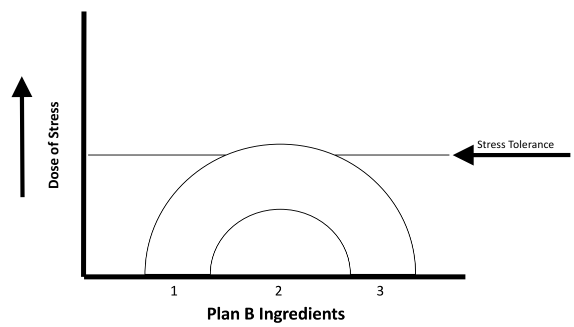

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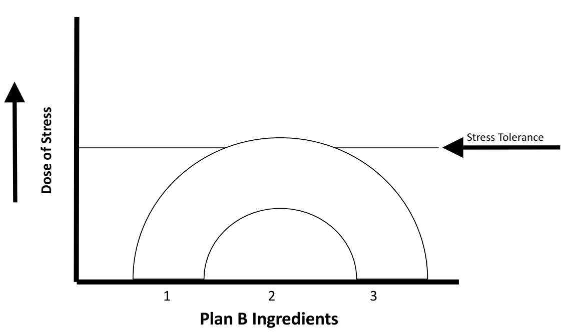

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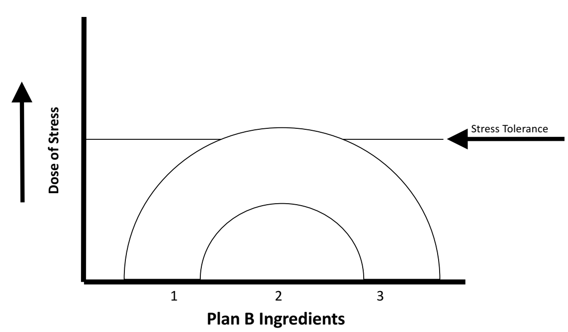

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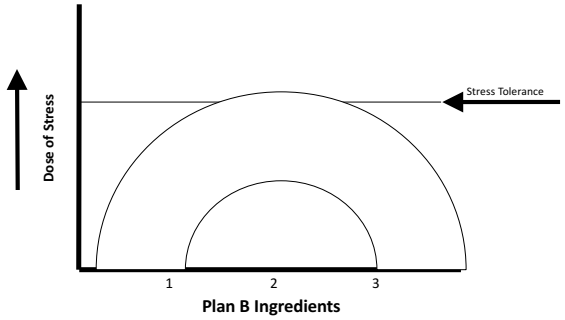

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Plan B Pattern

- Moderate: choice of problem and how you approach it
- Predictable: same 3 ingredients in same order
- **Controlled: returning to regulating ingredients whenever needed**

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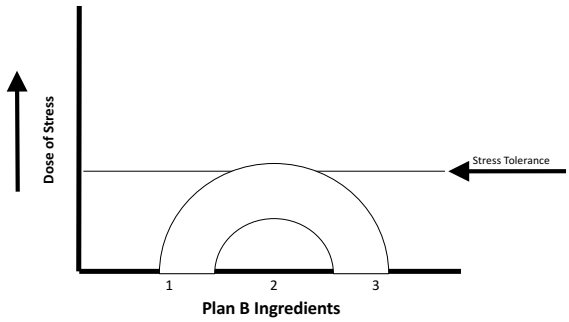

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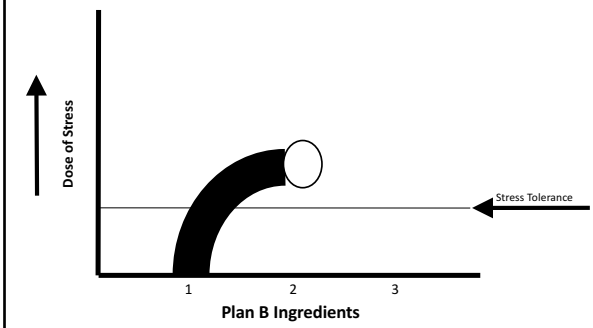

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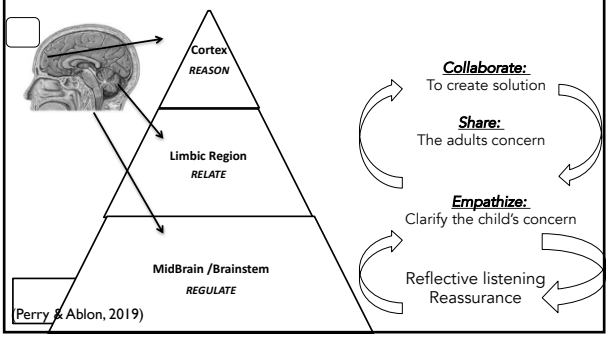
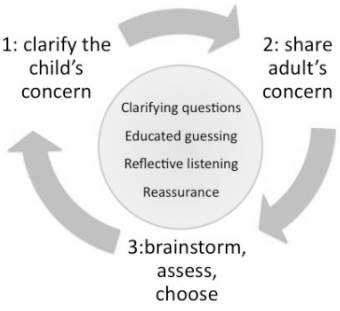
The Neurobiologic Sequence of Plan B



(Perry & Ablon, 2019)

Plan B Ingredients



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Plan B Dose

Neural networks change through repetition of small relational doses

- Need spacing or the network becomes unresponsive (refractory)
- Importance of small many small attempts throughout the course of the day
- Guidance counselor / school psych can't be the change agent
- The specific focus is less important than the process of safely activating the stress response

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The Relational Process

Bad news? Plan B isn't magical and requires many repetitions!

Good news: those repetitions, conducted in a relational context, are how skills are built and new neural networks in the brain are developed

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This is Hard for Us, Too!

The bad news: we adults have lagging skills too!

The good news: we practice our skills too every time we do Plan B

Regulation or disregulation is contagious and Plan B fosters positive co-regulation by helping regulate both child and adult

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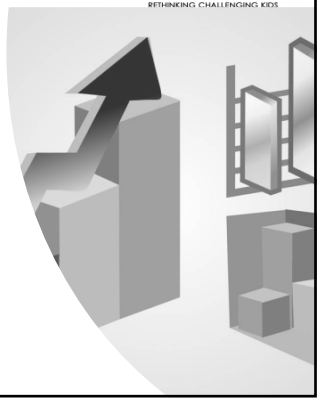
RESEARCH FINDINGS



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CPS is an Evidence Based Practice

– CPS is listed on:

- California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare
- Blue Menu of Evidence-Based Psychosocial Interventions for Youth
- PracticeWise Evidence-Based Services Database

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CPS Research Summary

All known published and unpublished studies of child and caregiver outcomes:

Inpatient:	Outpatient/IHT:	Residential:	Juv. Detention:	Schools:
↓ Restrictive interventions (restraints, short holds, seclusion)	↓ Children's challenging behaviors	↓ Restrictive interventions	↓ Restrictive interventions	↓ Restrictive interventions
↓ Challenging behaviors	↓ Children's emotional distress	↓ Youth aggression	↓ Staff Injuries	↓ Staff and student injury
↓ Self-inflicted injury	↓ Parent stress	↑ Social skills and community participation		↓ In-school arrests, summonses, violent crimes committed
↓ Length of stay	↑ Parent-child relationships	↑ Youth-reported satisfaction with care received		↓ Teacher stress
↓ Security staff involvement	↑ Parents' empathy			↓ Discipline referrals
↓ Staff turnover	↑ Child EF and behavioral control skills			↑ Student EF skills

Adapted from Pollastri, Epstein, Heath, & Ablon (2013), Harvard Review of Psychiatry

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Food for Thought (for all kids)

- If you teach a child that someone always has to win and someone always has to lose, when does (s)he learn the skill of solving problems in a mutually satisfactory manner (win/win)?
- If you teach a child that "winning" depends on being bigger and stronger ("might makes right"), what do you do when (s)he is bigger and stronger than you?
- If you teach a child that adults are the only ones with good ideas, when does the child learn that (s)he has good ideas?

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Future Ready Skills

- CPS provides a roadmap for helping students develop the skills to prepare them for the real world. Skills like:
  - Problem solving
  - Collaboration
  - Creativity
  - Flexibility
  - Communication
  - Perspective taking
  - Empathy

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Implementation in Systems

You can't use Plan A to get your colleagues to do Plan B!

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Adults do well if they can!

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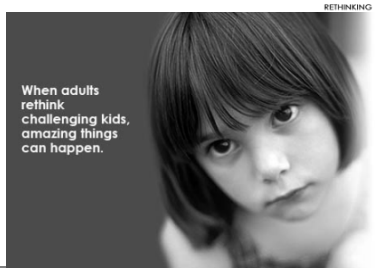

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NEW RESOURCES!