COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING
Collaborative Problem Solving

OTTAWA: COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE
Why CPS

Why the CPS Community of Practice (CoP) was Established?

• Development of common language and treatment modality.
• Anti-stigma and creating resiliency
• In response to SOCPR evaluation.
  – Integration and coordination.
  – Seamless transition for children/youth and families.
  – Strength based treatment planning.

Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS

SOC OTTAWA
A partnership between CHEO, Crossroads Children’s Centre, RSC, CA and YSB applied to the Centre of Excellence for funding to be trained in the CPS Approach.

Levels I and II Training

46 hours of supervision included for implementation with Dr. Stuart Ablon (Think:Kids).

Cornwall Hospital, Algonquin College, Ottawa Public School Board and Christie Lake joined supervision component.

A community of Practice (CoP) established among these organizations.
Current Membership of CoP

- Crossroads Children’s Centre
- Coordinated Access and Referral
- Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario
- Youth Services Bureau
- Robert Smart Centre
- Algonquin College Child and Youth Worker Program
- Christie Lake Camp
- Lowertown Community Resource Centre
- Eastern Ontario Youth Justice Agency
- Cornwall Hospital
- Ottawa Public School Board
- Storey Homes Ltd.
- St. Mary’s Home
Ottawa’s Future

- In the final stages of development of a parent training component consistent with CPS philosophy.
- Continued increase of membership within the CoP.
- A further year of supervision with Dr. Stuart Ablon.
- Explore opportunities to further the evidence based related to CPS.
The Philosophy

COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING (CPS)

Think:Kids
RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS
Collaborative Problem Solving

Developed by Dr. Ross Greene

- Grounded in a Cognitive behavioral approach
- Requires a change in mindset in how to work with children and youth presenting with challenging behaviours (eg. inflexible, explosive)
- Focuses on how adults interact with children/youth to manage their behavior
Kids do well if they can...

...if they can’t, we need to figure out what’s getting in their way so we can help.
Your explanation guides your intervention...
Theoretical Underpinnings of CPS

- CPS was developed to address a group of challenging core behaviors: temper outbursts, persistent stubbornness, resistance to direction unwillingness to compromise, persistent testing of limits, verbal and minor physical aggression.
- These behaviors are an outcome of an incompatibility between child/youth and environment.
Characteristics of Inflexible-Explosive Children/Youth

- Very limited capacity for flexibility and adaptability
- Incoherent when severely frustrated
- Tendency to think in a concrete, rigid, black-and-white manner
- Persistence of inflexibility and poor response to frustration despite a high level of intrinsic or extrinsic motivation
CPS Treatment Goals

- Stabilize (reduce meltdowns)
- Pursue adult expectations ???
- Teach lacking skills (e.g., flexibility and frustration tolerance)
Theoretical Basis

• Children do well if they **can**

   *Instead of asking yourself.....*

   “What's it going to take to motivate this kid to behave differently?”

Ask....

“**Why is this so hard for this child? What's getting in his way? How can I help?**”

- **Your explanation guides your intervention**
\[ f'(x) = \lim_{\Delta x \to 0} \frac{f(x + \Delta x) - f(x)}{\Delta x} \]

Where \( f(x) = -3x^3 + (x^{\frac{1}{2}}) + f(y) \), \( f(y) = x^3 - 3x^2 \)
Conventional Wisdom

Because of poor passive, permissive, inconsistent parenting, challenging kids have learned that their behaviour is effective at getting things (e.g., attention) or escaping or avoiding things (e.g., homework).
Specific Components of Operant Approach

• List of Target Behaviors (priority is compliance)

• Menu of Rewards and Punishments (differential reinforcement)

• Currency System
Limits of Operant Strategies

What Operant Strategies Can Do:
- teach basic lessons
- facilitate extrinsic motivation
Limits of Operant Strategies

- facilitate teaching/learning of basic lessons: right from wrong
  - It is highly likely that the child already knows the basic lessons (don’t hit, don’t swear, don’t explode), and is already aware of the consequences for these behaviors
  - Reward and punishment programs can teach basic lessons but weren’t ever intended to teach complicated skills
Limits of Operant Strategies

- facilitate extrinsic motivation (to perform behaviors one is already capable of consistently performing)
  - If a child does not yet have the skills to behave adaptively, adding incentives will not accomplish the mission
  - Motivational programs make the possible more possible, but they don’t make the impossible possible
  - Motivational programs have side-effects:
    - The more extrinsic motivation is applied, the less intrinsic motivation the child develops
    - The more you motivate someone to do something, the more you teach them that they aren’t trying hard enough
  - It is highly likely that the child is already motivated (not to be miserable)
Limits of Operant Strategies

• Token economy systems have been mainstays of treatment in therapeutic programs for many years but...
  – There is very little empirical evidence to suggest they are effective in such programs and lots of evidence to suggest that they can actually be counter-productive
Logical Intervention

Train and motivate adaptive behaviour through an intensive, consistent program of contingent consequences and ignoring.
Unconventional Wisdom: It’s a Learning Disability

• Research in neurosciences has shown that the child/youth is delayed in the development of crucial cognitive skills (often including flexibility/adaptability, frustration tolerance, and problem-solving) or has significant difficulty applying these skills when they are most needed.

• Unconventional wisdom: “It is a learning disability”.

• This represents the “second pass” at defining the “function” of a behaviour.
Logical Intervention

• Identify the lagging skills contribution to the challenging behaviour and then teach them.

• Identify the problems or triggers precipitating the challenging behaviour and work towards solving them (while maintaining adults as authority figures).

• Create resiliency in children generalizing strengths and skills to multiple environments.
Defining Maladaptive Behaviour

- Includes but is not limited to explosions, aggression, self-injury, running, substance use.
- Maladaptive behaviour occurs when the cognitive demands being placed on a person outstrip his/her capacity to respond adaptively.
- There is a spectrum of maladaptive behaviours that can occur when this condition is met.
“He just wants attention.”

- We all want attention so this explanation isn’t very useful for helping us understand why a kid is struggling to do well. And if a kid is seeking attention in a maladaptive way, doesn’t that suggest he lacks the skills to seek attention in an adaptive way?
“He just wants his own way.”

- We all want our own way, so this explanation doesn’t help us achieve an understanding of a kid’s challenges. Adaptively getting one’s own way requires skills often found lacking in challenging kids.
“He’s manipulating us.”

- This is a very popular, and misguided, characterization of children/youth with behavioural challenges. Competent manipulation requires various skills – forethought, planning, impulse control, and organization, among others – typically found lacking in challenging children/youth.
“He’s not motivated.”

- This is another very popular characterization that can be traced back to the “kids do well if they want to” mentality, and it can lead us straight to interventions aimed at giving a child/youth the incentive to do well. But why would any child/youth not want to do well?
“He’s making bad choices.”

- Are you certain he has the skills and repertoire to consistently make good choices?
“His parents are incompetent disciplinarians.”

• This, too, is a popular way of thinking, but it fails to take into account the fact that most challenging children/youth have well behaved siblings.

• Blaming parents doesn’t help anyone at school deal effectively with the child/youth in the six hours a day, five days a week, nine months of the year at that he/she’s in the building.
“It’s not like that in the real world!”

- How is it possible to teach a “real world” lesson in a 24-hour seven-day a week staffed locked inpatient unit?
Compliance

- Compliance is understood as a complex cognitive skill and a critical milestone in the development of adaptability and frustration tolerance.
- “Compliance: the capacity to defer or delay one’s own goals in response to the imposed goals of an authority figure.”
- Therefore, noncompliance is a byproduct of a learning disability in adaptability and frustration tolerance.
The emphasis is on:

– 1. The assessment of “raw material” (cognition, *not* behaviour)
  - What’s going on in this kid’s head that we wish wasn’t?
  - What’s not going on in this kid’s head that we wish was?

– 2. Different goals of intervention
  - Teaching lagging thinking skills and solving problems.
  - Not teaching adults to be more effective at imposing their will and ensuring that children/youth have the incentive to comply.
Assessment

COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

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RETHINKING CHALLENGING KIDS
Mantra

Behind every challenging behavior is a trigger and/or a skills deficit.
Why do we assess within the intervention?

- Cognition shows us *WHY* they are on the spectrum to begin with.
- People tend to describe a child/youth’s behavior rather than describing what is going on inside the child/youth’s head (that brought the child/youth to display maladaptive behaviors in the first place).
- Looking at cognition significantly shifts our intervention styles by removing the focus from successfully imposing adult will to teaching the child/youth skills (in the moment or proactively).
There is a rich literature linking challenging behavior with deficits in the following cognitive skill domains:

- Executive skills
- Language processing skills
- Emotion regulation skills
- Cognitive flexibility skills
- Social skills
Executive Skills

• Shifting cognitive set: difficulty handling transitions, shifting from one mindset or task to another
• Working memory: difficulty reflecting on multiple thoughts or ideas simultaneously
• Impulsivity: difficulty considering the likely outcomes or consequences of actions
• Reflexive negativity: an immediate negative response before any thinking could have occurred
• Restricted repertoire: difficulty generating or reflecting on a range of solutions to a problem
• Disorganization: difficulty doing things in a logical sequence or prescribed order
• Planning: poor sense of time
Language Skills

• Difficulty identifying or articulating what’s bothering you
• Difficulty expressing concerns, needs, or thoughts in words
• Difficulty understanding what is being said
Emotion Regulation Skills

- Difficulty managing emotional response to frustration so as to think rationally (poor separation of affect)
- Frequently cranky, grouchy, grumpy, irritable, or anxious (outside the context of frustration)
  - Impedes capacity for problem-solving
  - May be the byproduct of “chronic problems that have yet to be solved”
Cognitive Flexibility Skills

- Difficulty seeing the “grays” / concrete, literal, black-and-white thinking, need for precision
- Difficulty with hypothetical or inferential thinking
- Difficulty with hypothesis-testing
- Difficulty deviating from rules, routine, original plan
- Difficulty handling unpredictability, ambiguity, uncertainty, novelty
- Difficulty shifting from original idea or solution
- Difficulty taking into account situational factors that suggest need to adjust a plan
Cognitive Flexibility Skills

- Inflexible, inaccurate interpretations/cognitive distortions or biases (e.g., over-generalizing, personalizing)
- Errors in logic that usually have a basis in reality
  - “I’m stupid”
  - “Things will never work out for me”
  - “It’s not fair”
  - “Nobody likes me”
  - “You always blame me”
  - “People are out to get me”
  - “The only way to maintain one’s self-respect is through fighting”
Social Skills

• Difficulty starting or maintaining conversations, entering a group, making eye contact, reciprocity
• Difficulty appreciating how behavior is affecting other people; is surprised by others’ responses to his/her behavior
• Difficulty empathizing with others, appreciating another’s point of view
Why the Emphasis on Skills?

Focusing on the lagging skills helps adults

• understand that a child’s maladaptive behavior is a form of learning disability and not intentional, goal-oriented, manipulative, or attention-seeking

• identify specific cognitive skills that need to be trained

• understand why incentive programs haven’t made things better - and won’t

• understand why they need a different approach
Before intervening, you will need to gather one more crucial type of information: the situations in which the child tends to have the most difficulty (also known as the precipitants, antecedents, setting events, triggers or problems you want to solve)

- Examples at home: homework, screen time, diet, getting up in the morning, bedtime, curfew, sibling interactions etc.
- Examples at school: circle time, recess, gym, lunch, riding on the bus, getting down to work, staying on task, writing, etc.
It Takes Two to Tango: Triggers

• What’s the difference between a *trigger* and a *skills deficit*?
  – A trigger is the demand placed upon a child that they have difficulty handling (e.g., *homework*, *getting down to work after lunch* etc.)
  – A skills deficit is the reason *why* the child has difficulty handling the demand (e.g., *difficulty handling transitions*, *difficulty doing things in a logical sequence* etc.)
Why the Emphasis on Triggers?

Making the child predictable helps adults:

• Anticipate difficulties before they happen
• Prioritize what they want to work on first
• Shift from reactive to proactive interventions
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<thead>
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<th>Skills</th>
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<td><strong>What are they?</strong></td>
<td>The culprits causing the problems</td>
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<td>Antecedents, precipitants,</td>
<td>Hypothesizing using the Thinking Skills</td>
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<td>triggers, problems you want to</td>
<td>Inventory (the why)</td>
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<td>solve</td>
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<td>Situational analysis: who,</td>
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<td><strong>Why?</strong></td>
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How did the kid get this way?

• What’s the cause of skills deficits? Nature? Nurture? Yes, but it doesn’t matter!
  – What does matter is what skills the kid lacks and how we can help him/her develop them
Dead-End Explanations

“He has bipolar disorder”
“He has fetal alcohol syndrome”
“She’s adopted”
“He just wants attention”
“She just wants her own way”
“He just wants control”
“She has a mental illness”
“He has a bad attitude”
“She’s making bad choices”
“He won’t cooperate”

Explanation Litmus Test: Do I know what we’re working on?
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Expectations

• Expectations are a good thing as long as they are clear (taught) and realistic
  – It is hard for a child to meet an expectation that they aren’t aware of!
• If you’re expectations are being met, you’re happy
• If you’re expectations aren’t being met, you’ve got a problem and you need a plan
  – First step is knowing what your options are and what each option accomplishes (or doesn’t!)
Goals of CPS Intervention

1. Pursue High Priority Expectations/low hanging fruit
2. Create (or Restore) a Helping Relationship
3. Identify and Teach Lagging Skills
4. Solve Problems so They Don’t Keep Coming up
5. Reduce Challenging Behaviour
Three Plans (Common Approaches to Handling Unmet Expectations)

- Plan A: Impose adult will
- Plan B: Solving Problems Together
- Plan C: Drop it (for now, at least)
Three Plans: Plan A

Plan A: Impose adult will

- Ex. “No”, “You must,” “You can’t,” “1-2-3”
- Doesn’t require much adult focus or attention
- What goals are you pursuing:
  - Pursue your expectations
  - Reduce challenging behaviour
  - Create (or restore) a helping relationship
  - Identify and teach lagging thinking skills
  - Solve problems so they don’t keep coming up
Plan C: Drop it (for now, at least)  
(e.g., “OK”)

- What goals are you pursuing?
  - Pursue your expectations
  - Reduce challenging behaviour
  - Create (or restore) a helping relationship
  - Identify and teach lagging thinking skills
  - Solve problems so they don’t keep coming up
Three Plans: Plan B

Plan B: Solving problems together

- Work towards solving the problem in a mutually satisfactory and realistic manner
- Requires adult focus and attention on the child and the problem to be solved
- What goals are you pursuing?
  - Pursue your expectations
  - Reduce challenging behaviour
  - Create (or restore) a helping relationship
  - Identify and teach lagging thinking skills
  - Solve problems so they don’t keep coming up
Outcomes of each Plan

- **Plan A**: Staff dictate what to do = possible argument, aggression, stand off and could result in meltdown/restraint

- **Plan B**: Child/Youth and Staff worked out the problem together

- **Plan C**: You simply dropped your expectation
Initiating the Plans

- **Plan A:** Say “no”, “you must”, “you can’t”

- **Plan B:** Empathy > Problem > Invitation

- **Plan C:** “ok”

As the adult ask yourself, do I have a problem here?

- If yes, use plan B
- If no, use plan C
Clearing up Misconceptions

• The Plans aren’t needed unless you have an *unmet* expectation
• Setting an expectation does not equal imposing your will (using Plan A) when your expectation isn’t met
• The Plans are not a ranking system for expectations: each Plan represents a *distinct way of responding to unmet expectations*.
• Plan B is not “picking your battles” or the average of Plans A and C
• Plan B is not a “technique”
• Plan B takes much less time than Plan A
An Important Reminder:

“Any problem/unmet expectation that can be handled using Plan A can also be handled using Plan B.”
What about safety issues?

The more severe or unsafe the behavior, the more important it is to solve the problem or work on the skills deficit causing the behavior in the first place.