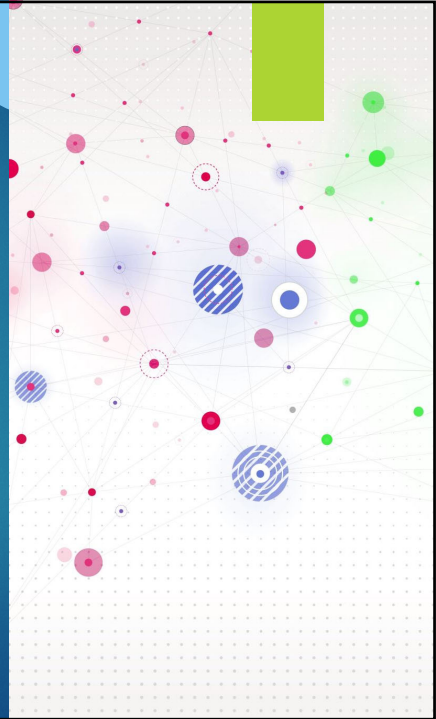


How to Identify Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems

PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR COMPLETING AN ALSUP

ANNA DEDOUSIS-WALLACE
THE KIDMAN CENTRE, UTS



ASSESSMENT OF LAGGING SKILLS AND UNSOLVED PROBLEMS (ALSUP)

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ALSUP 2020

ASSESSMENT OF LAGGING SKILLS & UNSOLVED PROBLEMS

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CHILD'S NAME _____

DATE _____

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- | | |
|--|---|
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Sensory/motor difficulties | <input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty handling unpredictability, ambiguity, uncertainty, novelty |

UNSOLVED PROBLEMS

Unsolved problems are the specific expectations a child is having difficulty meeting. The wording of an unsolved problem will translate directly into the words that you'll be using when you introduce an unsolved problem to the child when it comes time to solve the problem together. Poorly worded unsolved problems often cause the problem-solving process to deteriorate before it even gets started. Please reference the ALSUP Guide for guidance on the four guidelines for writing unsolved problems.

SCHOOL/FACILITY PROMPTS:

- Are there specific tasks/expectations the student is having difficulty completing or getting started on?
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- Are there tasks and activities this student is having difficulty moving from or to?
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HOME/CLINIC PROMPTS:

- Are there chores/tasks/activities the child is having difficulty completing or getting started on?
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- Are there aspects of hygiene the child is having difficulty completing?
- Are there activities the child is having difficulty ending or tasks the child is having difficulty moving on to?
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ASSESSMENT OF LAGGING SKILLS AND UNSOLVED PROBLEMS (ALSUP)

- In the top section is a representative list of the skills frequently found lagging in kids with concerning behaviors
- Unsolved problems are identified in the bottom section
- 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 the things we can't do anything about, we are likely to conclude that we can't do anything to help)
- We're not trying explain how the kid came to exhibit concerning behaviors

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USING THE ALSUP

- Participants receive a blank copy of the ALSUP
 - The kid is not present in the meeting
- Start with the lagging skills...check all that apply (about 10 seconds each)
- After completing the lagging skills section, begin identifying unsolved problems, using the prompts (about 1 minute per unsolved problem)
- Be exhaustive...identify as many unsolved problems as possible for each prompt
- No need to write the same unsolved problem twice

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USING THE ALSUP

Guidelines for Wording 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.

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GUIDELINES FOR WRITING UNSOLVED PROBLEMS

1. Free of concerning behaviors (*Most unsolved problems start with the word “Difficulty,” followed by a verb...*)
2. Free of adult theories (*no need to explain anything*)
3. Split, not clumped
 - *“Split early, maybe you can clump later...but if you clump early, you’ll never find out”*
4. As specific as possible
 - **STRATEGY #1:** Who, What, Where, When...NOT Why)
 - **STRATEGY #2:** What expectation is the child having difficulty meeting?

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USING THE ALSUP

A Few More Guidelines

- Verb selection is the hardest part of writing unsolved problems
- Don't write "aftermath" unsolved problems (e.g., "Difficulty asking for help..." or "Difficulty staying calm...")
- The wording of unsolved problems should be kid-friendly
- You're not looking for "hundred percenters"...just expectations that a kid is having difficulty meeting **reliably**

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Example 1

"Difficulty being impulsive"

- ▶ This is a lagging skill, not an unsolved problem

▶ Where is she impulsive?

- ▶ "She is impulsive during social studies"

▶ What's going on during social studies that she's being impulsive?

- ▶ "She always calls out without raising her hand during social studies discussions"

→ Much more specific but let's try and re-word without the challenging behaviour (calling out answers)

"Difficulty raising hand during social studies discussions"



Example 2

- ▶ *"He has a lot of anger"*

This is an "aftermath"

Where does he have a lot of anger?

- ▶ *"He has a lot of anger during recess"*
- ▶ → This is more specific but there is not enough useful information

What's going on during recess-and with whom- that makes you say he has a lot of anger?

- ▶ *"He always gets upset at his best friend Tom when Tom plays with Joey instead of him at recess"*
- ▶ → Highly specific! Now we can make it into an UP

"Difficulty when Tom plays with Joey instead of him during recess"



Example 3

- ▶ *"Difficulty with the word no"*

▶ What are you saying 'no' about?

▶ → I'm saying, "no, you can't go to the bathroom 18 times during every math period."

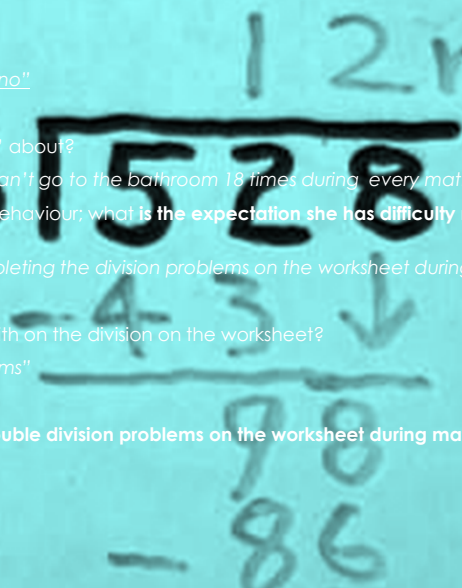
▶ → The bathroom is the behaviour; what is the expectation she has difficulty meeting during math period?

"She's having difficulty completing the division problems on the worksheet during math"

What is she having trouble with on the division on the worksheet?

"Double-digit division problems"

"Difficulty completing the double division problems on the worksheet during math"



Other examples

- ▶ Difficulty ending computer time to come to circle time
- ▶ Difficulty walking in the hallway between classes
- ▶ Difficulty keeping hands to self in the lunch line
- ▶ Difficulty getting out of bed at 7 am in the morning to get ready for school on weekdays
- ▶ Difficulty taking turns when playing chess with brother
- ▶ Difficulty sitting next to sister at dinner
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- ▶ Difficulty brushing teeth before going to bed at night
- ▶ Difficulty ending Xbox at 8 pm
- ▶ Difficulty making bed before school on weekday mornings

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More tips!

- ▶ There are also a variety of verbs that should be avoided, including:
- ▶ *accepting, appreciating, staying calm, asking for help, listening, paying attention, focusing, considering, understanding, persisting, controlling, recognizing*
- ▶ **INSTEAD, ask:**
- ▶ *“what does it look like when the kid is doing these things?”*
- ▶ *What are you expecting them to be doing? What does this look like?*





Have a
go!

THE ALSUP CHANGES LENSES

Expect lightbulbs to go on when...

- Caregivers come to recognize that a kid is, in fact, lacking many skills and having difficulty meeting many expectations
- Caregivers come to recognize why prior interventions have been ineffective
- Caregivers begin to regret the way they've been treating the child based on incorrect assumptions
- Caregivers become aware that unsolved problems occur under highly specific conditions
- Caregivers recognize that unsolved problems are predictable and can therefore be solved proactively

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MORE UNSOLVED PROBLEMS

Ask the Kid

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

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NEXT GOAL

Prioritizing

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

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Lives in the balance walking tour



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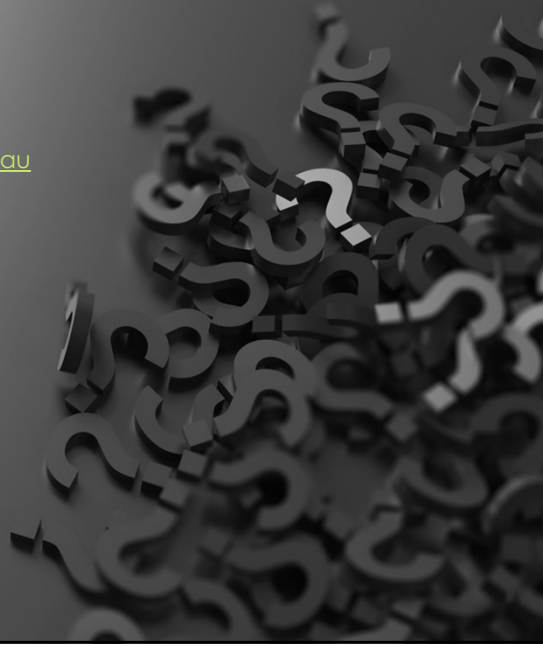
ADDITIONAL INFORMATION/RESOURCES



livesinthebalance.org
cpsconnection.com
thekidswelose.com
truecrisisprevention.org

Questions?

- ▶ Anna.Wallace@uts.edu.au
- ▶ The Kidman Centre, UTS



The **Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems (ALSUP)** is a discussion guide created to assist caregivers in identifying a child's lagging skills and unsolved problems. Lagging skills provide caregivers with new lenses. Rather than viewing a child's difficulties as attention-seeking, manipulative, coercive, unmotivated, lazy, or limit testing, lagging skills provide more accurate, productive, actionable lenses.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR IDENTIFYING LAGGING SKILLS:

How hard could it be to check off lagging skills? Not that hard, but here are a few important reminders:

- Go in order...you don't want to miss anything.
- Don't spend time hypothesizing or theorizing about causal factors (why the student is lacking these skills)...you can't establish cause with any level of precision, and your time will be better spent identifying lagging skills and unsolved problems
- Don't spend any time talking about the child's behavior either...the behavior is simply the way children communicate that there are expectations they are having difficulty meeting
- Checking off a lagging skill is not a democratic process and shouldn't take more than 3-5 seconds each. If any caregivers in the meeting think the lagging skill applies to the child, check it off.
- While lagging skills provide you with new lenses -- a worthy goal -- lagging skills are not the primary targets of intervention. The unsolved problems you'll be identifying are the primary targets of intervention. If you solve those problems collaboratively and proactively, the child's skills will be enhanced.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR IDENTIFYING UNSOLVED PROBLEMS:

An unsolved problem is ***an expectation a child is having difficulty meeting***. Writing unsolved problems is harder, because the wording of the unsolved problem on the ALSUP is going to translate directly into the words that you're going to use to introduce the unsolved problem to the child when it comes time to solve the problem together. As such, there are four guidelines for writing unsolved problems:

They should contain no reference to the child's challenging behaviors. Since you won't be talking with children about their behavior, there's no need to include the behavior in the wording of the unsolved problem. Instead, almost all unsolved problems begin with the words *Difficulty*, followed by a verb (a variety of verbs are shown in the examples below as well). So you wouldn't write *Screams and swears when having difficulty completing the word problems on the math homework*...instead write *Difficulty completing the word problems on the math homework*.

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They should be split, not clumped (so you wouldn't write *Difficulty getting along with others* but rather *Difficulty getting along with Trevor on the school bus in the morning*).

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The above guidelines -- and a variety of sample verbs -- are embodied in the following examples (they're grouped based on setting, but the verbs apply across settings):

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- Difficulty retrieving Geography notebook from locker before Geography class

HOME/CLINIC:

- Difficulty getting out of bed at 7 am in the morning to get ready for school on weekdays
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PROBLEM SOLVING PLAN

CHILD'S NAME _____ DATE _____

UNSOLVED PROBLEM #1	UNSOLVED PROBLEM #2	UNSOLVED PROBLEM #3
Adult taking the lead on Plan B:	Adult taking the lead on Plan B:	Adult taking the lead on Plan B:
Kid concerns identified: (Empathy step) DATE _____	Kid concerns identified: (Empathy step) DATE _____	Kid concerns identified: (Empathy step) DATE _____
Adult concerns identified: (Define Adult Concerns Step) DATE _____	Adult concerns identified: (Define Adult Concerns Step) DATE _____	Adult concerns identified: (Define Adult Concerns Step) DATE _____
Solution agreed upon: (Invitation step) DATE _____	Solution agreed upon: (Invitation step) DATE _____	Solution agreed upon: (Invitation step) DATE _____
Problem Solved? YES? ____ DATE _____ NO? ____ COMMENT: _____	Problem Solved? YES? ____ DATE _____ NO? ____ COMMENT: _____	Problem Solved? YES? ____ DATE _____ NO? ____ COMMENT: _____

The goal of the Empathy Step is to gather information from the child about **their** concern or perspective on the unsolved problem you're discussing (preferably proactively). For many adults, this is the most difficult part of Plan B, as they often find that they are unsure of what to ask next. So here's a brief summary of different strategies for "drilling" for information:

REFLECTIVE LISTENING AND CLARIFYING STATEMENTS

Reflective listening basically involves **mirroring what a child has said** and then encouraging him/her to provide additional information by saying one of the following:

- "How so?"
- "I don't quite understand"
- "I'm confused"
- "Can you say more about that?"
- "What do you mean?"

Reflective listening is your "default" drilling strategy...if you aren't sure of which strategy to use or what to say next, use this strategy.

ASKING ABOUT THE WHO, WHAT, WHERE/WHEN OF THE UNSOLVED PROBLEM

EXAMPLES:

- "Who was making fun of your clothes?"
- "What's getting the way of completing the science project?"
- "Where is Eddie bossing you around?"

ASKING ABOUT WHY THE PROBLEM OCCURS UNDER SOME CONDITIONS AND NOT OTHERS

EXAMPLE: "You seem to be doing really well in your work group in math...but not so well in your work group in social studies...what's getting in the way in social studies?"

ASKING THE CHILD WHAT THEY ARE THINKING IN THE MIDST OF THE UNSOLVED PROBLEM

Notice, this is different than asking the child what **they** are feeling, which doesn't usually provide much information about the child's concern or perspective on an unsolved problem.

EXAMPLE: "What were you thinking when Mrs. Thompson told the class to get to work on the science quiz?"

BREAKING THE PROBLEM DOWN INTO ITS COMPONENT PARTS

EXAMPLE: "So writing the answers to the questions on the science quiz is hard for you...but you're not sure why. Let's think about the different parts of answering questions on the science quiz. First, you have to understand what the question is asking. Is that part hard for you? Next, you need to think of the answer to the question. Is that part hard? Next, you have to remember the answer long enough to write it down. Are you having trouble with that part? Then you have to actually do the writing. Any trouble with that part?"

DISCREPANT OBSERVATION

This involves making an observation that differs from what the child is describing about a particular situation, and it's the riskiest (in terms of causing the child to stop talking) of all the drilling strategies.

EXAMPLE: "I know you're saying that you haven't been having any difficulty with Chad on the playground lately, but I recall a few times last week when you guys were having a big disagreement about the rules in the box-ball game. What do you think was going on with that?"

TABLING (AND ASKING FOR MORE CONCERNS)

This is where you're "shelving" some concerns the child has already expressed so as to permit consideration of other concerns.

EXAMPLE: "So if Timmy wasn't sitting too close to you, and Robbie wasn't making noises, and the floor wasn't dirty, and the buttons in your pants weren't bothering you...is there anything else that would make it difficult for you to participate in Morning Meeting?"

SUMMARIZING (AND ASKING FOR MORE CONCERNS)

This is where you're summarizing concerns you've already heard about and then asking if there are any other concerns that haven't yet been discussed. This is the recommended strategy to use before moving on to the Define Adult Concerns step.

EXAMPLE: "Let me make sure I understand all of this correctly. It's hard for you to do your social studies worksheet for homework because writing down the answers is still hard for you...and because sometimes you don't understand the question...and because Mrs. Langley hasn't yet covered the material on the worksheet. Is there anything else that's hard for you about completing the social studies worksheet for homework?"

Prepared with the assistance of Dr. Christopher Watson

① EMPATHY STEP | INGREDIENT/GOAL

Gather information about and achieve a clear understanding of what's making it hard for a kid to meet a given expectation.

WORDS | Initial Inquiry (neutral observation)

"I've noticed that...(insert unsolved problem)... what's up?"

DRILLING FOR INFORMATION

Involves using a variety of drilling strategies -- as shown on the drilling cheat sheet -- to gather information from the child about what's making it hard for them to meet a given expectation.

MORE HELP

If the kid doesn't talk or says "I don't know," try to figure out why:

- Maybe the unsolved problem wasn't free of concerning behavior, wasn't specific, wasn't free of adult theories, or was "clumped" (instead of split)
- Maybe you're using Emergency Plan B (instead of Proactive Plan B)
- Maybe you're using Plan A
- Maybe they really don't know
- Maybe they need the problem broken down into its component parts
- Maybe they need time to think

WHAT YOU'RE THINKING

"What don't I yet understand about the kid's concern or perspective? What doesn't make sense to me yet? What do I need to ask to understand it better?"

DON'T

- Skip the Empathy step
- Assume you already know what the kid's concern is and treat the Empathy step as if it is a formality
- Rush through the Empathy step
- Leave the Empathy step before you completely understand the kid's concern or perception
- Talk about solutions yet

② DEFINE ADULT CONCERNS STEP | INGREDIENT/GOAL

Enter the concern of the second party (often the adult) into consideration.

WORDS | Initial Inquiry (neutral observation)

"The thing is (insert adult concern)..." or "My concern is (insert adult concern)..."

MORE HELP

Most adult concerns fall into one of two categories:

- How the problem is affecting the kid
- How the problem is affecting others

WHAT YOU'RE THINKING

"Have I been clear about my concern? Does the child understand what I have said?"

DON'T

- Start talking about solutions yet
- Sermonize, judge, lecture, use sarcasm

③ INVITATION STEP | INGREDIENT/GOAL

Generate solutions that are realistic (meaning both parties can do what they are agreeing to) and mutually satisfactory (meaning the solution truly addresses the concerns of both parties)

WORDS | Initial Inquiry (neutral observation)

Restate the concerns that were identified in the first two steps, usually beginning with "I wonder if there is a way..."

MORE HELP

- Stick as closely to the concerns that were identified in the first two steps
- While it's a good idea to give the kid the first opportunity to propose a solution, generating solutions is a team effort
- It's a good idea to consider the odds of a given solution actually working... if you think the odds are below 60-70 percent, consider what it is that's making you skeptical and talk about it
- This step always ends with agreement to return to Plan B if the first solution doesn't stand the test of time

WHAT YOU'RE THINKING

"Have I summarized both concerns accurately? Have we truly considered whether both parties can do what they've agreed to? Does the solution truly address the concerns of both parties? What's my estimate of the odds of this solution working?"

DON'T

- Rush through this step either
- Enter this step with preordained solutions
- Sign off on solutions that both parties can't actually perform
- Sign off on solutions that don't truly address the concerns of both parties

If we don't start doing right by kids with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges, we're going to keep losing them at an astounding rate. Doing the right thing isn't an option...it's an imperative. There are lives in the balance, and we all need to do everything we can to make sure those lives aren't lost.

KIDS WITH CONCERNING BEHAVIOR HAVE THE RIGHT:

1. To have caregivers understand that their maladaptive responses to problems and frustrations are due to lagging skills -- not lagging motivation or faulty learning -- especially in the domains of flexibility/adaptability, frustration tolerance, emotion regulation, and problem-solving.
2. To have caregivers understand that concerning behavior is no less a form of developmental delay than delays in reading, writing, and arithmetic, and is deserving of the same compassion as is applied to these other cognitive delays.
3. Not to be characterized as bratty, spoiled, manipulative, attention-seeking, coercive, limit-testing, controlling, or unmotivated.
4. To have caregivers recognize that concerning behavior occurs in response to specific expectations kids are having difficulty meeting -- called unsolved problems -- and that these unsolved problems are usually highly predictable and can therefore be solved proactively.
5. To have caregivers understand that the primary goal of intervention is to collaboratively solve these problems in a way that is realistic and mutually satisfactory so that they no longer precipitate concerning behavior.
6. To have caregivers (and peers) understand that time-outs, detentions, suspensions, expulsion, paddling, restraint, seclusion, and arrests do not solve problems and often make things worse.
7. To have caregivers recognize that the best source of information on what's making it hard for a child to meet an expectation is the child, and that kids' concerns are legitimate, important, and worth listening to and clarifying.
8. To have adults in their lives who are aware of the damage caused by physical intervention and are knowledgeable about and proficient in solving problems.
9. To have adults who understand that solving problems collaboratively -- rather than insisting on blind adherence to authority -- is what prepares kids for the demands they will face in the real world.
10. To have adults understand that blind obedience to authority is dangerous, and that life in the real world requires expressing one's concerns, listening to the concerns of others, and working toward mutually satisfactory solutions.

A more compassionate, productive, effective, approach
to understanding and helping kids with concerning behaviors.

Collaborative&ProactiveSolutions(CPS) is the evidence-based approach for understanding and helping kids with concerning behaviors, as described in Dr. Ross Greene's books *The Explosive Child*, *Lost at School*, *Lost & Found*, and *Raising Human Beings*. The CPS model has been implemented in countless families, schools, inpatient psychiatry units, and residential and juvenile detention facilities. The approach sets forth two major tenets. First, the reason some kids respond maladaptively to problems and frustrations is that they're lacking the skills -- especially in the realms of flexibility/adaptability, frustration tolerance, emotion regulation, and problem solving -- to respond adaptively. Second, the best way to reduce concerning behaviors is by solving the problems that are causing those behaviors. The problem solving should be collaborative (something that's being done with the child rather than to them) and proactive (rather than reactive). The model does not rely at all on adult-imposed consequences aimed at modifying behavior. Here are some of the important questions answered by the model:

QUESTION: Why do kids exhibit concerning behavior?

ANSWER: Again because they're lacking the skills to respond more adaptively to problems and frustrations. If they had the skills, they wouldn't be exhibiting concerning behaviors. That's because -- and this is perhaps the key theme of the model -- *Kids do well if they can*. And because (here's another key theme) *Doing well is preferable*. These new "lenses" are supported by research in the neurosciences over the past 40-50 years, and have dramatic implications for how caregivers go about helping such kids. These new lenses also represent a dramatic departure from the view that kids with concerning behaviors are attention-seeking, manipulative, coercive, limit-testing, and poorly motivated. An important goal for caregivers is to identify the skills a child with concerning behaviors is lacking, a goal accomplished by the completion of an instrument called the *Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems (ALSUP)*.

QUESTION: When are challenging kids challenging?

ANSWER: When they're having difficulty meeting certain expectations. Thus, another important goal for caregivers is to identify the specific expectations a kid is having difficulty meeting, referred to as unsolved problems... and to help kids solve those problems. Because unsolved problems tend to be highly predictable, the problem-solving can be proactive most of the time. Identifying unsolved problems is also accomplished through use of the ALSUP. You can find the ALSUP on the website of Lives in the Balance (livesinthebalance.org).

QUESTION: What behaviors do kids exhibit when they don't have the skills to respond adaptively to certain demands?

ANSWER: You've probably heard the cliché *behavior is communication*. Now you know what concerning behaviors are communicating: that there's an expectation a child is having difficulty meeting. Some kids communicate that through whining, pouting, sulking, withdrawing, and crying. These behaviors are referred to as "lucky" because they're likely to elicit empathy, nurturance, and support from caregivers. Other kids communicate that they're having difficulty meeting expectations by screaming, swearing, hitting, spitting, kicking, throwing, lying, stealing, and so forth. These "unlucky" behaviors are far less likely to elicit empathy, nurturance, and support from caregivers. But whether lucky or unlucky, the concerning behaviors are communicating the same thing.

QUESTION: What should we be doing differently to help these kids better than we're helping them now?

ANSWER: If kids are responding poorly to problems and frustrations because of lagging skills and not lagging motivation, then it's easy to understand why motivational strategies -- rewarding and punishing -- may not make things better. And, if it's unsolved problems that are causing concerning behaviors, then the best way to reduce the behaviors is by solving the problems that are causing them. But if we solve the problems unilaterally, through imposition of adult will (referred to in the model as "Plan A"), then we'll only increase the likelihood of concerning behavior and we won't solve any problems durably. Better to solve those problems collaboratively ("Plan B") so the kid is a fully invested participant, solutions are more durable, and (over time) the skills the kid is lacking are enhanced. Plan B is comprised of three basic ingredients. The first ingredient -- called the Empathy step -- involves gathering information from the child so as to achieve the clearest understanding of what's making it hard for the child to meet a given expectation. The second ingredient (called the Define Adult Concerns step) involves having caregivers enter their concerns into consideration on the same unsolved problem (i.e. how the problem is affecting the kid and/or others). The third ingredient (called the Invitation step) involves having the adult and kid work toward a solution that is realistic and mutually satisfactory... in other words, a solution that addresses the concerns of both parties and that both parties can actually perform.

QUESTION: Where can I learn more about this model?

ANSWER: The Lives in the Balance website (livesinthebalance.org) is a very good place to start. It has a ton of free resources, including streaming video, podcasts, support, and lots more.

QUESTION: Where can I find the research on the CPS model?

ANSWER: On the Research page of the Lives in the Balance website.

QUESTION: Wasn't this model previously referred to as Collaborative Problem Solving?

ANSWER: Yes...but not anymore! A product called "Collaborative Problem Solving" is now being marketed by a large hospital corporation, but we don't have anything to do with them!

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advocator

(noun) a person who pleads for a cause or propounds an idea

If you've seen the Lives in the Balance documentary film, *The Kids We Lose*, then you know it's a jungle out there for kids with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges. And it's not a walk in the park for parents, educators, mental health professionals, staff in facilities, or law enforcement professionals either. Fortunately, there is hope, but we're going to need your help to facilitate the changes in lenses, practices, structures, and systems that are needed to end the counterproductive, punitive practices -- detentions, suspensions, expulsions, paddling, restraint, and seclusion -- that are still commonly employed in schools and facilities. There are a lot of things **you** can do to heighten awareness and advocate for change.

Visit www.livesinthebalance.org/advocators to get involved in any or many of the following:

- ✓ Sign up for our Newsletter, *The Advocator*
- ✓ Check out our Punitive Index to familiarize yourself with the states where things are *really* bad
- ✓ Join our Facebook Group
- ✓ Sign up to Round Up! by rounding up your credit card purchases, you'll help Lives in the Balance fund the effort
- ✓ Stay on top of the most current news on how kids with behavioral challenges are being treated

