Important Themes

- Emphasis is on problems (and solving them) rather than on behaviors (and extinguishing and replacing them)
- Problem solving is collaborative rather than unilateral (something you're doing *with* the kid rather than *to* him)
- Problem solving is proactive rather than emergent
- Understanding comes before helping…indeed, understanding is the most important part of helping

Most Important Theme

Kids do well if they can

If they're not doing well,
we adults need to figure out why,
so we can help.

Important Questions

Why are challenging kids challenging?

When are challenging kids challenging?

What are we going to do differently now that we know why challenging kids are challenging?

A less important question:

What do challenging kids do when they're challenging?

Traditional Answer to *Why?*: Challenging Behavior Is Working

Because of passive, permissive, inconsistent, non-contingent parenting, the kid has learned that challenging behavior is an effective means of getting something (e.g., attention) and escaping and avoiding something (e.g., homework).

"First pass" definition of function: It's working

Leads to interventions aimed at ensuring that kids know that maladaptive behavior is not going to work and incentivizing the performance of adult-conceived replacement behaviors.

DON'T STOP AT "WORKING"!!!

Important Questions

If the kid had the skills to go about getting, escaping, and avoiding in an adaptive fashion, then why would be getting, escaping, and avoiding in such a maladaptive fashion?

Doesn't the fact that the kid is getting, escaping, and avoiding in a maladaptive fashion suggest that he doesn't have the skills to go about getting, escaping, and avoiding in an adaptive fashion?

(We all get, escape, and avoid…but why is the kid getting, escaping, and avoiding in such a maladaptive fashion?)

Another Important Theme

Doing well is always preferable

to not doing well

(prerequisite: skills)

Unconventional Answer to *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.

"Second pass" definition of function: challenging behavior communicates that the kid doesn't have the skills to respond to problems more adaptively
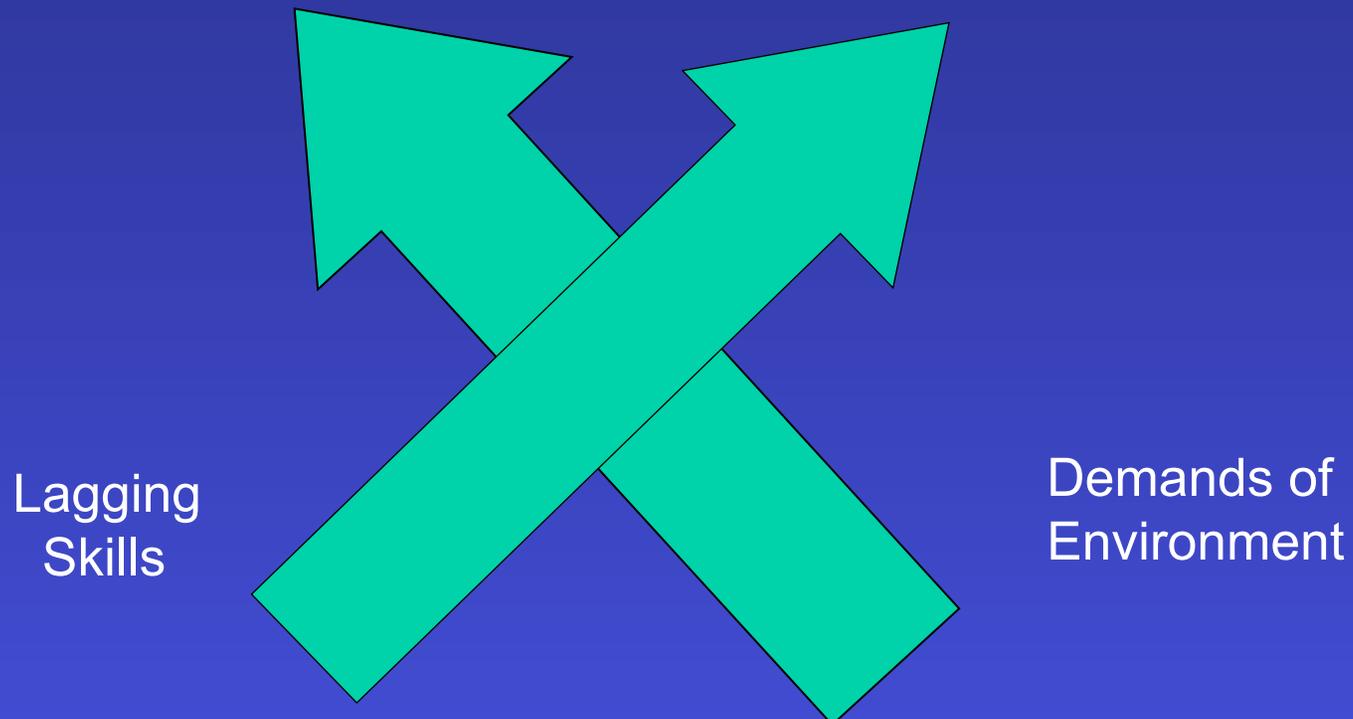
Leads to interventions aimed at identifying the skills kids are lacking and the specific conditions (unsolved problems) in which those lagging skills are making it difficult for the child to meet expectations….and then solving those problems and simultaneously teaching those skills

What Skills Are Behaviorally Challenging Kids Lacking?

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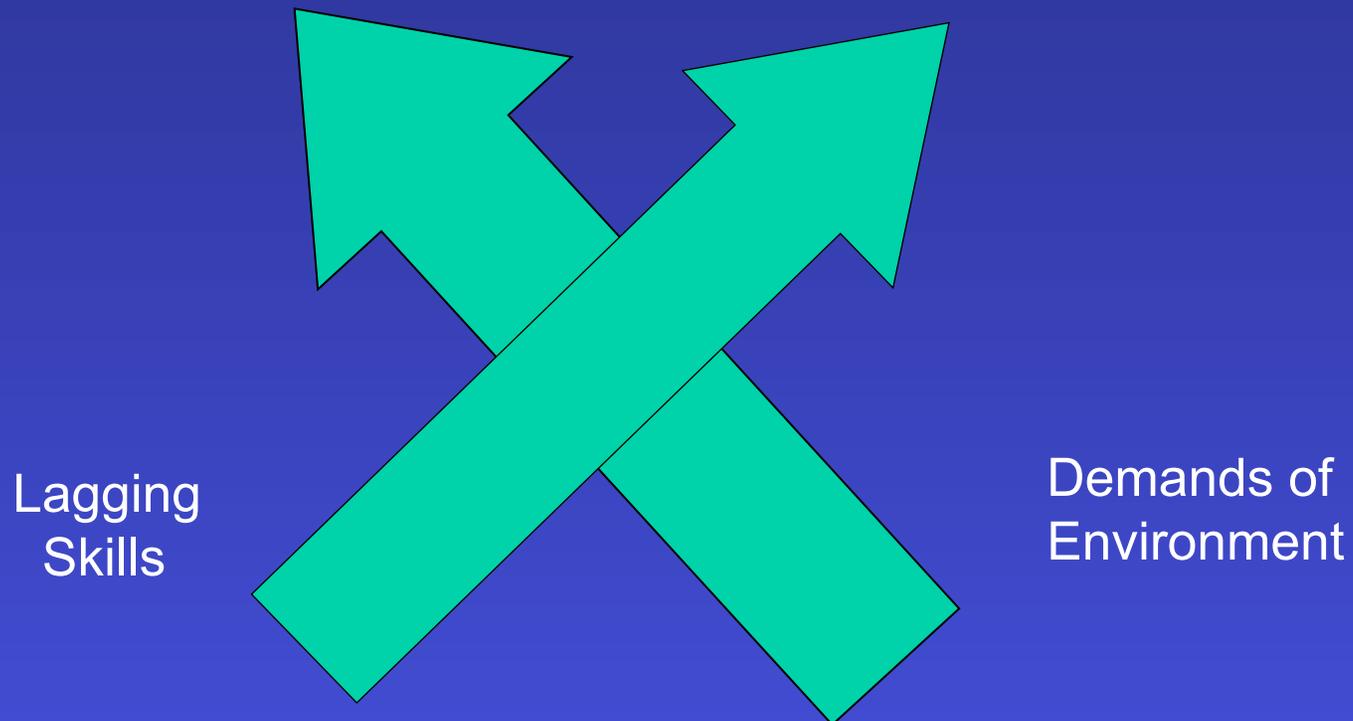- **Cognitive flexibility skills**
- **Social skills**

Unconventional Answer to *When?*:
The Clash of the Two Forces

Challenging episodes occur when the cognitive demands being placed upon a person outstrip the person's capacity to respond adaptively (best conceived as "incompatibility episodes").
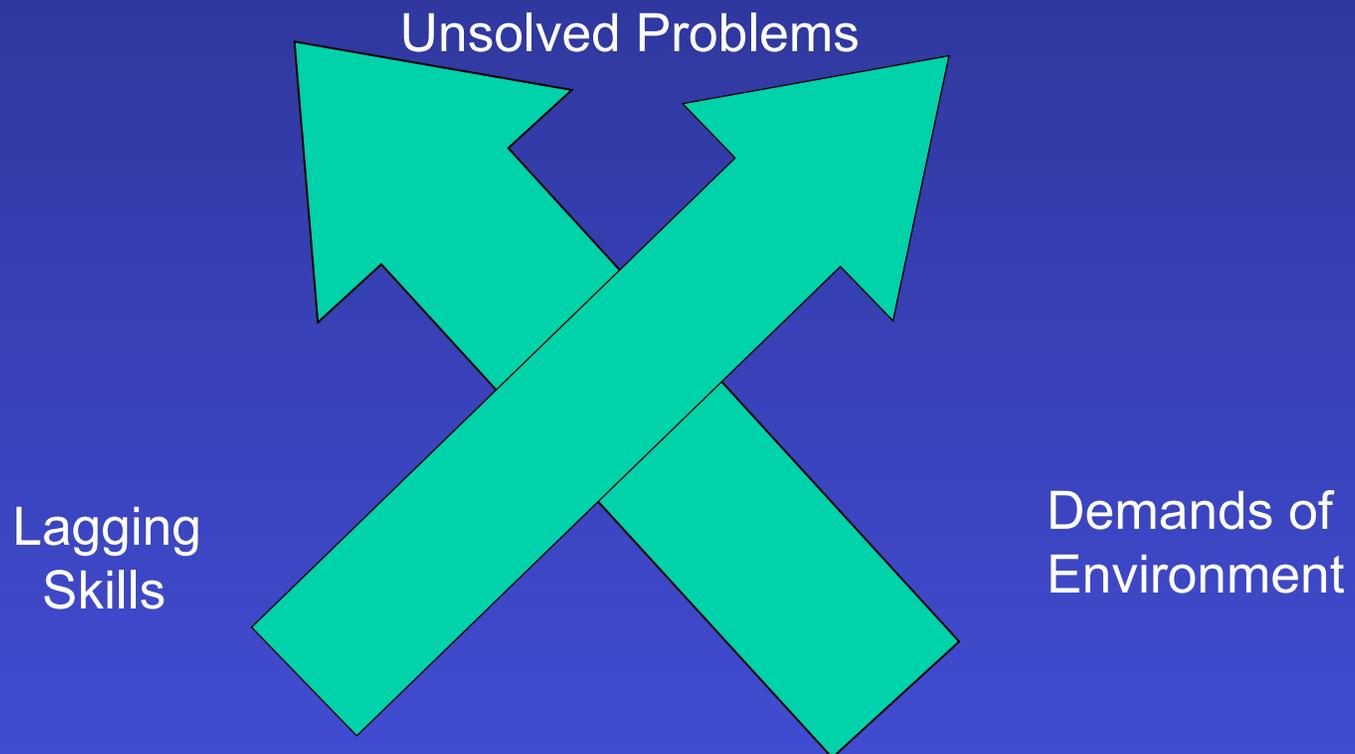
Lagging
Skills

Demands of
Environment

When in a Child's Development Do Incompatibility Episodes Begin to Emerge?

When incompatibility between the child's characteristics (i.e., skills) and characteristics of the environment (i.e., demands) starts to emerge.

Lagging Skills

Demands of Environment

The Clash of the Two Forces

Unsolved Problems: the specific conditions in which the demands being placed upon a person exceed the person's capacity to respond adaptively

Unsolved Problems

Lagging Skills

Demands of Environment

New Adult Roles in the Lives of Behaviorally Challenging Kids

- Lenses come first:
    - Identify lagging skills

- What are you working on?
    - Identify unsolved problems

- Get started:
    - Solve problems (collaboratively and proactively) and simultaneously teach skills

The Little *What?*:

The Spectrum of Looking Bad: a person may exhibit any of a variety of challenging behaviors when the clash of forces occurs, distinguished primarily by their severity

Identifying Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems

How are all these lagging skills

and unsolved problems identified?

The Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems (ALSUP)

- The ALSUP is meant to be used as a discussion guide for achieving a consensus - not simply a checklist or mechanism for quantifying (quantification comes in third)

- 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're looking to avoid the "correlation equals causation error"

- In a meeting, this discussion usually takes about 50 minutes…but only if we stop theorizing, hypothesizing, and telling stories

Using the ALSUP

- One section contains a representative list of the skills frequently found lagging in challenging kids
- Middle section is where unsolved problems are identified
- Goal is to have a meaningful (not perfunctory) discussion about the degree to which each lagging skill applies to a particular child (don't just check and move on), along with the unsolved problems associated with the lagging skills
  - Discussion of a kid's strengths isn't a bad idea, though identification of lagging skills is what typically leads to a more compassionate understanding of the kid's difficulties
- Unsolved problems are examples of times when a child's lagging skills are making it difficult to respond adaptively to specific expectations
  - Wording: Often start with "Difficulty…" and then the expectation the child is having difficulty meeting

Using the ALSUP:
Guidelines for Identifying Unsolved Problems

Unsolved Problems should be:

• Free of challenging behaviors

• Free of adult theories (no need to explain anything yet)

• Split, not clumped

• Specific (who, what, where/when…NOT why)

- If you're having difficulty being specific, ask "What expectation is the child having difficulty meeting?"

Another Crucial Strategy:

• Ask the kid (and other caregivers)

- "What are people bugging you about?"
- "What are people giving you a hard time about?"
- "What are you getting in trouble for?"

Using the ALSUP

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

Lagging Skills + Unsolved Problems:

INCOMPATIBILITY EPISODES
ARE HIGHLY PREDICTABLE

- so we can intervene proactively

- "predictable" doesn't infer 100% reliability

  it means that an unsolved problem *heightens the likelihood* of an incompatibility episode

Next Goal: Prioritizing

- You can't work on everything at once
- Focus on the "big fish" first
  - Severity: those unsolved problems contributing to the kid's worst moments or safety issues
  - Frequency: those unsolved problems contributing to incompatibility episodes most often

Keeping Track: 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 a successful resolution
- Add new unsolved problems as old ones are solved

Options for Handling <u>Unsolved Problems</u>

Plan A: solve the problem unilaterally

Plan B: solve the problem collaboratively

Plan C: set the problem aside for now

Options for Handling <u>Unsolved Problems</u>

Plan A: Solve the problem unilaterally

- "I've decided that…"

- Plan A is unilateral
- Plan A involves the imposition of adult will, often accompanied by adult-imposed consequences
- Plan A *causes* incompatibility episodes in challenging kids
- Plan A provides no information whatsoever about the factors making it difficult for the kid to meet a given expectation
- Thus, solutions arrived at through Plan A are "uninformed solutions"

Timing is Everything

INCOMPATIBILITY EPISODES ARE HIGHLY PREDICTABLE

Crisis Management: Intervention is reactive and occurs emergently, in the heat of the moment

Crisis Prevention: Intervention is planned and occurs proactively, well before highly predictable incompatibility episodes occur again

Question is not "What should I do when…?" but rather "What should I do *before*…?"

Options for Handling <u>Unsolved Problems</u>

Plan C: Set the problem aside for now (prioritizing)

- Emergency C: "OK"

- Proactive C:

    - don't bring it up

    - an agreed-upon interim plan for tabling the problem for now

Dropping expectations (even temporarily) can be hard!

Options for Handling <u>Unsolved Problems</u>

Plan B: Solve the problem collaboratively

- **Emergency B:** more useful for de-escalation (durably solving problems isn't likely in the heat of the moment)

- **Proactive B:** more useful for working toward durable solutions **(creating TIME)**

The Three Steps of Plan B

1. Empathy Step
2. Define the Problem Step
3. Invitation Step

The Empathy Step

Fundamentally Simple Part:

The goal of the Empathy step is to *gather information so as to achieve the clearest possible understanding of the kid's concern or perspective on a given unsolved problem*

What's Hard:

Introducing the Unsolved Problem to the Kid: The Empathy step begins with the words "I've noticed that", followed by an unsolved problems and an initial inquiry ("What's up?")…though this isn't very hard if you've be careful to word unsolved problems in accordance with the guidelines

The Empathy Step of Plan B

Especially Hard:

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"
- The kids says, "I don't want to talk about it"
- The kid responds defensively ("I don't have to talk to you!")

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

Drilling for Information is Really Hard:

- Key Theme: Don't run with the first thing the kid says
- Strategies:
  - Reflective listening and clarifying statements ("How so?" "I don't quite understand" "I'm confused" "Can you say more about that?" "What do you mean?")
  - 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 (more important than *feeling*)
  - Breaking the problem down into its component parts

- Getting to your "aha" moment is hard…the premium is skilled drilling rather than adult ingenuity and insight

Additional Drilling Strategies:

- Discrepant Observation
- Tabling (and asking for more concerns)
- Summarizing (and asking for more concerns)

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

Also Hard:

– 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 have a clear understanding of the kid's concern or perspective

The Empathy Step (cont.):
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

The Empathy Step (cont.)
Other Responses to "What's Up?"

- "I don't have a problem with that"
    - 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"

The Define the Problem Step

Fundamentally Simple Part:

•The goal of this step is to *ensure that the adult's concern or perspective is entered 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 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 the Problem step is a Solution-Free Zone, too…the first two steps are reserved exclusively for concerns

The Define the Problem Step (cont.)

Also Hard:

• Sometimes there are two solutions instead of two concerns on the table at the end of this step

– that's a power struggle (a win/lose proposition)
– Collaborative Solutions are win/win propositions

• Some kids say they "don't care" about your concern

The Invitation Step

Fundamentally Simple Part:

Goal of this step is to *brainstorm solutions that are realistic and mutually satisfactory*

What's Hard:

– Proving to the kid that you're as invested in getting his concern addressed as you are in getting your own concern addressed

– The wording is hard:
  - Should recap two concerns so as to summarize the problem to be solved (Starts with: "I wonder if there's a way…")
  - The concerns are the reference point against which all solutions are weighed
  - 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)

The Invitation Step (cont.)

- Not being a genius is hard
  - you don't know where the plane is landing before it takes off

- Coming up with a good solution is hard
  - A good solution meets two criteria
    - Realistic
    - Mutually Satisfactory

- 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

- The Invitation ends with an agreement to return to Plan B if the first solution doesn't stand the test of time

You're Ready!

Additional Pointers

- 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 and mutually satisfactory as first thought
    - didn't address concerns that hadn't yet been identified
- Your first Plan B: just do the Empathy step (save the next two ingredients for the next day)
- You don't get good at Plan B without practicing Plan B (the first 20 are for practice)

How are the Skills Trained?

Mostly Indirectly

- Some skills can be trained directly
    - some social skills
    - language processing/communication skills
- There really isn't a technology for teaching (directly) most of the lagging skills on the ALSUP
- By collaboratively solving the problems associated with a given lagging skill, you're simultaneously (but indirectly) training that skill…you're building a "problem-solving repertoire"
- There are also skills being taught in each of the three steps of Plan B

Implementation in Schools and Facilities (Start Small)

- **Leadership commitment**
  - **Time, continuity, participation**

- **Formation of Core Group (start small)**
  - **Ensures that structures that support the model are in place before full-scale implementation**
  - **Practice using ALSUP and Plan B**
  - **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?

- 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)?

Additional Information/Resources

www.livesinthebalance.org
Advocacy/support/Care Packages/Bill of Rights
Action Plan *B*
Web-based radio programs/Listening Library
Streaming video

www.cpsconnection.com
Advanced and certification trainings

www.cpsinitiative.com
Consultation
CPS Store