

## The Collaborative Approach – Basics of Collaborative Problem Solving

Our primary strategies in helping kids and families are guided by a Collaborative Integral Approach (CIA). I have been inspired by a lot of people, but the two main inspirations are the works of Ross Greene and Ken Wilber. Greene espouses the Collaborative Problem Solving Approach and Wilber, the Integral Approach. In this section, we will focus on the Collaborative approach.

The first assumption of the collaborative approach (Called Collaborative Problem Solving by Dr. Greene) is that everybody matters – their need, desires, opinions, and perceptions. The collaborative part of the CIA doesn't discount hierarchical structure of families, schools, communities, and society. But it takes everybody seriously.

Another critical assumption of the CIA is that a parent's job is to help their child grow in assessing the situation they are in, what they want, and developing good judgment and flexibility in their approach to life. A parent's job is not to control their child and tell them every step to take but to gradually help their child develop self-control and increasingly establish their own goals.

We now move on to some specifics of Collaborative Problem Solving as described by Dr. Greene. On his web site, <http://www.livesinthebalance.org> Dr. Greene says:

First, social, emotional, and behavioral challenges in kids are best understood as the by-product of **lagging cognitive skills** in the domains of flexibility/adaptability, frustration tolerance, and problem-solving (rather than as attention-seeking, manipulative, limit-testing, or a sign of **poor motivation**). In other words, **challenging behavior is a form of developmental delay**.

**Kids will do well if they can** is his mantra that replaces, kids will do well if they want to. Click on this link for a five minute video on this major theme in CPS: <http://www.livesinthebalance.org/kids-do-well-if-they-can>

An underlying belief of the collaborative approach at the ALC is that **we all** have lagging skills that prevent us from solving problems with others as well as we could. One of these lagging skills that we all seem to have to some extent is that *we tend to pay attention to what confirms our existing thoughts, opinions, and beliefs and discard everything else*. This makes solving problems collaboratively difficult for both kids and adults. The collaborative approach mandates that we do our best to listen to the thoughts, opinions, and feelings of others – especially when it doesn't fit with our own.

Dr. Greene focuses on the kid's lagging skills. Click here for the **lagging skills worksheet (ALSUP)**: <http://www.livesinthebalance.org/sites/default/files/ALSUP%20Rev%2011-12-12%20pdf%20%282%29.pdf> The paperwork is now available in Spanish and several other languages.

We ask parents to discuss the ALSUP (as it pertains to their child) with each other; sometimes with teachers and other school staff; and often with their kids.

Expanding Dr. Greene’s approach, we also ask parents to discuss how the ALSUP items may also pertain to themselves and each other. For this to be helpful, this needs to be a collaborative discussion, which means respecting the other person and being open (instead of defensive) to what they say. Really try to understand your spouse’s viewpoint – instead of mostly defending your own position – which most of us are professionals at doing.

The second major section of the ALSUP is to identify unsolved problems. Again parents usually discuss this step with each other first. Doing a **situational analysis** on the unsolved problems is usually helpful. This means identifying what is going on before and after the problem behavior. Most problem behavior in children doesn’t really “come out of the blue”, although it may seem that way to parents at times. Most behavioral problems are sparked by something that frustrates, upsets, or angers the child.

After writing down the unsolved problems, you have to **prioritize**. Trying to work on everything at once just doesn’t work. Select what problems are the most *important, urgent, and developmentally appropriate*.

For problems at school, Ross Greene recommends that teachers usually meet together first, without the student or their parents. In this way they are freer to discuss the situation – the students lagging skills and unresolved problems.

The next step is for parents to discuss the unsolved problems and perhaps lagging skills with their child. Ross Greene calls this the empathy step because to be successful, parents need to discuss the unsolved problems with their kids in an open and non-defensive way. Showing empathy with your child's viewpoint and concerns helps lower the child's defensiveness; however, this is a process that can take quite a while. In Greene's words, “The goal of the Empathy step is to achieve the clearest possible understanding of a kid's concern or perspective on a given unsolved problem.” Greene calls the process of getting your child to express his or her concerns and feelings, **drilling for information**. A short video of Greene explaining this process is a click away at <http://www.livesinthebalance.org/drilling-information>

Greene talks about **three plans** that parents might employ to work on unsolved problems. Plan C is to let it go for now. After creating the unsolved problems list, parents then need to prioritize which problems need to be worked on first. The remaining (less urgent) problems go to C; they may be worked on later with Plan B. Plan A means the parent simply tells the child what to do – no if's, and's, or but's. Plan B, which Greene strongly endorses for most problems, is to work collaboratively with your child to solve problems. Proactive plan B usually works best. This means talking about the problem, outside the heat of the battle or when the problem is actually occurring. We all temporarily lose part of our intelligence when we are upset or frustrated. Click here for short video on Plan B. <http://www.livesinthebalance.org/simple-plan-b>

In review, there are **Three Plans To Solve Problems With Children:**

- A. Solve the problem your (parent’s) way – make the child conform to your expectations
  - Often the preferred plan for parents.
- B. Work it out with the child collaboratively
  - Solve problems together
  - Work on the problematic lagging skills at the same time
- C. Solve the problem the child’s way – drop your expectations
  - You can drop the expectation now, and bring it up later
  - Plan C is not “giving in”, it is recognizing that there are higher priorities at this time

Parents usually have **Three Major Goals:**

- Reduce or prevent meltdowns and other problematic behavior
- Your child meets your expectations
- Teach lagging skills to child

The following chart shows how each plan meets these three goals.

GOAL	Plan A	Plan B	Plan C
Reduce or prevent meltdowns	No	Yes	Yes
Your child meets your expectations	Yes	Yes	No
Teach lagging skills to child	No	Yes	No

It seems obvious that Plan B is most likely to meet all three goals.

Please visit Dr. Green’s website <http://www.livesinthebalance.org> for a wealth of information about CPS. There are numerous video and audio files to assist your learning. A 45 minute audio program on using the ALSUP can be found at <http://www.blogtalkradio.com/drossgreene/2012/01/23/collaborative-problem-solving-at-school>