

The Explosive Child

Collaborative Problem Solving

Elizabeth Yeaman B.Sc.O.T.Reg.(Ont.)
Occupational Therapist / Psychotherapist
CBT Certified

October 10th, 2014

1

THE EXPLOSIVE CHILD

- Easily frustrated
- Chronically inflexible



The Spectrum of Bad Behaviour...



2

- Behaviourally challenging children have typically been poorly understood



3

Conventional Wisdom

- Because of passive, permissive, inconsistent, noncontingent parenting, the child has learned that explosive/noncompliant behaviour is an effective means of seeking attention or coercing adults into “giving in”.

4

Difficult behaviour is typically seen as product of a



- Willful, attention-seeking, manipulative, coercive, lazy and limit-testing child.

5

In other words...

- It is often viewed that the child has learned that explosive/aggressive behaviour is an effective means of getting attention or coercing others into giving-in to their wishes.

OR...

- *“They do well if they want to”*

6

Your explanation guides your intervention...

7

Logical Intervention

- Train and motivate compliant behaviour through an intensive, consistent program of contingent consequences and/or ignoring of behaviour

8

Specific Components of an Operant (conventional) Approach

- Menu of Rewards and Punishments (differential reinforcement)
- Currency System

9

Limits of Operant Strategies

- What Operant Strategies Can Do:
 - Facilitate teaching/learning of basic lessons (right from wrong)
 - Facilitate motivation
- What Operant Strategies Can't Do:
 - Teach lagging thinking skills
 - Solve problems durably

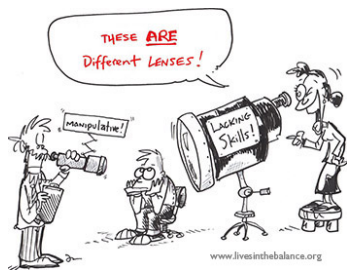
10

Limits of Operant Strategies

- It is highly likely that the child already knows right from wrong (don't hit, don't swear, don't explode), and is already well-acquainted with the consequences for these behaviours
- It is highly likely that the child is *already motivated*

11

We have to look at behaviour with different lenses.



12

**Unconventional Wisdom:
It's a Learning Disability**

- *The child is delayed in the development of the skills of flexibility/adaptability, frustration tolerance & problem solving, or has significant difficulty applying these skills when they are most needed.*

13

Definition of an Explosive Outburst

- An explosive outburst – like other forms of maladaptive behaviour – occurs when the cognitive demands being placed upon a person outstrip the person's capacity to respond adaptively

14

*Your explanation guides your
intervention...*

15

Logical Intervention

- *Teach the skills of flexibility, frustration tolerance, and problem-solving and reduce the likelihood of explosive outburst, while maintaining adults as authority figures.*

16

Facts:

- #1 There is no quick fix.
- #2 There is no cookie-cutter

17

Definition of “Authority Figure”, “Good Parent”, or “Good Teacher”

- *Understands the problem*
- *Solves the problem*

...Being responsive to the hand you’ve been dealt

18

COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

- A more accurate, compassionate, and productive understanding of behaviorally challenging kids

19

Children do well if they can...

- *...If they can't, we adults need to figure out why, so we can help*

20

THE GOALS:

- Understand the factors that contribute to your child's explosions
- Intervene proactively by anticipating the situations in which your child is most likely to explode
- Reduce explosions by replacing rewards/punishments with Collaborative Problem Solving
- Help your child develop the skills to be more flexible, solve problems, and handle frustration more adaptively
- Reduce hostility and antagonism between you and your child

21

Collaborative Problem Solving

- CPS is a model of understanding and helping kids with social, emotional and behavioral challenges.
- A model first described the book, *The Explosive Child*, by Dr. Ross Greene.
- The approach has been renamed “*Collaborative & Proactive Solutions*”

22

- The CPS approach is based on a thorough understanding of each child's unique strengths and vulnerabilities
- It is an approach that can assist caregiver's in gaining an understanding of why a child is struggling and how to help
- It's underlying philosophy is: Children do well if they can

23

WHY...
is a child exhibiting
challenging behaviour...?



24

BECAUSE...

- #1 He is lacking the skills not to exhibit challenging behaviour
- #2 There is a developmental delay (or learning disability) in some key cognitive skill areas, including:
 - Executive Function (planning, organization, impulse control)
 - Emotional Regulation (frustration tolerance)
 - Flexible Thinking
 - Social Skills
 - Language Processing

25

WHEN...
does a child exhibit
challenging
behaviour....?



26

WHEN...

- The demands being placed upon him exceed the skills he has to respond adaptively.



27

In other words...

- Because of a variety of factors, most of these children lack the crucial cognitive skills that are essential to handling frustration and demands for flexibility and adaptability, or have significant difficulty applying them when they are most needed.
- These children are not choosing to be explosive or non-compliant any more than a child would choose to have a reading disability.
- *This is a skill deficit. NOT a motivation-orientated deficit*
- BEHIND EVERY CHALLENGING EPISODE IS A LAGGING SKILL AND A DEMAND FOR THAT SKILL (e.g. an unsolved problem)

28

....Anyone can become angry, that is easy...but to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way....this is not easy.

- Aristotle

29

Explanation:

Children's difficult behavior is the byproduct of a learning disability in the domains of flexibility, adaptability and frustration tolerance. It is about delayed development, not poor motivation.

30

Goal of Treatment:

Teach children lacking cognitive and emotional skills

31

Tools of Treatment:

Teach children and adults how to work towards mutually satisfactory solutions to problems underlying difficult behavior

32

Emphasis:

Proactive focus on solving and preventing problems before they occur

33

Collaborative Problem Solving...

We need to start thinking outside of the box



- These children require a careful assessment to determine:
 - The nature of their difficulties (5 major pathways)
 - The factors that contribute to their overall level of frustration
 - The situations, times and people with which they have the most difficulty (triggers)

34

The FIVE Major Pathways

1. Executive Function Skills
2. Language Skills
3. Emotional Regulation Skills
4. Social Skills
5. Cognitive Flexibility Skills



35

EXECUTIVE SKILLS

- These are the thinking skills associated with the frontal lobe of the brain. They enable one to do the clear, organized, reflective thinking in the midst of frustration that is crucial for solving problems in an adaptive (non impulsive) manner.



36

EXECUTIVE SKILLS include:

- Shifting cognitive set (the ability to shift gears, to make transitions in activities and thinking smoothly)
- Organization and planning, and working memory (allow you to use hindsight and forethought to solve problems in a systematic fashion)

37

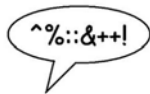
EXECUTIVE SKILLS

- When lacking these skills, children...
 - Have difficulty shifting from one activity to another.
 - Have difficulty anticipating problems
 - Have difficulty sorting through different solutions to organize a coherent plan of action
 - Reflexive negativity (e.g. "NO!")

38

LANGUAGE SKILLS

- Language skills set the stage for labeling, categorizing, communication and managing our emotions.



39

LANGUAGE SKILLS

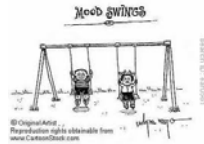
- When lacking these skills, children...
 - May not be able to identify or articulate their concerns
 - May not be able to label their emotions
 - May not have a problem solving vocabulary (e.g. "I need help")

When trying to process situations, children can often be heard saying such things as, "shut up", "get away", "I don't know", "don't care", "It's boring", "I don't want to talk about it" or, they may swear

40

EMOTION REGULATION SKILLS

- These are the cognitive skills one uses to control, modulate and regulate emotions, outside of the context of frustration.



41

EMOTION REGULATION SKILLS

- Separation of affect
 - The ability to separate one's emotional response to a problem from the thinking one must perform to resolve the problem

Goal #2 Think clearly in the midst of frustration

Goal #1 Stay calm enough to do Goal #2

42

EMOTION REGULATION SKILLS

- When lacking these skills, children have difficulty with:

- Chronic grouchiness
- Irritability
- Fatigue
- Anxiety
- Agitation

These chronic states make dealing with frustration difficult. These children can often find the energy to look good in certain situations, only to fall apart later.

43

COGNITIVE FLEXIBILITY SKILLS

Children who have difficulty in this area are:

- Function in rigid, black and white ways.
- Difficulty handling the “grays” of the world
- Literal and concrete in their thinking
- Often adhere to predictable routines/rigid/inflexible rules
- Difficulty focusing on the “big picture”



44

COGNITIVE FLEXIBILITY SKILLS

- Cognitive Distortions

- “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”

45

SOCIAL SKILLS

- Poor perspective-taking and appreciation of how one's behaviour is affecting other people
- Poor appreciation of how one is coming across
- Poor appreciation of social nuances
- Poor social repertoire (e.g. starting conversations, entering groups)



46

PATHWAYS: How are all these skills assessed?

- Pathways Inventory
 - Provides a listing of the skills frequently found lagging in children with social, emotional, and behavioural challenges
 - Which lagging skills seem to be accounting for the child's worst moments?
 - Which lagging skills seem to be getting in the child's way most often?
- Situational Analysis (Triggers)
 - These are "problems that have yet to be solved" (e.g. homework, academic tasks, circle time, teach brushing, sensory hypersensitivities, sibling interactions, computer time etc.)
- Formal Testing (sometimes)

47

CPS: Three Goals

1. Allow adults to pursue expectations
2. Teach lacking thinking (cognitive) skills
3. Reduce meltdowns*

* When a child enters into a meltdown they lose the ability to think clearly and no learning occurs. There is no evidence to indicate that having meltdowns will build lacking skills. Since motivation is not the key, and also these kids typically lack the ability to remember the consequences of a prior event when in the midst of frustration, it is unlikely to be of help to them in the future.

48

CPS: Three Ingredients

1. Understanding the pathways (skill deficits) underlying the explosive behaviour and the typical situations where meltdowns are most likely to occur (triggers or Unsolved-Problems).

This may raise need for further assessments, and a comprehensive approach that includes CPS, as well as: medication, OT., social skills, organizational skills training, SLP

49

CPS: Three Ingredients

2. Be aware of options for responding to problems/unmet expectations and of what each option accomplishes (e.g. Plan A, B or C).
3. Executing Plan B successfully so as to teach lacking skills and reduce explosive behaviour

50

CPS: Three Plans

- PLAN A: Impose adult will
 - "NO", "You must", "You cant"
- PLAN B: Collaborative Problem Solving
 - "We worked it out...we solved the problem together"
 - We are teaching skills
- PLAN C: Drop it (for now, at least)
 - "Okay" / "I didn't bring it up"

51

Goals Achieved by Each Plan

	Pursue Expectations	Reduce Explosions	Teach Skills
PLAN A	X		
PLAN B	X	X	X
PLAN C		X	

52

The PLANS....

- PLAN A
 - Refers to handling a problem/unmet expectation by imposing your adult will.
 - The adult concern is the only one on the table.
 - Using Plan A greatly heightens the likelihood of a meltdown in challenging children
 - You know that you are using Plan A when you say "No", "You must", "You can't", "1, 2, 3...", or the threat or imposition of consequences.


53

- PLAN C
 - The adult is eliminating or reducing the problem expectation.
 - Only the child's concern is considered.
 - Does not cause meltdowns.
 - Using Plan C helps adults eliminate unnecessary demands, thereby reducing a child's global level of frustration and enabling him or her to deal more successfully with the more critical remaining demands.
 - The adult thinks "I chose to drop this expectation for now"



54

- PLAN B
 - Using Plan B does not generally cause meltdowns. When using Plan B, your role (at least initially) is as surrogate frontal lobe doing what the child can't yet do. You and the child are engaged in a process by which you will come up with mutually satisfactory solutions to problems (address triggers). BOTH your concern and the child's concern will be on the table.
 - It is also using Plan B where you will help promote the communication and Problem Solving skills (address the pathways) that your child needs to be more flexible and handle frustrations more adaptively)



- Once you've identified the unsolved problems that are precipitating challenging episodes, and determined the two or three high-priority unsolved problems you want to solve, you're ready for Plan B

PLAN B: Surrogate Frontal Lobe

- Serves as the child's "four guide" for solving problems and regulating emotions initially
- Over time, teaches the child skills so he won't need a surrogate frontal lobe for the rest of his life

PLAN B: Timing is everything

- Timing is everything
 - Challenging episodes are highly predictable
 - ProActive Plan B = Crisis Prevention.
Intervention is planned and occurs proactively, well before highly predictable challenging episodes occur again.
 - Emergency Plan B = Crisis Management.
Intervention is reactive and occurs emergently, in the heat of the moment.

58

PLAN B: Timing is everything

- Question is NOT: "What should I do when...?" but rather "What should I do before...?"
- BEFORE, BEFORE, BEFORE
- Be consumed with solving problems proactively
- 99.9% of the time use Proactive Plan B (as opposed to Emergency Plan B)
- REMINDER: Explosive outbursts are highly predictable

59

PLAN B: Entry Steps

1. Empathy
2. Define the Problem
3. Invitation

60

PLAN B: Empathy Step

- Helps keep the child (and adult) calm
- The goal of the Empathy step is to gather information as to achieve the clearest possible understanding of the kid's concern or perspective on a given unsolved problem

61

PLAN B: Empathy Step

Proactive B

- Begins with a neutral observation ("I've notice that...") about an unsolved problem, along with an initial inquiry ("What's up?")
- Requires being as specific as possible
- The neutral part is important
- Ensures that the child's concern is on the table

62

PLAN B: Empathy Step

- DRILLING FOR INFORMATION
 - Ask about the who, what, where, and when of the unsolved problem
 - Ask about why the problem occurs under some circumstances and not others
 - Break the problem down into its component parts
 - Ask the child what she is thinking in the midst of the unsolved problem (more important than "feeling")
 - Use clarifying statements: "how so?" "I don't understand", "Can you say more about that?"
 - Need the "AHA! Moment" when you truly understand the child's concern

63

PLAN B: Empathy Step

DRILLING GUIDANCE

- Remember, “drilling” isn’t “grilling”...it involves “listening” not “lessoning”
- Stay neutral, non-defensive throughout...suspend your emotional response...the Empathy step isn’t about you
- Don’t rush
- You’re not ready to leave the Empathy step until you have a clear understanding of the kid’s concern.
- VIDEO CLIP (Drilling)

64

PLAN B: Define the Problem

- The goal of this step is to ensure that the adult’s concern or perspective is also entered into consideration (possibly beginning with, “the thing is...” or “my concern is...”)
- Definition of a problem: two concerns that have yet to be reconciled
- This step is a solution-free zone
- If there are two solutions instead of two concerns on the table at the end of this step you’re engaged in a power struggle

65

PLAN B: The Invitation Step

- The goal of this step is to brainstorm solutions that will address the concerns of both parties
- Lets the child know this is something you’re doing with him rather than to him
- Should recap two concerns so as to reiterate the problem to be solved
- Crucial to prove to the child that you’re as invested in getting his concern addressed as you are in getting your own concern addressed
- Stick as closely as possible to the concerns uncovered in the first two steps – not a good time for assumptions, creativity or vague summaries
- Can start with “I wonder if there’s a way...”

66

PLAN B: The Invitation Step

- The child is given the first opportunity to generate solutions (“do you have any ideas?”) but the resolution of the problem is a team effort
- The Invitation Step ends with an agreement to return to Plan B if the first solution doesn’t stand the test of time
- Definition of a good solution
 - Realistic
 - Mutually satisfactory

67

VIDEO CLIPS

- #1 Simple Plan B
- #2 Plan B Mistakes

68

You’re Ready! But....this is hard...

- Next Ingredients:
 - BRAVERY:
 - It’s not as easy as it sounds
 - PERSISTENCE:
 - Plan B takes lots of practice
 - CONTINUITY:
 - Solving problems tends to be incremental
 - The first solution seldom solves the problem durable...most problems require more than one discussion
 - “Talking with” a child is not the same thing as doing Plan B

69

Get Busy: What Do We Do While We're "waiting for Plan B to work"?

- By achieving a clear understanding of the child's lagging skills, challenging episodes are reduced
- By decreasing the use of Plan A, challenging episodes are reduced further
- By increasing the use of Plan C, challenging episodes are reduced further
- By increasing the use of Plan B, many problems are being solved and skills are being trained and challenging episodes are reduced further

70

Special Topic: Targets of Medical Intervention

- Inattention/disorganized thinking
- Hyperactivity-impulsivity
- Irritability
- Obsessiveness
- Mood instability

71

Bill of Rights for Behaviourally Challenging Children



72

Additional Information/Resources:

- www.livesinthebalance.org
 - Advocacy/support
 - Bill of Rights
 - Action Plan B
 - Web-based radio programs/listening library
- The Explosive Child: A New approach for understanding and helping easily frustrated, chronically inflexible children by Ross Greene
- Lost at School: Why our kids with behavioral challenges are still falling through the cracks and how we can help them by Ross Greene

73
