

CHAPTER 2

Kids Do Well If They Can

Kids with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges lack important thinking skills. Now there's an idea that can take some getting used to. Let's begin by considering your philosophy of kids: what kids are about, why they do what they do, what they're up to (if they're really up to anything).

Many adults have never given much thought to their philosophy of kids. But if you're trying to help kids with behavioral challenges, you're going to need one, because it's your philosophy of kids that's going to guide your beliefs and your actions in your interactions with them, especially when the going gets tough. The philosophy that serves as the foundation of this book is the title of this chapter: "kids do well if they can."

This philosophy may not sound earth-shattering, but when we consider the very popular alternative philosophy—"kids do well if they want to"—the significance becomes clear. These two disparate philosophies have dramatically different ramifications for our assumptions about kids and how to proceed when they do not meet our expectations.

When the "kids do well if they want to" philosophy is applied to a child who's not doing well, then we believe that the reason he's not

doing well is because he *doesn't want to*. This very common assumption is usually wrong and causes adults to believe that their primary role in the life of a challenging kid (and the goal of intervention) is to *make the kid want to do well*. This is typically accomplished by motivating the kid, by giving him the incentive to do well, by rewarding him when he behaves in an adaptive fashion and punishing him when he behaves in a maladaptive fashion.

By contrast, the "kids do well if they can" philosophy carries the assumption that if a kid *could* do well he *would* do well. If he's not doing well, he must be lacking the *skills* needed to respond to life's challenges in an adaptive way. What's the most important role an adult can play in the life of such a kid? First, assume he's already motivated, already knows right from wrong, and has already been punished enough. Then, *figure out what thinking skills he's lacking so you know what thinking skills to teach*.

This can be a radical philosophical shift for a lot of people, and new ways of thinking can cause some anxiety. But don't abandon ship yet. There's much at stake, not only for kids with behavioral challenges but also for their classmates, teachers, and parents. This chapter is aimed at familiarizing you with the skills challenging kids lack and how to identify these lagging skills in the kids you're trying to help.

LAGGING SKILLS

If you know what thinking skills a kid is lacking, you'll be in a much better position to teach those skills. You'll also be in a better position to anticipate the situations in which challenging behavior is most likely to occur. If you don't know what skills a kid is lacking, they probably won't get taught, it will be much harder to anticipate his worst moments, the kid's challenges will linger (or get worse), and he will become increasingly frustrated, hopeless, and alienated, just as most of us would if we had a problem no one seemed able to understand and were being treated in a way that made the problem worse.

When is challenging behavior most likely to occur? *When the demands being placed on a kid exceed his capacity to respond adaptively*. Of course, that's when all of us exhibit maladaptive behavior.

The problem for kids with behavioral challenges (and those around them) is that they're responding much more maladaptively than the rest of us, and much more often. You see, there's a spectrum of things kids do when life's demands exceed their capacity to respond adaptively. Some cry, or sulk, or pout, or whine, or withdraw—that would be the milder end of the spectrum. As we move toward the more difficult end of the spectrum, we find screaming, swearing, spitting, hitting, kicking, destroying property, lying, and truancy. And as we move even further toward the extreme end of the spectrum, we find self-induced vomiting, self-injurious behavior, drinking or using drugs to excess, stabbing, and shooting. But all of these behaviors occur under the same conditions: when the demands being placed on a kid exceed that kid's capacity to respond adaptively. Why do some kids respond at the milder end of the spectrum while others are at the more severe end? Some kids have the *skills* to “hold it together” when pushed to their limits and some don't.

With this new perspective on challenging kids, much of what we say about them no longer makes sense. Take a look:

- “*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 that 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 kids with behavioral challenges. Competent manipulation requires various skills—foresight, planning, impulse control, and organization, among others—typically found lacking in challenging kids. In other words, the kids who are most often described as being manipulative are those least capable of pulling it off.
- “*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 kid the incentive to do well. But why would any kid *not* want to do well? Why would he choose *not* to do well if he has the skills to do well? Isn't doing well always preferable?

- “*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 kids have well-behaved siblings. Blaming parents doesn't help anyone at school deal effectively with the kid in the six hours a day, five days a week, nine months of the year that he's in the building.

- “*He has a bad attitude.*” He probably didn't start out with one. “Bad attitudes” tend to be the by-product of countless years of being misunderstood and overpunished by adults who didn't recognize that a kid was lacking crucial thinking skills. But kids are resilient; they come around if we start doing the right thing.

- “*He has a mental illness.*” While he may well meet diagnostic criteria for a psychiatric disorder and may even benefit from psychotropic medication, this description is a nonstarter. Fifty years ago, a psychiatrist named Thomas Szasz understood that “mentally ill” was a limiting (and potentially inaccurate and derisive) way to describe people with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges. He advocated for reconceptualizing these challenges as “problems in living,” a more fitting and productive way of viewing things.

- “*His brother was the same way.*” Ah, so it's the gene pool! Alas, we can't do anything about the gene pool, and it's likely that his brother was lacking some important thinking skills, too.

While many of these explanations enjoy tremendous popularity, most are simply clichés that lead caregivers down an intervention dead-end. Once you become comfortable with the idea that challenging kids lack important thinking skills, these explanations no longer make much sense. In fact, such explanations have a tendency to cause adults to view kids with behavioral challenges as “the enemy” and push them away.

The following list is much more useful. It's the list of many skills frequently found lagging in challenging kids:

- Difficulty handling transitions, shifting from one mind-set or task to another (shifting cognitive set)
- Difficulty mustering the energy to persist on tasks that are challenging, effortful, or tedious
- Difficulty doing things in a logical sequence or prescribed order
- Poor sense of time
- Difficulty reflecting on multiple thoughts or ideas simultaneously
- Difficulty maintaining focus for goal-directed problem-solving
- Difficulty considering the likely outcomes or consequences of actions (impulsive)
- Difficulty considering a range of solutions to a problem
- Difficulty expressing concerns, needs, or thoughts in words
- Difficulty understanding what is being said
- Difficulty managing emotional response to frustration so as to think rationally (separation of affect)
- Chronic irritability and/or anxiety significantly impede capacity for problem-solving
- Difficulty seeing the "grays"/concrete, literal, black-and-white thinking
- Difficulty deviating from rules, routine, original plan
- Difficulty handling unpredictability, ambiguity, uncertainty, novelty
- Difficulty shifting from original idea or solution/difficulty adapting to changes in plan or new rules/possibly perseverative or obsessive
- Difficulty taking into account situational factors that would require adjusting one's plan of action
- Inflexible, inaccurate interpretations/cognitive distortions or biases (e.g., "Everyone's out to get me," "Nobody likes me," "You always blame me," "It's not fair," "I'm stupid," "Things will never work out for me")
- Difficulty attending to and/or accurately interpreting social cues/poor perception of social nuances
- Difficulty starting a conversation, entering groups, connecting with people/lacking other basic social skills
- Difficulty seeking attention in appropriate ways

- Difficulty appreciating how one's behavior is affecting other people; often surprised by others' responses to his/her behavior
- Difficulty empathizing with others, appreciating another person's perspective or point of view
- Difficulty appreciating how one is coming across or being perceived by others

An excerpt from

"Lost at School-Why Our Kids with Behavioral Challenges are Falling Through the Cracks and How We Can Help Them"
by Ross W. Greene, Ph.D.

You can also view videos of Dr. Greene discussing these ideas at <http://www.livesinthebalance.org/walking-tour-educators>

These will be linked on our Tier 3 website.