Kids Do Well
If They Can

Kids with behavioral challenges are not attention-seeking, manipulative, limit-testing, coercive, or unmotivated. But they do lack the skills to behave appropriately. Adults can help by recognizing what causes their difficult behaviors and teaching kids the skills they need.
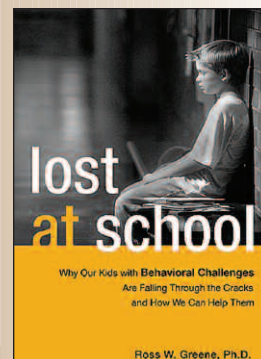
BY ROSS GREENE

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 what you're about to read is *"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.

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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

> Behind every challenging behavior is an unsolved problem or a lagging skill (or both).

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.

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?
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> **>> "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.
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> **>> "He's manipulating us."**
> This is a very popular, and misguided, characterization of kids with behavioral challenges. Competent manipulation requires various skills — forethought, 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.
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> **>> "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?

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 over-punished 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 derisory) 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.

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 or 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.

You may have noticed that this list contains no diagnoses. That's because diagnoses don't give us any information about the cognitive skills a kid may be lacking. All too often adults get caught up in the quest for the right diagnosis, assuming that a diagnosis will help them know what to do next. The reality is that diagnoses aren't especially useful for understanding kids with behavioral challenges or for helping adults know what to do next. Plus, kids don't generally exhibit challenging behavior in a vacuum. It usually

takes two to tango: a kid who's lacking skills and an environment (teachers, parents, peers) that demands those skills. Diagnoses don't reflect that reality, they simply pathologize the child.

Let's focus on a few of the lagging skills on the list for the purpose of making clear the connection between lagging skills and how they can contribute to challenging behavior.

IN FOCUS

> **Difficulty reflecting on multiple thoughts or ideas simultaneously (disorganized).**
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> **Difficulty considering a range of solutions to a problem.**
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> **Difficulty considering the likely outcomes or consequences of one's actions (impulsive).**

When you're faced with a problem or frustration, your primary task is to solve the problem that caused your frustration. To accomplish this task, these three skills will be absolutely essential. That's because problem solving requires a great deal of organized, planful thinking.

Let's ponder that for a moment. To solve a problem, you must first identify the problem you're trying to solve. Then you'll need to think of solutions to the problem. And then you'll need to anticipate the likely outcomes of those solutions so as to pick the best one. That's how people make decisions.

Many kids are so disorganized in their thinking — they have so much difficulty sorting through their thoughts — that they're unable to figure out what's frustrating them, in which case the process of problem solving comes to an abrupt halt, the problem doesn't get solved, and their frustration heightens (often setting in motion one of the behaviors on the spectrum). Many are so disorganized that even if they can manage to figure out what problem they're trying to solve, they can't think of more than one solution to the problem. Many are so impulsive that even if they can think of more than one solution, they've already done the first thing that popped into their heads. The bad news? Our first solution is often (not always, but often) our worst. Good solutions usually come to mind after we've inhibited our less optimal initial impulses and considered our better options in a more organized fashion. Many kids — often the disorganized, impulsive ones — are notorious for putting their "worst foot forward." In other words, there are many kids who are responding to life's challenges in a maladaptive fashion because they aren't very skilled at organizing their thoughts, thinking of alter-

native solutions, or anticipating likely outcomes.

Approaching problems in an organized, planful manner, considering a variety of solutions, and reflecting on their likely outcomes are crucial developmental skills. Most 2-year-olds don't yet possess these skills. Neither do a lot of challenging kids who — chronologically, at least — are a lot older.

Clearly, we have some skills to teach. But if the school discipline program emphasizes formal consequences, they're not going to get taught. Consequences only remind kids of what we don't want them to do and give them the incentive to do something more adaptive instead. But they already know what we don't want them to do, and they're already motivated to do something more adaptive instead. They need something else from us.

IN FOCUS

> **Difficulty expressing concerns, needs, or thoughts in words.**

Most of the thinking and communicating we do involves language, so it's no accident that many kids with language delays also have trouble handling the social, emotional, and behavioral demands that are placed upon them. For example, many kids have trouble finding the words to tell someone what's the matter or what they need. This can present a big problem; life's a lot easier when you have the linguistic wherewithal to let people know you "don't feel like talking," that "something's the matter," that you "need a minute to think," that you "don't know what to do," that you "need a break," or that you "don't like that." The reminder "use your words" won't help at all if a kid doesn't have the words. It's the lack of words that often sets the stage for challenging behavior.

Some kids cry or become withdrawn when they lack the language skills to successfully manage interactions with classmates and teachers. Of course, that's the mild end of the spectrum. Other kids express their feelings or needs with "Screw you," "I hate you," "Shut up," "Leave me alone," and other more colorful expressions (now we're a little further down the spectrum). And still others vault right past these inappropriate verbal options and wind up expressing themselves physically (shoving, hitting, throwing things, destroying property, running out of the classroom).

A crucial developmental leap occurs when kids begin to use words to let the world know what's bugging them, what they need, and what they're thinking. The social, emotional, and behavioral challenges

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of many kids can be traced back to a developmental lag in these and related domains. Regrettably, language-processing problems are frequently overlooked. Adults often don't think to assess language skills when they're trying to figure out why a challenging kid is challenging. And sometimes the testing instrumentation used in standard language assessments doesn't pick up on some of the finer-grained language issues that may be involved; in such cases, the test results may not only fail to pinpoint the kid's difficulties, but also erroneously conclude that the kid has no language difficulties at all.

Can kids be taught to articulate their concerns, needs, and thoughts more effectively? Absolutely. But not until adults understand that it's the lack of these skills that is setting the stage for challenging behavior.

IN FOCUS

> **Difficulty managing emotional response to frustration so as to think rationally (separation of affect).**

Separation of affect refers to the ability to separate the emotions (affect) you're feeling in response to a problem or frustration from the thinking you must do to resolve the problem. While emotions can be quite useful for mobilizing or energizing people to solve problems, thinking is how problems get solved. Kids skilled at separating affect tend to respond to problems or frustrations with more thought than

emotion, and that's good. But kids who lack skill in this domain tend to respond to problems or frustrations with more emotion and less (or no) thought, and that's not good at all. Learning how to put your emotions "on the shelf" so as to be able to think rationally is an essential developmental skill, and one many challenging kids have failed to develop.

At the milder end of the spectrum, kids who are having difficulty separating thought from emotion may become highly anxious over, for example, an upcoming test, a new social situation, not understanding an assignment, or being embarrassed in front of their classmates. They may cry over a bad grade, at not being picked first for a team, or when they feel socially excluded. At the more extreme end of the spectrum, their emotions may burst through in such a powerful way that they scream, swear, throw something, hit somebody, or worse. These kids may actually feel themselves "heating up" but often aren't able to stem the emotional tide until later, when the emotions have subsided and rational thought has returned. Naturally, the heating-up process will be greatly intensified if adults or peers respond in a way that adds fuel to the fire.

IN FOCUS

> **Difficulty seeing the "grays"; concrete, literal, black-and-white thinking.**
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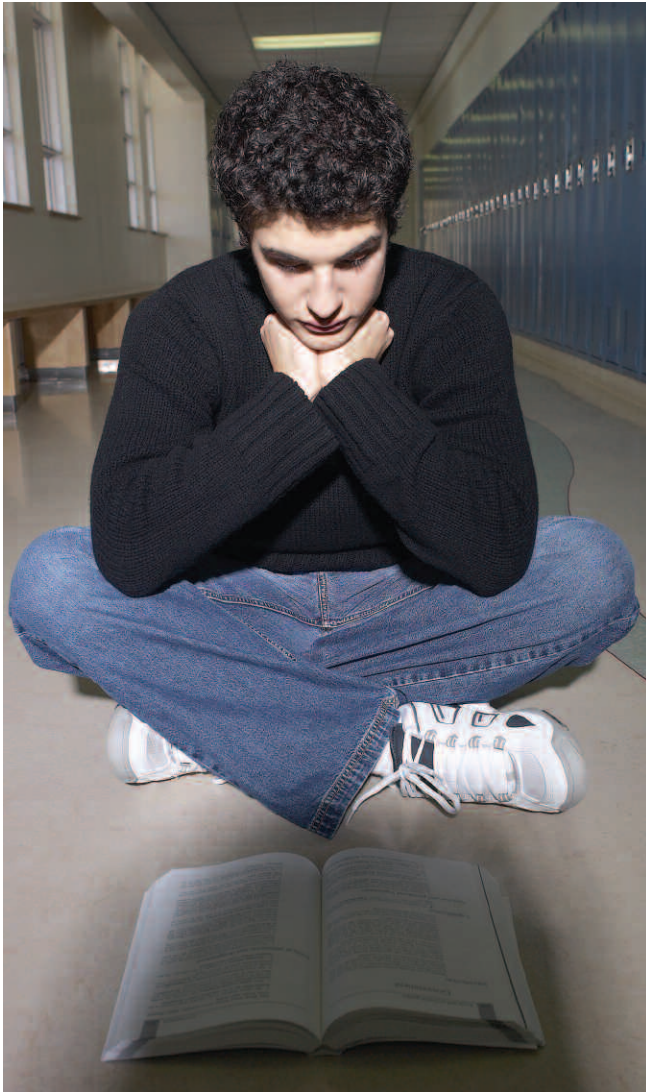> **Difficulty deviating from rules, routine, original plan.**
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> **Difficulty handling unpredictability, ambiguity, uncertainty, novelty.**
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> **Difficulty shifting from original idea or solution; difficulty adapting to changes in plan; possibly perseverative or obsessive.**
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> **Inflexible, inaccurate interpretations; cognitive distortions or biases.**

Young kids tend to be fairly rigid, black-and-white, literal, inflexible thinkers. They're still making sense of the world, and it's easier to put two and two together if they don't have to worry about exceptions to the rule or alternative ways of looking at things. As kids develop, they learn that, in fact, most things in life are "gray," that there are exceptions to the rule and alternative ways of interpreting things. Sometimes we have a substitute teacher, a field trip needs to be rescheduled because of the weather, someone is sitting in our usual seat in the cafeteria, recess has to be indoors instead of outdoors.

Unfortunately, for some kids, "gray" thinking doesn't develop as readily. Though some of these kids are

tions to a world where few such rules apply. Some sulk or become anxious when events don't conform to their original configuration or when they've interpreted an event in a distorted fashion. Some scream. Some swear. Or throw things. Of course, those are the things they do. All that tells you is where they are on the spectrum of challenging behaviors. Now you know why and when they're doing them. That's where the action's at.

Kids who haven't responded to natural consequences don't need more consequences.

Can black-and-white thinkers be helped to think more flexibly? To move from an original way of thinking and adapt to circumstances or perspectives they may not have taken into account? Most definitely . . . so long as adults recognize that it's hard to teach kids to be more flexible by being inflexible themselves.

There's a big difference between interpreting the lagging skills described above as "excuses" rather than as "explanations." When lagging skills are invoked as excuses, the door slams shut on the process of thinking about how to teach the kid the skills he lacks. Conversely, when lagging skills are invoked as explanations for a kid's behavior, the door to helping swings wide open.

UNSOLVED PROBLEMS

So far, you've read about a sampling of the lagging skills that can set the stage for challenging behavior, but there's another piece of information missing. We can learn a lot about a kid's social, emotional, and behavioral challenges, and identify potential avenues for intervention, by noting the situations in which challenging behavior is most likely to occur. A situational analysis can give you invaluable information about the circumstances or unsolved problems — sometimes called triggers or antecedents — that precipitate social, emotional, and behavioral challenges.

For example, if a kid is having some of his greatest difficulties during circle time, then circle time is a circumstance precipitating challenging behavior. If a kid is having difficulty getting along with other kids during recess, then getting along with other kids during recess is an unsolved problem precipitating challenging behavior. And if a kid is refusing to work when

diagnosed with disorders such as nonverbal learning disability or Asperger's disorder, it's more useful to think of them as "black-and-white thinkers stuck in a gray world." Predictably, these kids are most likely to exhibit challenging behavior when the world places demands on them for gray thinking.

Many such kids are quite comfortable with factual information because it's black-and-white but grow uncomfortable when life demands problem solving because it's gray. These kids love details (black-and-white) but aren't so adept at handling ambiguity (gray) and often miss the "big picture" (gray). They love predictability (it's black-and-white) but don't do so well when things are unpredictable (gray). They love certainty (black-and-white) and routines (black-and-white) but don't handle uncertainty (gray) or changes in plan (gray) very well.

These black-and-white thinkers often present significant challenges to their teachers and classmates as they struggle to apply concrete rules and interpreta-

paired with a particular classmate, then working with that particular classmate is a circumstance or unsolved problem precipitating challenging behavior. A lot of adults nominate the word "no" as a trigger. But it's not specific enough. It's what the adult is saying "no" to — going to the bathroom (yet again), sharpening a pencil (yet again), excessive talking or teasing — that helps adults know the specific problem they need to solve (so they don't have to keep saying "no" so often). We know these problems haven't been solved yet because they're still setting the stage for maladaptive behavior.

NEW LENSES

There are many lenses through which challenging behavior in kids can be viewed. Here's the mantra that encapsulates the view of this author: Behind every challenging behavior is an unsolved problem or a lagging skill (or both).

Whether a kid is sulking, pouting, whining, withdrawing, refusing to talk, curling up in a fetal position, crying, spitting, screaming, swearing, running out of the classroom, kicking, hitting, destroying property, or worse, you won't know what to do about the challenging behavior until you've identified the lagging skills or unsolved problems that gave rise to it. Lagging skills are the *why* of challenging behavior. Unsolved problems are the *who, what, when*, and *where*.

Once you have a decent handle on a kid's lagging skills and unsolved problems, you've taken a major step in the right direction because the kid's challenging episodes are now highly predictable, which is good news if you're a teacher and have a class full of 25 other students. You don't have to wait until the kid is disrupting the class before you try to teach skills or solve problems; you can do it in advance because the disruption is predictable. A lot of adults find it hard to believe that a kid's challenging behaviors are highly predictable, believing instead that such behaviors are unpredictable and occur out of the blue. But that's not true, not if you know what skills the child is lacking and what his triggers are.

ILLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

Before moving on, let's consider why consequences may not be an effective way to teach skills or help kids solve problems. There are a variety of ways to address a kid's challenging behavior. One common option is to simply tell the kid you don't approve of his behavior and to suggest alternative behaviors. While this can be an effective approach for a lot of kids, it often isn't especially effective for the challenging ones because it doesn't teach any lagging skills or solve any problems.

There's a big difference between interpreting the lagging skills as "excuses" rather than as "explanations."

What option invariably kicks in next? Those very powerful, ever-present, and inescapable natural consequences: praise, approval, embarrassment, being scolded, being liked or disliked, being invited to things (or not), and so forth. Challenging kids experience lots of natural consequences but are far more likely to experience the punishing variety than their less challenging counterparts. While natural consequences are inescapable, they don't teach lagging thinking skills or solve problems, so for many challenging kids they aren't especially effective at reducing difficult behavior.

If the first two options don't achieve the desired effect, adults usually turn to a third option and add more consequences, those of the imposed, "logical," "unnatural," or "artificial" variety. These include punishments, such as staying in from recess, time-out from reinforcement, detention, suspension, and expulsion; and rewards, such as special privileges. Of course, the kids who are on the receiving end of most imposed, logical consequences are the ones who haven't responded to natural consequences. But imposed, logical consequences don't teach lagging skills or help kids solve problems any better than natural consequences do. Indeed, when logical consequences are being liberally applied but are not effectively reducing a kid's challenging behavior, I think they're probably more accurately referred to as illogical consequences.

My view is that kids who haven't responded to natural consequences don't need more consequences, they need adults who are knowledgeable about how challenging kids come to be challenging, who can identify the lagging skills and unsolved problems that are setting the stage for maladaptive behavior, and who know how to teach those skills and help solve those problems. We've learned a lot about children's brains in the last 30 years. It's time for our actions to reflect our knowledge. **K**

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