

hiddensparks  
without walls

***What's Behind Children's  
Challenging Behavior and What  
Can We Do to Help?***

**With Claire Wurtzel**

**March 5, 2014**



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helping children reach their potential™

# Our Guest:



**Claire Wurtzel**, Co-Educational Director of Hidden Sparks and professor at the American Museum of Natural History. She was the Director of Faculty Development for the Churchill School and Center in New York, and prior to her work at Churchill, Ms. Wurtzel was the Director of Faculty Development for the New York City Schools Attuned initiative for All Kinds of Minds, an institute co-founded by Dr. Mel Levine and Charles Schwab. In her capacity as Director, she oversaw Schools Attuned courses, mentor training, and facilitator training for over 400 New York City schools. To fulfill long-standing interest in Jewish education, Ms. Wurtzel has worked to adapt the Schools Attuned professional development program for Jewish day schools. Most recently, she and her husband, Bill Wurtzel, co-authored the book, [\*Funny Food: 365 Fun, Healthy, Silly, Creative Breakfasts\*](#), and have been running workshops in New York City schools to improve children's eating habits.

# Collaborative Problem Solving Approach (CPS)

All children and parents want to do well. But even with best intentions, unpleasant confrontations occur when kids **can't** meet your expectations. It can get very frustrating.

Notice I said **can't** not **won't**.

What approaches have you used to deal with children's inappropriate behavior? Have they worked?



The (CPS) approach offers parents and teachers a different framework for understanding challenging behavior and a better way to help kids.

And leads to more joyful and successful parenting.

# Collaborative Problem Solving

In the CPS approach, developed by Ross Greene & Stuart Ablon there is a mantra - “Kids do well if they can.”

Don't ignore inappropriate behaviors but focus on figuring out what's behind the behavior that makes it hard for kids to behave.

An example: a child who likes routines has a tantrum when you spontaneously do something new- even if it's fun. The child lacks flexibility- can't switch gears. Once you realize the trigger -you can prepare the child in advance.

Too often the children who need help are viewed as disrespectful, out of control, attention seeking, manipulative, or “chutspadic.”



# Dealing with Inappropriate Behavior

Three ways adults respond to children's misbehavior:

- **Plan A-** adults impose their will by solving the problem- “You must...” “You can’t.” This works for some things, but can also heighten challenging behavior. It doesn’t teach kids how to solve problems in a thoughtful manner.
- **Plan B-** collaborate to solve problems. This teaches the child how to solve problems considering a range of ideas and their likely results. It is also compassionate.
- **Plan C** the adult prioritizes-dropping some things for now. This helps everyone from getting overwhelmed with issues.

# Implementation: First Assess Child's skill's strengths and weaknesses

**First: assess** the child's strengths and lagging skills. Ideally- both parents do it. Greene & Ablon have checklists of lagging skills on their websites. (See resource page)



Typical lagging skills: lack of cognitive flexibility, low frustration tolerance, undeveloped emotional regulation, poor social skills and language delays that may lead to misinterpreting what has been said, or an inability to express ones thoughts.

Once you understand the child's profile of strengths and struggles and triggers or unmet expectations you can begin to formulate a way to talk about the problem to be solved.



# Implementation cont'd

The goal: **prevent** inappropriate behaviors.  
It's impossible to solve a problem in the midst of a fight.

Greene says, "Highly challenging behaviors are highly predictable." If you pay attention to the triggers you can **prevent** many meltdowns.



The lagging skills do not cause the behavior struggle. The “bad” behavior occurs when the child has to do something that he doesn’t have the skill to do.

Focus on the problem (the trigger) and not the behavior.

# The Empathy Phase

The **Empathy phase** - gather information to understand the kid's perspective or concern on the issue.

Approach the child in a non-judgmental & non-blaming way  
You want to learn more- not punish!

Sentence starters:

- “I’ve noticed that... what’s up?” “So help me understand...” “It seems hard for you to...” “Is it...”
- Do not lose the neutral stance- even if the child just shrugs or says, “I don’t know.”





# Empathy phase: Exploring for information

- Explore to get information.
- Don't assume you know the problem.
- The goal is to get the child talking.
- Don't rush.
- We need to hear the child's concern.
- When children have reading problems, we search for the underlying lagging skill causing of the reading problem.
- We explore- does the child know the sounds of the letters? Does the child understand how to blend letters together?
- In the same way we need to explore and understand the factors that set the stage for the challenging behavior.



# Defining the Problem Phase

- **Defining the problem** is the next phase. The adult shares his/her concern or perspective on the unsolved problem.
- Listen very carefully to what the child has to say. Don't jump to solutions. You may learn something that might surprise you.
- You also state your concern "My concern is.."
- Don't get into the behavior- stick with your concern.



# The Invitation Phase

- **The Invitation** - adult and child brainstorm solutions to address the concerns of both- the child and the adult. The adult: “I wonder if there’s a way...” “Do you have any ideas?”
- Let the child see that you’re in this together.
- You’re not imposing your will.
- If the child’s solution is not reasonable let him/her know. “It’s an interesting idea but it won’t work because....”
- CPS is a positive and practical approach that is compassionate and may improve your relationship with your child.



# Results of CPS: Effective Relationships

- In ***Lost at School***, a book by Ross Greene, he quotes part of a song by Kate Wolf that is very powerful: ...”the finest hour that I have seen Is the one that comes between the edge of night and the break of day when the darkness rolls away...”
- The hope is that the darkness will roll away.
- Kids with behavior challenges are poorly understood.
- Parents and sibling get frustrated and everyone is extremely stressed. Parents feel powerless and are often blamed for their children’s misbehavior at school or in the community
- CPS can lower anxiety and stress in the family.



# Review of CPS

- Rewards and punishments can teach basic lessons, but they don't teach the problem solving process that helps kids develop complicated skills- that gives children a sense of competence and mastery.
- “Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” - *Albert Einstein*
- *We need to do something different to get different results.*
- If your child is having behavior problems ask yourself, am I expecting him/her to do something that they are unable to do?



# Review of CPS cont'd

- Children want to succeed but they keep getting into trouble, and over time, they may lose faith that anyone will ever know how to help them.
- CPS can be messy, but with patience and practice you get better at it.
- Even if it doesn't work the first time -- it's still a success. You have had a neutral conversation with your child and formed an alliance and that is success!



# Lagging Skills and Triggers

- The development of the skills needed for critical thinking and problem solving are based on research in neurosciences.
- Stuart Ablon says, “the children with behavioral challenges lack **skill** not **will**.”
- The trigger is the antecedent of the explosive behavior when the child is expected to do something that he/she can't do -- because he/she lacks the skill to do.





# Focus on the problem not the behavior

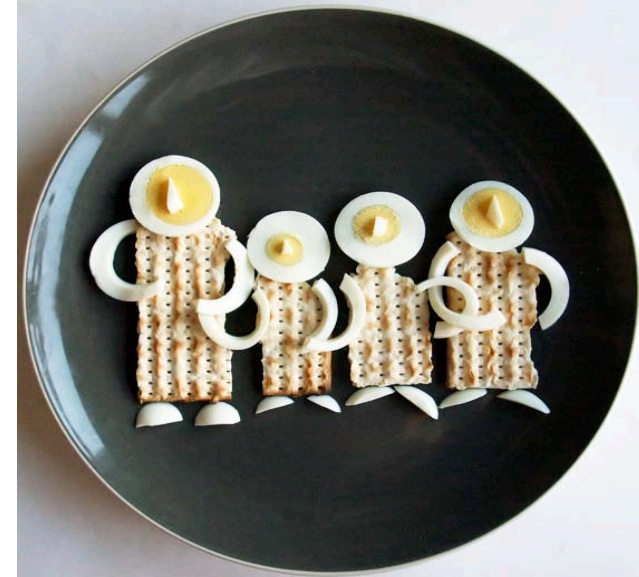
Behavior is the first thing we see -- don't dwell on it. You can't solve a behavior. Focus on the problems to be solved & the skills needed to solve them.



CPS has been implemented with thousands of families and in many schools and even in inpatient psychiatric units, residential facilities and juvenile detention centers.

# It's a Process & an Event

- Parents should agree to use plan B. Don't use Plan A to get your partner onboard.
- A better relationship may take time, especially if there have been mostly Plan A responses to the child's misbehavior: might makes right.
- Helping is a two-way effort- both you and the child working together.
- The child learns problem solving skills and that he/she is capable of coming up with solutions.
- The child also learns that someone doesn't have to lose to solve a problem. It can be a win-win solution.
- Here's to your success!



## Websites:

- [www.thinkkids.org](http://www.thinkkids.org)
- [www.livesinthebalance.org](http://www.livesinthebalance.org)

## Books:

- The Explosive Child by Ross W. Greene Ph.D (2010)
- Lost at School by Ross Greene Ph.D (2009)
- Treating Explosive Kids by Ross W. Greene Ph.D & J. Stuart Ablon (2005)

*The food creations were made by Bill Wurtzel*  
***Funny Food***, book by Claire & Bill Wurtzel

# Upcoming Hidden Sparks Without Walls Sessions

<b>Wed March 26</b>	<b>For Teachers:</b> <b><i>“Screen Time and Bullying”</i></b> with Jeannie Crowley
<b>Wed May 7</b>	<b>For Parents:</b> <b><i>“Making Bar and Bat Mitzvah Preparation More Joyful!”</i></b> With Howard Blass

*For more information visit: [www.hiddensparks.org](http://www.hiddensparks.org)*

The Hidden Sparks program is currently in 23 Jewish day schools/yeshivot in the New York metro area, 7 schools in Baltimore and 2 schools in Chicago.

Since inception, Hidden Sparks has trained 95 Internal Coaches from 45 ICP participating schools and has provided school-based coaching to a total of 15 Hidden Sparks External Coach Schools.

More than 1,200 teachers have received Hidden Sparks training, impacting an estimated 12,000 students.

**If you are interested in bringing Hidden Sparks  
to your school or city, please contact us at:**

**212-767-7707 or [news@hiddensparks.org](mailto:news@hiddensparks.org)**

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