

Book Review

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

New York: Scribner, 2008

Reviewed by Sherry Cramer, M.S., ET/P

I recently discovered the Collaborative Problem Solving model by Ross Greene. The central idea behind CPS is that children will do well if they can. As I read about the model, which Greene developed for children exhibiting challenging behaviors, I was struck by its potential usefulness for the practice of educational therapy, not only for social-emotional concerns, but also for academic issues.

Greene believes that children with behavioral challenges lack important thinking skills, akin to weaknesses in executive functions. He believes that behavioral problems are most likely to occur when the demands of the situation exceed the capacity of the child to deal with the situation adaptively. Difficulty with the executive skills needed to negotiate the school setting is often what brings clients to educational therapy. Greene's "Assessment of Lagging Skills & Unsolved Problems," provides a helpful structure for thinking about these executive skills and may be a useful case management tool for explaining a client's difficulties to school personnel.

Effective intervention in the CPS model focuses on both the child and the situation. Determining which skills are lagging explains why the challenging behaviors are occurring. Analyzing the expectations within the environment highlights the circumstances in which the difficulties most likely to occur.

This can also apply to academic issues. As educational therapists, we evaluate our clients' skills and investigate the expectations of teachers and the demands of the curriculum in order to determine which academic skills, strategies and behaviors are needed for our clients to be successful.

The intervention procedures of CPS consist of three steps: establishing empathy, defining the problem, and inviting the child to help develop a solution. The purpose of

empathy is to develop an accurate understanding of the child's perspective. This is accomplished by conversations in which the adult becomes an active listener. *Defining the problem* clarifies both the child's perspective and the adult's concerns. Both parties strive to see the bigger picture. *Inviting the child to help develop a solution* begins by asking the child to suggest ideas that can address both the child's perspective and the adult's concerns. The focus here is on respecting the child's ideas even though the adult may need to scaffold attempts to come up with a solution. This approach not only respects the child's input but also provides teachable moments. The ultimate goal of CPS is to help the child learn the skills necessary to be successful in educational settings as well as in life. This is also a goal of educational therapy.

What drew me to investigate Greene's work was his belief that "If you want to help a kid, you're going to need a helping relationship to accomplish the mission" (p 53). Such a therapeutic relationship, of course, is a key component of Educational Therapy. I was especially drawn to his focus on empathy. Without empathy, we are imposing our beliefs without taking the child's worldview into consideration. A child who is described as oppositional may actually fear exposing his or her academic difficulties in front of peers or may be struggling with anxiety related to changes in the routine. We won't understand unless we listen.

Although Lost at School is directed toward classroom teachers and school administrators, I believe the CPS model is useful in other settings, including educational therapy. Additional information about CPS can be found on Greene's website www.livesinthebalance.org/.

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