

## Behind Every Challenging Behavior Lies an Even Stronger Emotion

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**This is the beginning of The Brave Reporter program. Enjoy this information (presented as a program for a parent to use for her child, but adaptable to an adult treating him/herself. The HyperHealing program offers many more intervention plans to help The Brave Reporter flourish!**

Katie came home from school in a black mood. The minute she spotted her little sister sitting peacefully drawing at the kitchen table, she went into overdrive. She yelled at her sister,

“Why are you looking at me!”

“You just walked in. I wanted to see who came home,” was her little sister’s timid reply.

“Mom, she’s bothering me!” yelled the agitated older sister.

Mom was caught by surprise. This was some out-of-control behavior. Before Mom could pull herself together to respond, or perhaps she was stalling because she had no idea how to respond, the angry girl grabbed the crayons and threw them at the little girl and all over the room. Mom swept up the victim and said, “Katie, in our house we can’t behave that way toward siblings. This evening you will be missing ten minutes of your computer time. Now I’m going to my room to organize my clothing with your sister. You can join us when you calm down,”

Mom and the younger child went upstairs and began organizing clothing. A few minutes later there was a pitter-patter on the steps. Someone was coming up to see what was going on. When Mom heard Katie at the door to her bedroom, she said out loud, “I’m going to go through my clothing to decide what no longer fits and put it aside to donate to charity. I usually have a hard time deciding what looks good on me. Maybe there is someone who has great taste and can help me out here.” In walked Katie. “Mom, step aside. I know what’s in style. You wear your clothing forever; I’ll help you,” And she did.

Mom had very little left in her closet at the end, someone benefited from a large bag of her donated clothing, and Katie was calm and feeling better. Whew! That could have been a disaster, but it went well. Let’s move on . . .

Absolutely not!

We are not going anywhere. Why did Katie behave that way? Is she just an explosive, unpredictable kid? Do we have to hold our breath and hope it will blow over quickly? The punishment was important. Good job, Mom, for giving a clear message that siblings must be respected, but we are not done here. Katie would have behaved well if she could have. Something is bothering her, and simply managing the symptoms of her emotional stress will not make the stress go away.

In this chapter we will discuss difficult behavior and how it is triggered by emotional stress. We will discover that our children’s actions are rooted in one of two sources: either they have not yet developed vital emotional skills to cope with the demands of their environment, or they are dealing with suppressed emotional trauma. We will learn that we can help our child develop these skills, not by punishing harshly, but by taking an emotional “collaborative conversation” journey. We will first identify what skills are missing and then understand why our child is missing them. Then we will roll out a

program to help our children become more emotionally savvy. We will also address serious emotional trauma that our child may be experiencing, learn to identify behaviors that indicate that the child is being victimized, and help alleviate the isolation and suffering our child may be experiencing.

Remember the habit cycle we spoke about earlier? Katie has been triggered by an emotional cue, and neither she nor her mother know what it is. It is vital to figure out what is triggering Katie, because she will be triggered again, and once again will behave very poorly because she simply does not have the emotional skill to contain her distress. Our job is not to solve her problem for her, nor to come down hard on her with a terrible punishment; it is to help her become a problem solver herself.

Dr. Ross W. Greene, PhD, author of *The Explosive Child* (Harper, 1998), a must-read for all parents of children with ADHD symptoms, explains that challenging behavior occurs when the demands and expectations being placed on a child exceed the child's capacity to respond adaptively. Why does our child lack the capacity to respond appropriately? She is missing the emotional skills to work through the problem and align her behavior with social demands. We have behavioral expectations for every child, according to age. We expect our children to act in a socially appropriate way, but if our child is being overloaded and is missing the skill needed to behave in the way we would like, no punishment or behavior chart can fix his problem.

Consider an absurd situation in which a parent demanded that her child respond to all questions asked of him in French but had not yet taught her son the language. French is a beautiful language, and it would be fantastic if he spoke French, wouldn't it? Now imagine that Mom so desires that her son speak French that she sets up a behavior program for him. Every time her son responds in French, he will get a dollar, and when he replies in English, he will lose computer time. Can this child succeed? He is highly motivated; he just does not have the skill required to succeed! This is what responding to emotional outbursts with a strict punishment looks like.

We will not be focusing on the challenging behavior itself, because this behavior is a child's call for help, telling us he is unable to meet our expectations. Instead, we will focus on the skill our child is missing that is the root cause of him not being able to solve his emotional problems, and we will give him the skill to solve these problems. This process will be accomplished through a collaborative conversation, a partnership between adult and child. The first two things we need to identify are the skills our child is missing and the environment, conditions, or situation in which the behavior is accruing. This may seem like an enormous task, but situations tend to repeat themselves, and if we pay attention, we can figure out what is triggering the clash between a difficult situation and lack of necessary skills.

### **What skills is our child missing?**

A. Executive functioning skills x Trouble with transitions x Trouble sticking with a task that requires sustained attention x Does tasks out of order x Has trouble relating to or keeping time x Can't assess how long a task will take x Has trouble blocking out irrelevant noise to focus on a task x Does not think before responding.

B. Language processing skills x Struggles to express needs, thoughts, or concerns in words x Gets confused with verbal instructions x Does not follow conversation.

C. Emotional regulation skills x Does not think rationally when frustrated or manage irritability in an age-appropriate way x Struggles with dealing with disappointment.

D. Cognitive flexibility skills x Sees situations in black and white; does not see shades of gray Can't envision other possibilities to solve a problem x Gets confused when there is a deviation from schedule, rules, or routine x Experiences stress with changes in plans, ambiguity, or unpredictability x Generalizes and personalizes situations with words like “always” and “never” x Labels himself or others based on one experience (I'm stupid; he hates me).

E. Social skills x Does not interpret nonverbal social cues like facial expression and tone of voice x Does not know how to start a conversation or enter a conversation with peers x Seeks inappropriate attention from peers x Does not understand how she is perceived by peers.

**Why is our child with ADHD symptoms often missing these skills?**

1. He responds impulsively in an instant gratification way. Each event is a stand-alone experience, and therefore does not lend itself to internalizing the problem and developing skills to solve it.
2. Every time she is triggered, she experiences it as a deep and painful experience, unrelated to any experience she has had before. This is because she has not learned to identify the triggering patterns
3. When he has been triggered emotionally, he is less able to sort out his emotions and becomes overwhelmed and struggles to verbally express what he is experiencing.
4. She tends to view emotional stress in an egocentric way, blaming others for her pain rather than searching inside for solutions.

We may have spent a good few years either delegitimizing his emotional confusion because it is accompanied by such difficult behavior and what seems like untruthful reporting of events, or we have tried to soothe and fix the expression of pain quickly because the outbursts are too difficult to bear. We are not listening; we are shutting down the behavior and missing the emotional stress, thereby not helping our child develop emotional skills. Our child explodes, and we are angry and worried. Will she ever be normal? Will he ever express himself without breaking things or using his fists? The answer is a resounding yes, but as in all worthwhile processes, this one takes some time, patience, and skill.

Let us remember some of the skills we have developed so far:

- We have learned to de-escalate ourselves.
- We have learned to identify our own triggers. Very often those triggers are feelings that we are incapable of dealing with our child's tantrums. We have found a way to calm ourselves and change our own habit loops.
- We have learned to establish rules in our home. We know how to follow through with positive feedback for respecting rules and punishment for disregarding them.
- We have created a daily schedule to help our child be more in control and a behavior chart to start developing new habits. So far, we are doing great. Our child needs emotional and physical order, and that is what we are providing. He must know he has a strong parent who is in charge and will care for him and love him, no matter what. He feels competent knowing that he is capable of mastering new skills. She feels safe knowing she is not the one in charge of the rules and aware that we will be by her side to help her choose to do well.

Yet he still tantrums; she still ignores us; he continually picks on siblings; she gets into fights at school. This is because we have more work to do. We still have not helped our child identify and resolve the emotional stress that is causing the difficult behavior.

**Collaborative and Proactive Solutions**, also referred to as Collaborative Problem Solving, is an excellent method, developed by Dr. Greene, in which a parent, teacher, or other responsible adult opens a dialogue to help the child build emotional skills and become an emotional problem solver.

How are Collaborative and Proactive Solutions accomplished?

**Warm-up:** Understand that our child wants to do well and will do well as soon as we work together with her in a collaborative fashion to help her develop missing skills. We can begin by inviting our child to participate in an open conversation, in which she is an equal participant. It's important to stress that we cannot invite our child for a conversation when we are angry at her. We also can't be truly honest in conversation when we have already diagnosed the problem and chosen a solution. A truly collaborative conversation is a fact-finding mission, and it requires curiosity. It also requires quiet time and a scoop of ice cream or hot cocoa.

What behaviors will we choose to focus on?

1. We are looking for patterns, not stand-alone, challenging events that could easily have been triggered by exhaustion or hunger. Missing emotional skills will never be a one-time occurrence; the missing skill will be obvious in many social situations.
2. Any behavior that demonstrates that your child is suffering socially or emotionally. Examples include:  
x Alienating peers x Causing fights at home Being disrespectful to adults x Behaving in an age-inappropriate way x Frequently tantrumming or shutting down x An allergy to hearing the word “no.”

Some of these behaviors will demand your attention because your child is very loudly struggling (tantrums, fights with siblings) and the behavior can't be ignored. In these cases, your child is “inviting” you to a Collaborative and Proactive Solutions conversation.

In other cases, your child will be struggling more quietly (trouble-making friends, difficulty interpreting social interactions, shutting down when overloaded). In these cases, we as parents must initiate the conversation. We begin the conversation in the same way whether we are initiating, or our child is, by finding a quiet time to sit down and talk. Don't forget the ice cream.

These are the steps to take:

1. **Show empathy:** This is the beginning of the conversation— the fact-gathering stage. We are trying to investigate what skill is missing. We are here to listen, to figure out what our child's concern is, how he feels about an unsolved problem. This step takes time. You may initiate this step a few times before your child responds. What are some pitfalls you may discover when approaching the empathy step?
- Your child does not want to talk: He feels you never listen to him and does not trust that you will really hear him this time. Don't worry; it takes all parents a few tries before getting it right. Make the invitation to the conversation. Set out the ice cream. Discuss how proud you are of your child for something specific. Begin the conversation gently. If he does not want to talk, that's okay; no one has

failed. Ask him when he would like to talk. Give him a few choices of times. Do not be forceful; remember, this is a collaborative conversation. Both you and he are equal partners and should have a desire to participate.

- Your child starts making up stories: You know, the kind you always feel you must correct? He says his brother started, but you saw the whole thing. It’s a trap! Don’t fall into it. Listen to what he is saying and mirror his words. Don’t disagree, because that will end the conversation. The goal is to understand what emotional challenge your child is dealing with, not to present the facts before a judge and jury. He is building a wall to divert you, but you can jump right over it. He says Andre started; you respond with, “You feel Andre started? And what else is bothering you?” I admit it’s hard. Untruths make us angry, but if we let our emotions carry us away, how can we help our child develop his emotions?
- Our child feels defensive and does not want to reveal that she is jealous or hateful or ashamed: It makes her feel petty or bad. We must be very clear that all emotions are valid. We must learn how to respond to our strong emotions, not punish ourselves for having them. A great way to help our children with feeling freer to share emotions is by telling personal stories. When Dad was young, he got into fights with his brother all the time. He once threw his brother’s McDonald’s meal right out the car window because he felt jealous that his brother got dessert. Share with your kids the funny stories, the challenging stories, anything that is appropriate for their ages.
- Our child is not used to sharing emotions: He’s the strong, silent type. We must be the example. When we are processing emotional stress, do it out loud. A woman yells at you in a parking lot? Let your child know how that felt and how you wanted to respond (leaving out the profanities). Ask your child to help you process. Ask her how she would have felt in the same situation. While we do not want to invite our child to weigh in with an opinion when we punish, now’s our chance to engage our child in meaningful conversation and clue her in to our emotional process.

What are we trying to achieve in this step?

We want to identify the emotion our child is feeling that is not allowing her to respond well to the situation. Through questions, stories, mirroring, and validating, we want to conclude the empathy step by understanding what caused our child to respond so poorly in any situation. In the case of the child throwing the crayons at her sister, consider the following:

Mom sat with Katie that evening for a conversation. Since Mom read a story to Katie as part of their nightly routine, this was a great time to talk.

“Katie, it seems you had a hard day in school today,” began Mom.

“Nope, great day.”

Mom could really skid off the tracks here, saying, “But Katie, that can’t be true; you came home in such a bad mood!” But this mom is holding it together. She says,

“Great to hear. Did someone bother you at recess?”

“No, I played ball.”

“How about in the classroom? Did you get along with your teacher today?”

“She’s so mean! I hate her!”

This is great! Katie is talking. The story unfolds. Mom is listening, asking gentle questions, and affirming. Katie stood up to get her notebook and passed a boy on the way back from her cubby. The boy moved his chair back, pushing Katie into the desk behind her and hurting her. Katie got mad and hit her classmate. At that moment the teacher took notice and blamed the incident on Katie. She asked Katie to stand in the corner of the classroom until recess. All the other kids stared at her for the rest of the lesson (from Katie’s perspective).

“Wow, that’s really rough, Katie. How did that make you feel?”

“Like I wanted to kill the teacher. I hate her; she’s the worst teacher EVER!”

Here she is identifying her emotion as hatred. But that’s not really what blocked her from making good behavior choices. More investigating is necessary.

“You are so mad at your teacher! I wonder how I would feel if I was in the same situation. I think I might have felt so embarrassed!”

“Yeah, all the kids were staring at me like I was a bad kid. And you know what else makes me so mad? She didn’t even punish Bob; he just got to smash me and then stay in his seat. He kept smiling at me, and I wanted to bash his face!”

“It sounds like you were embarrassed and felt like it wasn’t fair, like there was no justice.”

“Yeah. So in the next lesson, right when the teacher came into the room, I got up on my chair and yelled, ‘No one listen to the teacher! Only listen to me!’”

Oh goodness, this story has taken a twist. The teacher will be calling soon. But Mom has done some good investigative work. She has determined that embarrassment or shame, mixed with a feeling of not being treated fairly, was too much for Katie to process. She was not treated fairly by Bob or by the teacher and responded with poor or no communication to both. Is this a repeating trend? Does Katie respond to injustice and shame this way often? Are these emotions triggers for Katie? Thinking back, Mom can say there is very likely a pattern here.

“Katie, that was a very painful day for you. You felt ashamed and that things were not fair. Is it correct to say that it is very hard for you when you feel embarrassed and when you feel something wasn’t fair? Both Bob and the teacher were not fair to you.”

“Mom, this was the worst day ever!”

Step one has been completed very successfully. Katie has shared her distress; Mom has not corrected her, only mirrored and questioned: and the outcome was the revelation that the two emotions of shame and need for justice were driving Katie’s distressed behavior. What do we do about the double chair episode and attacking the younger sister?

**Moving on to step two.**

**Define the problem from the parent’s perspective:** Now it’s our turn to express our concern and the problems we face due to our child’s behavior. Why do we have to inject ourselves into the process? Isn’t this about our child? It sure is, and an important skill our child must learn is how her behavior affects

others. When Katie attacks her sister, how does her sister feel? How does her behavior clash with the rules carefully set up in the home? Her behavior is often egocentric; she is only seeing her own pain and discomfort. If we try to shield her from hearing how her behavior affects others, we are denying her a very safe way to practice and learn to see others. This is a skill she will need her entire life. We do a child no favors when we focus strictly on her emotional stress and do not allow her to see the larger picture and the other people.

Our message, which we must continually reiterate, is that “every feeling must be respected and understood. We must identify your feeling and figure out together how to respond in a socially appropriate and respectful way to your strong emotions.”

Here is a continuation of the prior conversation:

“Katie, I see that feeling ashamed and feeling not listened to has caused you to feel so bad that you behave in ways that are problematic to others.”

“I don’t care. If the teacher doesn’t listen to me, no one should listen to her. If Bob pushes me, I should hit him back.”

“We have some important rules about respecting classmates, teachers, and sisters. Even when we are very sad and mad, we have to think about those rules. You were too upset to choose another way to behave. Your feelings were correct, but we have to come up with another way to respond so that you don’t hurt your sister or disrespect your teacher.”

“My sister was looking at me like the kids in the class. She deserved it.”

“Do you think that there could be a better way to talk to her if you had a rough day and don’t want her to look at you? In our house we have a rule that children must respect each other. Your sister didn’t know you were having a hard day. We have to come up with a way that you can share how you feel without disrespecting or hurting other people.”

“I don’t know how to do that.”

“We are going to figure it out. I know that, together, we can help you share what you are feeling and learn how to let others know in a respectful way. I’m so proud of you for sharing your feelings with me. It’s okay not to know things; we just have to work together and find out.”

Sometimes our child will reject step two and insist that she is right, and she doesn’t care how others feel. Take your time. Take a deep breath. As you repeat this process, she will start to understand that you are not angry with her, and she will be more willing to hear the other side. Now that we understand our child’s emotional triggers and we have identified the problem, it’s time to search for appropriate solutions to the clash between the emotional feeling and the behavioral response. This clash is due to missing skills.

What skills is Katie missing?

- Emotional regulation – Katie had a very hard time thinking rationally when she got frustrated by being pushed. Her response was hitting back. This snowballed into being disrespectful to the teacher in retaliation for her unfair punishment. She had been treated unjustly and was not able to process and respond to the injustice.

- Cognitive inflexibility – She saw no other solution to the problem other than striking out at the teacher and her sister.
- Social skills – Katie could only interpret her classmates or sister looking at her as an obvious slight to her honor. Once she felt internal embarrassment, she viewed all others as scorning her. When we search for a solution, we must consider these skills and how we will help Katie strengthen them.

**Step Three: The child and adult find a solution to the problem together:** The adult and child brainstorm different solutions to the problem and resolve it in a way that addresses both the concerns of the child and the adult. The concern of the child is the stress caused by the injustice and humiliation and the challenge of being unable to express her emotions or choose a more socially appropriate and respectful way to respond. If her problem is not resolved with a solution she can apply to other challenging experiences, she will continue to respond poorly and continue to absorb negative feedback from her environment. How about the parent? What problems does she need addressed? The important house rule—respecting a sibling—has been violated. And basic respect for teachers and other adults is not firmly understood by her daughter.

Both concerns must be addressed in the solution. Time to brainstorm.

We begin by repeating the child and the adult’s concerns.

“Katie, we talked about the very hard time you had in school when you got pushed and then you hit back because you felt the teacher was not hearing the truth and you felt embarrassed by her punishment, right?”

“Yes, we did. I just hate that teacher.”

“You sure are angry at her. I also said that I had a few problems. Do you remember them?”

“No, not really.” “My problem, Katie, is that because you were so ashamed, you behaved disrespectfully to your sister and your teacher. You also made a choice to shove Bob instead of talking to him or the teacher. We must come up with a plan that helps you deal with your feelings and helps you make better choices even when you are upset. Do you have any ideas of how to solve this problem?”

“Okay, I won’t go to school anymore, then I won’t have to see the stinky teacher.”

“Thanks for that suggestion. I’m glad you’re thinking. Since you have to go to school, let’s think of some other ideas.”

“Can I tell the teacher how mad she made me? Can you tell her she has to listen to all the kids and not just guess who’s wrong?”

“Katie, I love your idea! You want to have a conversation with the teacher? How will that help you feel calmer about being listened to?”

“Maybe if I can tell her that I need her to also listen to me and not just other kids, I will feel calmer. Maybe if I know she will listen, then I won’t hit. Maybe I can tell her how embarrassed I was.”

“You have some great suggestions. You are holding difficult feelings in your heart; how can we work together to help you share your feelings in words and not lash out at others or cross lines of respect?”

“I don’t know. Do you have an idea?”

“I’m thinking that we can come up with a secret code that you can say to me when you feel bad inside, and then I will know that I have to stop and listen to you, and we can figure out together how to work through your feelings.”

“Okay, how about ‘explosion’? Can we try that? I will say it when I feel like I am going to explode.”

“Fantastic! I have one more concern on my mind. Let’s say you are so upset, and you begin getting frustrated with someone in the family. But you don’t realize that you are upset about something that happened that you are carrying in your heart. You start to make bad choices, but you did not say ‘explosion’ to me. What should I do? Is there a way I can help you calm down and talk to me?”

“So, we need another plan. Maybe you can touch my shoulder when you think I am getting mad.”

“I love it! What a great plan. This is what we will do. We will call your teacher to talk with her. We can discuss with her the feelings you were having, and you can apologize for being disrespectful. Does that sound good so far?”

“No. Why do I have to apologize to her if she didn’t listen to me and embarrassed me?” “Great question. You are right that she did not listen to you the way you wanted her to. But we have rules about how we have to respect adults, especially teachers. Even if she made you feel very hurt, you had a choice to communicate that pain in a respectful way. Can you think of a better way to tell your teacher that you feel she is being unfair?”

“I can tell her when we meet with her. I can tell her it’s hard for me when all the kids look at me, that I feel embarrassed. I can ask her to listen to me before she decides that I did something wrong.”

“And can you tell her that you will do your best to be respectful to her even if you are upset?”

“I can try.”

“That’s fantastic! What a pleasure talking with you. I think we found out a lot of important things about your feelings and how you can understand and tell your teacher or me how you feel, and that can help you calm your behavior. I really like the secret codes. Let’s check in next week and see how our plan is working.”

Now wasn’t that easy? Just kidding.

It’s a challenging yet worthwhile process. Let me give you a few more examples so you get the hang of it. Keep in mind that, most often, a Collaborative and Proactive Solutions conversation does not run so smoothly and in one sitting. Frequently, you will begin one evening and conclude a few days later. Alternatively, you will spend many hours just on empathy before you identify the emotion your child is grappling with. Also, in the case above (based on a true story), the child was able to offer solutions, but in many cases, your child will not have ready solutions, and you will have to suggest some of your own. The solutions should involve skill-building, such as developing self-awareness, awareness of others, self-control, understanding of expectations, and flexibility, to name a few. Our goal is not to plug up the problem that occurred today. We want to use the event to strengthen long-term skills. Explosive or negative behaviors are big, loud signs for us from our child that she is overloaded and is missing the

skills to make better choices. These behaviors are not failures; they are opportunities for self-development.

Here are a few more examples of problems that are the result of missing skills:

**The Attention Drain:** Every time Mom sits down with one of her children to do homework or give any other type of concentrated attention, Sara shows up. Not the quiet kind of showing up; no, Sara lets herself be heard and felt. Sometimes she picks on the child being attended to; sometimes she demands help from Mom. It takes Mom some time to notice the pattern because the behavior is so disruptive, she feels too depleted to connect the dots. Until now her strategy for dealing with the constant disruptions has been to accommodate, yell, punish, or try to ignore the disruptive behavior for as long as possible. All have backfired! When she moved on to the next ill-conceived strategy of trying to offer a reward for time that Sara grants her to spend with other siblings, that was not a great success there either. The other children resented the reward, and Sara continued to disrupt, but a little more quietly. What could be triggering Sara? Time for a conversation. Mom has a sneaking suspicion that Sara needs abundant attention and is jealous about having to share it with her siblings.

1. **Show empathy:** First, Sara denies that she behaves that way. Mom brings a few examples, to which Sara declares that Mom gives EVERYONE more attention than she gets. Breathe, Mom, you know that nothing is further from the truth and that in reality, Sara sucks up more oxygen than all the children in the house, and possibly the neighborhood, put together. This is not the time to correct her, though, so mirror her words. “Sara, you feel like you don’t get enough attention, and everyone gets more than you?” Great! Let’s move forward; you were not tripped up by the need to correct. Maybe it’s time for a little story. Can you tell Sara about how when you were a child, you felt jealous of your brother who was younger than you and Mom did everything for him? How about the kid who sat next to you in class and seemed to get good grades without studying? When she hears from you that everyone feels jealous sometimes, even adults and even her mother, she may be less ashamed to share her feelings. Ask her if she feels jealous. Tell her it’s okay. Sometimes offering a menu of feelings allows a child to think through her experience. She may not be able to pinpoint the emotion without some help. Sara agrees that she does have a hard time when her mother spends time with other kids.
2. **Put the parents’ problems on the table:** Sara’s mother’s problem is not that it’s bad for a child to be jealous, nor does she expect Sara to be happy when others get attention. Not at all! Her mother wants to tell Sara that jealousy is a very real emotion that hurts, and it is perfectly legitimate to be jealous. Sara’s mother’s problem is that Sara is having a hard time expressing her feeling of jealousy in a clear and helpful way and is therefore behaving very disrespectfully towards her siblings. She is also not allowing others to get the attention they deserve. She is demanding attention by force, thereby hijacking the peaceful environment. Her mother has a problem with the choice Sara is making to disrupt rather than communicate.
3. **Find a solution:** Half of the problem has already been solved by identifying why Sara demands attention. Now that we understand that she is jealous and is having trouble expressing her need, we can focus on a solution to the problem. Sara has no solution ideas. Here’s Mom’s suggestion: “How about when you are feeling jealous, like you really need attention, you come over to me and tell me quietly, ‘Mommy, can you please give me some attention?’” Have we fully solved the problem? Not yet. Mom can’t always drop everything and give Sara attention on demand. Also, the others need attention as well. How is this solution helpful? Mom tells Sara

that she cannot always give Sara attention on demand, but she can let Sara know when she will be available. She can say, “Sara, I am so proud of you for understanding what you need and asking for it. You have helped us keep a calm and respectful environment! That was very mature. I’m helping your brother with his math homework for the next ten minutes, and then you and I can prepare dinner together.” She can also tell Sara that she will not be available for a while, and they can discuss for a minute what Sara can do while she waits. Sara is now calmer because she knows how to communicate in a way in which she will be heard. She is not perceived as a bad kid who is always bothering people, and she has a way to get the attention she so dearly needs. She also understands that all people feel jealous sometimes, and she can share that feeling without shame. As always, the final step is setting up a time in the very near future to revisit how the plan is working.

**The “No” Explosion:** Every time Jason hears the word “no,” he explodes. When he is told he must come right away when called, he has the same response. Obviously, we can’t hermetically seal Jason’s environment from demands or limitations. This would be sending a message to Jason that he is fragile and that we have low expectations of him. But this has been the approach in his home for the last year or two. His parents describe it as walking on eggshells. They word requests carefully and try not to say “no” too often. This has led to Jason getting his way a lot, and as we know, kids cannot be expected to be responsible for deciding what’s right and wrong; they make terrible decisions. The parents have stepped out of the picture, and now both parents and child are suffering. Since this behavior is a pattern, it demands a Collaborative and Proactive Solutions intervention. The parents suspect that Jason is struggling with feeling controlled. He may also be transition phobic due to his fear of being told to stop one behavior with no promise that the next one will offer any pleasure. This looks like instant gratification clashing with real life.

1. Show empathy: Mom and Dad (or the parent who can communicate more calmly with Jason) sit him down for a talk. At first, Jason is not interested. He would rather watch a movie. The parents decide that the conversation would be more effective if rescheduled to the car ride on the way to soccer practice. Jason is usually chatty then. They tell him that they have noticed that he has a hard time being told “no.” He sure does, because according to Jason’s recollection, they always say “no” to him; he is not allowed to do anything. Obviously, Jason is running the show, but this is not the time to point it out.

“So, Jason, you feel like we always say no to you. That must be difficult. How does it make you feel?”

“Like you are controlling me, like you’re building a wall. I feel like I can’t make any decisions myself.” “Do you think, Jason, that parents should help children make decisions?”

“Yeah, but I always have to do things; I can’t just play. You make me stop playing on my iPad to take a shower. And you say I must come right away. I hate it!” “It can be quite difficult to be forced to stop doing something fun.”

The parents can conclude with Jason that it’s hard to make transitions, and if they understand Jason correctly, he feels that he is not in control of his time and he is always being forced to do things that are not fun. He feels trapped and controlled.

2. Put the parents’ problem on the table: Jason’s parents have a few problems. Firstly, they must help Jason understand that parents have to make rules so that children can grow up in a safe home and become good people. They must communicate with Jason the challenges of an

instant gratification personality, and also its advantages. Right now, Jason is only suffering from the challenges. His parents can discuss this by giving personal examples of how transitions and feeling controlled have been hard in their own lives. But they must help Jason understand that although it is difficult to feel controlled, parents must set rules and teach their children how to behave. His feelings are legitimate, but his response of tantruming or ignoring his parents cannot be tolerated.

3. Find a solution: Rules cannot be eliminated, as Jason is suggesting. He does have one excellent idea though. He says that since he feels controlled when his parents tell him to come when called right away, maybe they can let him know a few minutes in advance so he can prepare for the transition. What a fantastic suggestion! This can work in most situations, but when the entire family is in their coats, hats, boots, gloves, and scarves and holding all their sledding gear and Jason is reading a book, for example, there must be another, more flexible solution. His parents must make clear that this is a great new approach, but there are some situations in which Jason will still have to get moving right away.

Is this still a good plan? Jason says yes. What about his response to transitions and being told no? How can this be resolved? First, Jason needs to truly understand why he struggles so much with transitions. His parents must explain his fear of being pulled away from something he is enjoying to some unknown activity or some obviously inferior one. Giving examples or telling a personal story would be helpful and will help Jason feel validated. Now that he understands better, how about setting up an afternoon behavior chart with Jason, focused on one hour of making nice transitions? Dad promises to remind Jason each time that there is about to be a transition so Jason can mentally prepare for it. We still have “no” to deal with.

There are a few possible acceptable responses to “no.” “Sure” is obviously the best! “Why” is a runner-up. “Can we compromise?” can work as well. “Tantrum” has been kicked off the list. Let’s add Jason’s response to “no” or “you must” to the practice part of the chart. This way Jason can earn a point for discussing different scenarios in which hearing “no” would be difficult and practice a good response. And then, during the afternoon hour where we are working on transitions, we can also work on responses. How should his parents respond the rest of the day? They can clarify the rules in the home and praise Jason for his good listening while giving a small punishment for tantrums. This will only work if Jason understands the rules, knows that he can ask for a compromise, and is practicing his good behavior every afternoon.

The following are additional examples of missing emotional skills that can be addressed with Collaborative and Proactive Solutions:

1. **Sensory sensitivity:** A child may be suffering from sensory sensitivity but not understanding his challenge and feeling that everyone is out to hurt him. A good solution could be helping him understand his stress from the sensory overload and learning to tell a parent that he is having sensory overload, instead of demanding that everyone in the house acquiesce to his demand for total silence. This way a parent or older sibling can help the child find a quieter place to spend some time.
2. **Tactless comments:** A child is saying tactless comments, which invite very angry responses from others. Does she understand what a tactless comment is and why it is so? Take some time to discuss

it. Share some funny or embarrassing stories of your own. See how she feels when those comments are made to her. Practice with her.

Now, for the plan: She is not a bad child for asking someone if they're pregnant, but she still has to learn what is socially acceptable and what is not. Can she and her parent make a secret code, maybe a gesture from the parent (snap, clap, wave) to let her know that what she is saying should be stopped and reevaluated? Can they spend a few minutes a day (or have a once-a-week conversation alone with a fun snack) reviewing what should be said and what should not, and most importantly, why?

**The “compliment game”** may be useful in this situation. The way it works is that any time a parent and child enter a new social situation, they race to give a compliment or say something nice about a person or place they have just encountered. It is not a game with a prize; it's just a fun contest where the child can hear many appropriate comments from her parent and practice them herself. Because it is an unthreatening interaction and the child is directing her comments at her parent and not a stranger, she will not feel criticized and will be able to learn the tricks of the tact trade in a stress-free way.

**3. Making friends:** A child is struggling with making friends. First, allow her to share her difficult feelings of being rejected, seen as strange or different or never knowing what to say. Let her know that making friends is a skill like any other, and she needs to practice relating to people to get it right. Plan to have strategy conversations where she can report on what happened in school during the day and figure out better ways to interact or discuss new social skills with her. Plan to invite friends over in the afternoon and be present to help provide fun activities and coaching if necessary.

**4. Homework refusal:** A child is refusing to do schoolwork. Is the work too hard? Is he stuck in a fixed mentality? Would he rather play than work? Discover with your child why he is not engaging. Does he need a tutor? Does he need an understanding of fixed mentality—the need to be the perfect or smart kid—and a shift to growth mentality? If a child is making a poor choice and playing around, a behavior chart and follow-through on rules and consequences may be in order.

**5. Unpleasant habits:** A child has a habit that others find disgusting and hard to live with. He probably feels rejected and can't understand how that sound or behavior would bother someone. He may enjoy the attention he gets when he makes a loud slurp. He might think it's funny to drink seltzer quickly and let out a huge burp (are you sensing I may have some experience here?). Either way, the message he is getting is that he is disgusting, and no one wants him around. Take the time to let him know you understand his feeling and that it is painful to feel rejected. Help your child understand that everyone has to feel comfortable in the home, and if one person is causing others to get nauseous, that is inappropriate. Ask him about the things that make his own skin crawl. One solution is to have him give you a high five every time he wanted to burp/spit/slurp but controlled himself.

**6. Lying or stealing:** A child is not telling the truth (making up stories) or is taking things that don't belong to him. Why does he feel the need to represent facts differently than they occurred? Does he experience things through his own vivid imagination? Is he impulsive? Is he looking for attention? Is he unaware that it is wrong to misrepresent?

We parents tend to panic when our kids lie or steal. We assume that this kid is clearly headed for a life of crime. But he is not going to become a criminal based on his ten-year-old behavior! Before inviting your child to discuss these behaviors, try to reduce the fear. Some of my favorite kids have treated their friends to snacks on their parents' credit line at the local supermarket, running up hefty bills before being caught. You would be blown away by these kids' sharp cognitive functioning today, and they are most definitely upstanding non-criminals.

The following may make you feel better:

There is strong evidence that the ability to lie is positively related to the development of cognitive skills such as theory of mind and executive functioning (Evans et al. 2011; Polak and Harris 1999; Talwar, Gordon, and Lee 2007; Talwar and Lee 2008).

So, if your child is lying, you know he is developing higher cognitive skills. But still, he must not lie, or steal. Approach this conversation in the same way you would approach any other, with curiosity. Identify why your child feels the need to conceal or misrepresent or take things without permission. Let your child know that lying and stealing are big problems for you because they break trust, are disrespectful to the victims and make the child a less trustworthy person. Use examples. Ask how he would feel if someone took something of his or told him a lie.

What is the solution? That depends on why your child is behaving this way. In each of these cases, the problem was repetitive, the child was suffering, and there were one or more emotional skills missing. Your child would have chosen to do better had he been able to. Once you help him identify the weak missing skill and make a plan to strengthen it, working as a team to develop the new skill will become a pleasure. We must, however, also be aware of other potential causes of outbursts or academic, emotional, and behavioral stress: trauma.

The final step in the Collaborative and Proactive Solutions program:

**7. Checking in:** We choose a solution with our child, but sometimes the solution just doesn't work out. As such, we must set up a time to review progress, check the solution, and make changes as necessary. The above program will help children understand and develop missing emotional skills. We now move into a very heavy topic of helping a child who has suffered from any form of abuse. Another source of terrible emotional stress in children, which leads directly to academic and behavioral struggles and all the telltale signs of ADHD symptoms, is childhood trauma caused by emotional, physical or sexual abuse, and neglect.

The impact of trauma on children can manifest in difficulties in the areas of self-regulating, focusing and trusting others, and can lead to academic and social failure. If we discover that a child is suffering from emotional trauma, our first intervention must be giving our child full emotional support. Only then can we add other interventions.

A mother of five came in to consult about her son, who had been a strong student, but of late, his grades had begun to drop. He was twelve years old, just at the cutoff for an ADHD diagnosis according to the DSM-5. The mother described a child who had previously been happy and energetic, loved to learn, and was very curious. His grades began to tank at the beginning of sixth grade. She suggested that maybe the classwork had finally become too challenging for him and he was drowning. If only he had a boost from Ritalin, he would be able to catch up again. Although it's

possible for a student to suddenly become overwhelmed, the more likely explanation in this situation was that something was going on in this child’s life that was knocking him off-kilter.

After I asked my usual hundred questions, the mother reluctantly spilled her sad story. There were two boys in the class that were picking on her son and most likely sexually assaulting him. The boy was seeing a therapist to help him cope with the difficult situation, but all three children were still in the same class, and the principal and guidance counselor had still not been informed. Why not? I asked. She did not want to humiliate her son by being perceived as weak, nor did she want to cause problems in a school that had been very difficult to get accepted to.

The mother insisted that even though her child was indeed suffering “socially” as she called it, he might also have ADHD that needed to be addressed. I explained that when a child is clearly suffering trauma, it would be irresponsible to peg him with a diagnosis and mask his call for help with medication. I then contacted the appropriate authorities and prayed that this sweet child got the help he was begging for.

This is a tragic and perhaps atypical story. Healthy parents respond protectively if they are aware that their child is suffering abuse. Often, our children do not let us know they have been victimized right away and carry the burden of shame and anxiety on their own for years. While they are holding their abuse close to their heart, they are shouting out loud, expressing how much they are suffering through their actions. This behavior looks just like ADHD symptoms, so it often lands children with an ADHD diagnosis and subsequent medication. We can implement the entire program set out in this book, but our children will continue to rage until we address their inner turmoil. As a parent, it is frightening to know that we send our child out into the world and cannot always be right there to protect her.

Children are exposed to predators from within the family and outside, as well as bullies at school. According to a study for the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, 90 percent of children who have been sexually abused knew their abuser (Whealin 2007). In the many cases of abuse within the family or neighborhood, children are even more reluctant to speak up. They are either protecting the perpetrator, are fearful of that person, or worry that their parents will not believe them.

Sometimes, especially when sexual abuse occurs inside a family, a child is not even sure he is being abused; he only senses it in the pit of his stomach. Children may also be shrouded in a cloud of shame that keeps them from exposing the abuse. Although we cannot be at our child’s side every minute of every day, nor are we to blame in most cases if our child falls prey to abuse, we must look out for signs that our child has been victimized.

We must also speak of abuse very openly in our home, so that our child is more equipped to know when to speak. Our child must be told continually that she will always be heard, that we will always take his side no matter what. Our message should be crystal clear. If our child ever feels endangered by anyone, she should get out right away and not worry that she is offending or insulting someone. If the person she feared turned out to be harmless, we will be there to defend her anyway and be proud of her quick thinking and self-protective reflex.

My daughter’s school had a wonderful parent/child “Say NO” day to educate about sexual abuse and how children can learn to protect themselves. They ran an experiment as part of the presentation. A child was invited on stage. She was told that she would be approached by different people, and she had to put one hand out in front of her when she felt the person was coming too close and two hands up when she wanted the person to stop. This was an exercise in becoming aware of our personal space and reading our inner voice that tells us our space is being violated. One child after another was able to sense the difference between being approached by someone familiar (a teacher), someone from the outside (her friend’s dad), and someone who could approach and give her a hug (her parent).

I have repeated this exercise many times with my children. I tell them that as soon as they feel they would like to put one hand up, they should start listening to that inner voice. It may be time to look for help or get going. When they feel the need to put two hands up, way before they have been touched, children should know that they have every right to get away. We are built with a “personal space” radar. Give your kids instructions on how to use it, and remind them they always have permission to listen to it.

Children who have been traumatized by abuse are often diagnosed with ADHD. Nicole M. Brown, attending physician at the children’s hospital at Montefiore and assistant professor of pediatrics at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, was looking at signs of abuse and noticed a trend when treating patients diagnosed with ADHD.

“Despite our best efforts in referring them to behavioral therapy and starting them on stimulants, it was hard to get the symptoms under control,”

she said of treating her patients according to guidelines for ADHD.

“I began hypothesizing that perhaps a lot of what we were seeing was more externalizing behavior as a result of family dysfunction or other traumatic experience.”

She noticed that much of the behavior described as ADHD originated in childhood trauma. Brown found that children diagnosed with ADHD also experienced higher levels of violence, divorce, substance abuse, and poverty. The children who suffered four or more adverse childhood events (ACEs) were three times more likely to be prescribed ADHD medications (Brown 2017).

Dr. Heather Forkey, a pediatrician at the University of Massachusetts Memorial Medical Center, has been trying to spread the word to doctors that hyperactivity and inattention symptoms do not have one neat diagnosis. These symptoms have many different causes, just like chest pain can be attributed to many conditions. Therefore, before diagnosing ADHD, physicians must consider the child’s background and possible trauma as the source of the symptoms (Ruiz 2014).

Another trailblazer, bringing attention to the confusion around symptoms that are being called ADHD but that in reality are rooted in childhood trauma, is Cealan Kuban. She is a trauma and loss consultant and offers training courses to practitioners, teachers, and doctors. Kuban describes how traumatized children find it difficult to control their behavior and shift from one mood to the next quickly. They might drift into a dissociative state while reliving a horrifying memory or lose focus while anticipating the next violation of their safety. To a well-meaning teacher or clinician, this behavior can be quickly diagnosed as ADHD (Ruiz 2014).

**How common is child sexual abuse?**

According to David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center, one in five girls and one in twenty boys will be victims of sexual abuse. Too many children are carrying a burden heavier than they can bear. It is not someone else’s problem; it is right here, in our community, in every community.

Let’s look at some of the symptoms we may see in our children.

Symptoms we may see in children who are suffering from sexual abuse:

- Nightmares, fear of the dark, or other sleeping problems
- Extreme fear of monsters
- Spacing out at odd times
- Sudden mood swings: rage, fear, anger or withdrawal
- An older child behaving like a younger child, such as bed-wetting or thumb sucking
- Fear of certain people or places (e.g., a child may not want to be left alone with a baby-sitter, a friend, a relative, or some other child or adult; or a child who is usually talkative and cheery may become quiet and distant when around a certain person)
- Refusing to talk about a secret he/she has with an adult or older child
- New words for private body parts
- Talking about a new older friend
- Suddenly having money
- Stomach illness all the time with no identifiable reason
- Loss of appetite, or trouble eating or swallowing
- Pain in or around the genital area
- Unexplained bruises or redness around the anus or mouth

(How to Identify Child Abuse Ages 6–12, November 24, 2018, The Whole Child)

If you see these behaviors, the first step is to sit your child down for a warm, loving, accepting, and most importantly, patient Collaborative and Proactive Solutions conversation. Listen well without interrupting; reassure your child that she has done nothing wrong and that she is very brave for sharing her story. Let her know that you will always believe her. If such conversations are practiced in your home on a regular basis, your child will feel less intimidated to share, knowing that she has a parent who can listen without correcting and who always accepts her word. Even in a warm and supportive home, a child may still not be willing to talk. Inviting a therapist to join your team is often necessary and highly recommended. We need trained professionals to support our child and our family in the case of abuse.

The above list of symptoms is not proof that your child has been abused. If you see any of the symptoms listed above, investigate immediately. Remain calm and let your child talk because hysterical or fearful assumptions will shut her down.

**Bullying as another form of abuse our child may face**

Another form of abuse our children can be exposed to is bullying, which is defined by the CDC as unwanted aggressive behavior, observed or perceived power imbalance, and repetition of behaviors or high likelihood of repetition. Bullying, whether it be in person or online, has powerful and unfortunate repercussions for our children. According to the federally run website [stopbullying.gov](http://stopbullying.gov), kids who are bullied can experience mental health issues as well as physical problems.

The following is a list of possible symptoms a child may exhibit if he is being bullied:

- Depression and anxiety
- Increased feelings of sadness and loneliness
- Changes in sleep and eating patterns
- Loss of interest in activities the child used to enjoy. These issues may persist into adulthood.
- Health complaints
- Decreased academic achievement—GPA and standardized test scores—and school participation.
- More likely to miss, skip, or drop out of school.

How can we create a space in which our child can naturally share his experiences of school or a visit to a friend’s house?

When our child comes home from school in the afternoon, we tend to ask blandly how school was. The response, often just as bland as the question, is “fine.” There the conversation ends. School is your child’s profession; he spends most of his waking hours there. “Fine” can’t be the only feeling he has about a long and multifaceted day, just as it is probably never the feeling you have after your long day’s work. Try asking a few questions, but do not interrogate!

I like to ask about recess. “Did you stay in the classroom or go out to play soccer? Who were the children you spent the most time with?” If you have a school schedule at home, you can also ask about specific classes. “Which class was interesting today? None? Okay, so which ones were terrible? Was the teacher yelling?” Ease into conversation by sharing a little about your day. Let your child know how you felt when you got to the bank only to discover that it was closed due to a holiday. Share an interaction you had that elicited a strong emotion from you. The more you show interest and availability, the more your child will share. He loves talking with you; he only needs a caring and curious invitation.

One warning here: do not correct him or tell him what he should have said or done in a school interaction. It will reduce his confidence in his ability to navigate the social environment. Just reflect with him, share your story, and ask questions.

## Action Plan

1. Make a list of behaviors your child exhibits that are not resolved through clear and loving communication and discipline or by behavior intervention. These behaviors have an underlying emotional trigger due to lack of skill.
2. Choose one behavior to tackle.
3. Before inviting your child for a Collaborative and Proactive Solutions discussion, see if you can identify possible emotional triggers to the behavior. Remember to remain open to being surprised; this is a fact-finding mission and requires much curiosity.
4. Begin the conversation at a calm time, making sure to give your child your complete attention. Shut off your smartphone and put it away! Take out a nice treat and create a warm environment by telling your child how special she is.
5. Engage in the three steps: empathy, putting your concern on the table, and finding a solution calmly and lovingly. x Give fun personal examples x Do not be critical, don't correct, and don't take what your child is saying personally. She is trying to figure out how the world works and is using you as a sounding board, so be that for her. x If you do not succeed in completing the entire intervention in one sitting, don't despair! Most of us need a few conversations to fully understand how to help our child gain new emotional skills. Your success lies in your invitation to talk and your willingness to listen attentively.
6. At the conclusion of the conversation, be sure to set a time to check in later and see how the collaborative solution is working.
7. Use Collaborative and Proactive Solutions any time you see a pattern of behavior that is harming your child, or as a follow-up to particularly difficult behavior. As you engage in collaborative and proactive solutions, they will become a natural part of conversation in your home, and you will be surprised to find your children engaging their own struggles this way.
8. Keep an eye out for signs of possible abuse or bullying and invite a therapist to help your child and family in the case of suspected abuse.
9. Put your phone down for ten minutes when your child comes home from school and talk with him. Ask curious questions and share experiences from your day.