

## Opinion

# The 'Problem Child' Is a Child, Not a Problem

Suzanne Bouffard

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Matt Hannon was in preschool when he started getting into trouble. Teachers quickly labeled his mischievous behavior — like cutting his hair under the table — problematic. His kindergarten teacher warned that if Matt didn't stop using "potty words," she would make him do his work in the bathroom. His first-grade teacher forced Matt to copy the phrase "I will not blurt out in circle" 100 times. Matt began to dread school and developed serious separation anxiety. His acting-out got worse.

"I would bring him into the school nurse in the morning, and she would restrain him so I could run out and get to work," said his mother, Jessica, through tears. "I didn't know any better." (Names of children and parents in this article have been changed to protect privacy.) At age 8, he was expelled from an after-school program and, later, from school. Jessica reduced her work hours to deal with frequent calls from the school. When Matt had a psychiatric evaluation in fourth grade, a therapist said he presented like a child who had been traumatized. She believed it was because of how his behavior had been handled early on in school.

Early childhood education can be an invaluable opportunity for learning social and emotional skills. But when teachers repeatedly punish young children, their efforts can cause lifelong harm. Unfortunately, Matt's story is not exceptional. Nearly 1 in 10 *preschoolers* is suspended or expelled for behavior problems. Their

infractions — generally hitting, throwing things or swearing — need to be addressed, but educators are recognizing that removing 3- and 4-year-olds from classrooms is not the answer. It doesn't teach children *how* to behave differently, and it often makes matters worse.

Young children who are suspended are often the ones who need the most social and academic support — and they end up missing opportunities to get it. Early suspension predicts disengagement from school and dropping-out. And the fact that African-American preschoolers are far more likely than white children to be suspended raises serious issues of equity and access to educational opportunity. As states like Illinois and Connecticut pass legislation prohibiting or restricting expulsion from state-funded preschools, teachers desperately need better options for handling misbehavior.

Matt's behavior started to turn around in fifth grade, after his parents began using Collaborative Problem Solving (C.P.S.), a technique designed to build self-regulation skills. Many children are lagging in skills like impulse control, managing frustration and understanding social cues that are the foundation of self-control. Suspension does nothing to build those skills. Collaborative Problem Solving, in contrast, recognizes that behavior is not simply a function of motivation; it's a function of skills and practice. C.P.S. replaces a traditional philosophy of "children do well when they want to" with one that "children do well when they *can*."

After practicing C.P.S. at home for a few months, with help from a therapist, Jessica gradually saw Matt get calmer and more in control. But at school, where teachers refused to use the strategies, Matt was often sent to in-school suspension. One day he was escorted to a tiny, windowless room with "calming down tools," where Jessica says a teacher's aide blocked the door. "It freaked him out, so he threw a yoga ball. Then another aide came to help block the door." Terrified, Matt became even more aggressive. After that incident, Jessica found another school that uses C.P.S.

C.P.S. was developed in the late 1990s by Dr. Ross Greene, now the director of a nonprofit called Lives in the Balance, and later expanded upon by Stuart Ablon, a psychologist who runs the Think:Kids program at Massachusetts General Hospital. (The two organizations now use separate but similar models.) An adult and child

collaborate to understand *why* the child is struggling and what to do about it, using a strategy called “Plan B.” Plan B starts with the child stating a concern. Next the adult does the same. They then brainstorm realistic solutions that address both parties’ concerns. That method diverges from more typical responses, like when an adult tries to exert her will by applying consequences (“Plan A”) or lets go of the expectation for a specific behavior (“Plan C”).

I watched a teacher do Plan B with a student around 6 years old, whom I’ll call Jayden. He fidgeted and ran around during morning meeting — behavior that would get him sent to the principal’s office in many schools. But through C.P.S., Jayden was able to explain that sitting still caused him intense discomfort (a symptom consistent with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder). The teacher shared her concern that he was distracting others. They came up with a plan for Jayden to sit in a chair behind his classmates, where he could move around as long as he paid attention. Jayden’s whole demeanor changed: He calmed down, looked his teacher in the eye for the first time, and willingly returned to class.

Approaching misbehavior this way runs counter to many educators’ instincts. Deciding to share power rather than impose it requires a mind-set shift. One might see that as “giving in to the child.” But what would be the point of punishing a child who literally could not sit still? The C.P.S. conversation taught Jayden that his perspective mattered and that using calm problem solving pays off. It also kept him and his classmates learning.

In classrooms around the nation, one can find discipline strategies that rely on rewards and punishments, like color-coded charts, where each child’s behavior is marked in a green, yellow or red — trouble — zone. With a child like Jayden, it makes little difference how often his marker ends up on red. He’s not going to change his behavior until he learns *how*.

Similarly, many kids flounder when schools use the popular “token economy” approach, which gives checkmarks or tokens for good behavior that students cash in for rewards. These systems are straightforward and seem effective in the short term, but can cause long-term problems, psychologists say, including shame and anxiety. “Rewards and consequences work for some things like teaching very basic lessons

about right and wrong — but they weren't intended to build complex skills," explains Ablon. And for kids who struggle with behavior, they can backfire.

Christine McGuire, who is a teacher, learned that lesson when her own son, Quinn, started acting aggressively. "I tried everything I had been trained to do — sticker charts, token systems, timeout — but none of it helped," she said. When Quinn would make "one little slip up, like missing one star," his guilt and anxiety became so acute that he would get depressed and even suicidal.

"I was embarrassed that I didn't know how to handle it," recalled Christine. "I'm a teacher — why do I have a kid with behavior problems?"

The school recommended a special education classroom that used physical restraints and a plywood closet with padded walls for students to "work out" their anger. But that kind of isolation triggers loneliness, which further weakens self-regulation, says Adele Diamond, a neuropsychologist at the University of British Columbia.

Christine eventually learned about C.P.S., and she and Quinn began making "Plan B" a daily routine. As they identified triggers for his anger and anxiety, both mother and son learned to manage them better.

Christine ultimately got the school district to pay for Quinn to attend a private school that uses C.P.S., but it took an expensive lawsuit for which she had to borrow money from friends and hold public fund-raisers she found embarrassing. Still, she feels lucky, and worries about children whose families have fewer resources or don't know how to advocate for them. Quinn still struggles with anxiety, but his coping skills have improved so much that Christine went from being afraid to leave him alone for 10 minutes to letting him attend sleep-away camp this past summer.

C.P.S. has been shown to improve behavior, decrease disciplinary referrals, reduce teachers' stress and sometimes reduce the use of physical restraints and isolation. But it isn't easy. "It's complex, so you have to be patient, thoughtful and flexible," Christine said. "Anyone can count stickers on a chart, but it takes someone who has a special ability to process behavior with kids."

Andrea Powell, who teaches kindergartners with special needs at the Albert Bridge School, a public school in Brownsville, Vt., agrees. “When I went to my first C.P.S. training, it was amazing, but it’s not like a nature workshop where you can go home and make birdhouses with kids the next day.” It takes time to learn and practice the process. Her colleague, the school counselor David Gale, sees our penchant for quick fixes as part of the problem. “People don’t want the process, they want the pill,” he said. But improving behavior “doesn’t work that way.”

Jessica Hannon believes Matt’s struggles in school could have been prevented if his teachers and family had built up his self-regulation skills in the early years. But today she is cautiously optimistic about the future. Now an eighth grader, Matt has adjusted well to his new school and hopes to attend the local public high school next year. He wants to go to college and become a special-education teacher like the ones who have helped him. Jessica said: “C.P.S. has been a life-changer for us. It made me cry to see that someone recognized my child was not just bad.”

Suzanne Bouffard, a writer and developmental psychologist, is the author of “The Most Important Year: Pre-Kindergarten and the Future of Our Children.”

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