

# Ten Tips for Helping An Explosive Child

Ross W. Greene, Ph.D.

1. Don't worry too much about obtaining a diagnosis for your child. While it might feel like a diagnosis "certifies" that there's something different about your child, diagnoses don't actually provide much information about *why* your child is oppositional and explosive. Plus, childhood psychiatric diagnoses are just labels that are applied to clusters of challenging *behaviors*. But the behaviors are just the ways in which your child is *communicating* that he or she is having difficulty meeting certain expectations. Whether your child is hitting, spitting, biting, kicking, throwing things, screaming, swearing, or destroying property, the behaviors are communicating the same thing: *I'm stuck...there are expectations I'm having difficulty meeting.*
2. Know this: What the research that has accumulated over the past 40-50 years tells us is that behaviorally challenging kids are lacking certain skills, especially those related to flexibility/adaptability, frustration tolerance, and problem solving. That's why these kids explode or exhibit challenging behavior when certain specific situations are demanding those skills. The research does *not* tell us that behaviorally challenging kids are poorly motivated, so those sticker charts and time-outs may not be doing you much good.

3. Know this too: Like all of us, behaviorally challenging kids exhibit challenging behaviors *when the expectations being placed upon them outstrip their skills*. Because they're lacking skills, the clash between expectations and skills occurs more often in behaviorally challenging kids...and their reaction tends to be more extreme. That explains why behaviorally challenging kids aren't always challenging: the clash between expectations and skills isn't constant...it's *situational*.
4. One of the best things you can do for a behaviorally challenging kid is to figure out what skills he or she is lacking and what expectations he or she is having difficulty meeting. In my model – now called *Collaborative & Proactive Solutions* (CPS) – those unmet expectations are called *unsolved problems*. How do you figure those things out? By using an instrument – don't worry, it's only one sheet of paper – called the *Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems* (ALSUP). You can find the instrument on the website of my non-profit, *Lives in the Balance* ([www.livesinthebalance.org](http://www.livesinthebalance.org)). And don't worry, it's free, just like all the rest of the vast array of resources you'll find on that website.
5. There's something else you'll find on that website: *how to start solving those problems with your child*. While lots of caregivers try to solve those problems unilaterally, through the imposition of solutions – that's called Plan A in the CPS model – you'll be a lot more successful if you solve those problems *collaboratively* instead (that's called Plan B). When you solve problems collaboratively with your child, you become partners – teammates – rather than enemies. You can learn all about how to solve problems collaboratively on the Lives in the Balance website.
6. If you're going to solve problems collaboratively, then you also want to solve them *proactively*. The heat of the moment is bad timing on solving problems. But how can you solve problems proactively when your child's challenging episodes are so unpredictable? Well, they're actually not as unpredictable as they might seem. Once you use the ALSUP to identify those unsolved problems, they become predictable and can be solved proactively.
7. You'll need to prioritize before you start solving problems. One of the biggest reasons the unsolved problems of behaviorally challenging kids

remain unsolved is because caregivers tried solving them all at once. That a sure-fire way to ensure that none get solved. Once you've created a comprehensive list of unsolved problems – all the expectations your child is having difficulty reliably meeting – pick two or three to work on first. The rest you're setting aside for now (that's called Plan C). Which unsolved problems should you prioritize first? Any that are causing safety issues. If there are none of those, then perhaps those that are causing challenging episodes most frequently.

8. One of the nice things about seeing your child's difficulties through the prism of lagging skills and unsolved problems is that it permits you to stop referring to your child in ways that are inaccurate and counterproductive: attention-seeking, manipulative, coercive, unmotivated, limit-testing, button-pushing, and so on. And while mental health professionals have often referred to the parents of behaviorally challenging kids as passive, permissive, inconsistent, non-contingent, inept disciplinarians, those characterizations are probably off the mark as well.
9. Give yourself and your child time to get good at Plan B together. This is a new skill for both of you. As you start to develop muscle memory for solving problems collaboratively and proactively, you'll also start to notice that your communication and relationship with your child is improving. It's all good.
10. Know one more thing: conflict between parents and kids is not inevitable. Disagreements are inevitable. Kids having difficulty meeting expectations is inevitable. It's how you solve those problems that either causes conflict or fosters collaboration.

# About the Author

Ross W. Greene, Ph.D., was on the faculty at Harvard Medical School for over 20 years, and is now Founding Director of the non-profit Lives in the Balance ([www.livesinthebalance.org](http://www.livesinthebalance.org)), on the faculty at Virginia Tech and the University of Technology in Sydney, Australia, and author of the books *The Explosive Child*, *Lost at School*, *Lost & Found*, and *Raising Human Beings*.