



The Think Inclusive Podcast

Season 10, Episode 4

Dr. Ross Greene | Using Collaborative and Proactive Solutions to Support the Behavior of All Learners

Audio Transcript

Tim Villegas

Dr. Ross Greene wants schools to rethink how they are supporting learners with challenging behavior.

Ross Greene

Unfortunately, a lot of schools, despite their emphasis on relationships are still relying very heavily on consequences and still very focused on the behavior of their students. Now, that might sound like sort of an interesting statement, what you be focused on is not on the behavior, you'd be focused on the problems that are causing that behavior.

Tim Villegas

And what about the framework that many schools across the country have been using Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports and Multi Tiered Systems of Support?

Ross Greene

You know, the tiers are an attempt to organize the effort. The effort should be aimed at making sure every kid gets what they need. That is also the definition of equity. So interestingly enough, we should be asking ourselves the question, are the three tiers helping us ensure that every kid gets what they need?

Tim Villegas

But how would it look different if we supported learners with Dr. Greene's model?

Ross Greene

Solving a problem collaboratively involves three steps. First step is called the empathy step. Second step is called the define adult concerns step. Third step is called the invitation.

Tim Villegas

My name is Tim Villegas, and you're listening to Think Inclusive, presented by MCIE. This podcast exists to build bridges between families, educators and disability rights advocates to create a shared understanding of inclusive education, and what inclusion looks like in the real world. For this episode, I talk with Dr. Ross Greene, author of the books Lost at School and

Raising Human Beings. We discuss what schools are getting right and wrong about supporting learners with challenging behavior, and an alternative lens for educators to view behavior in all learners. Thank you so much for listening. And now my interview with Dr. Ross Greene.

Today on the podcast, we have Dr. Ross Greene, who is the New York Times bestselling author of *Lost at School* and *Raising Human Beings*. He is the originator of the model of care described in those books now called Collaborative and Proactive Solutions. Dr. Greene was on the faculty at Harvard Medical School for over 20 years and is now the founding director of the nonprofit *Lives in the Balance*, which provides a vast array of free web based resources on the CPS model. Dr. Greene, welcome to the Think Inclusive Podcast.

Ross Greene

Thanks for inviting me to do this.

Tim Villegas

I'd like to jump right in and ask what are schools getting right about supporting students with behavioral challenges? And what are they getting wrong?

Ross Greene

There are a lot of very caring people in schools who care a lot about establishing relationships with kids and are working under very difficult circumstances. Unfortunately, a lot of schools, despite their emphasis on relationships are still relying very heavily on consequences, and still very focused on the behavior of their students. Now, that might sound like sort of an interesting statement, what would you be focused on is not on the behavior, you'd be focused on the problems that are causing that behavior. So I think that a lot of schools are still way too focused on modifying behavior. And I think of concerning behavior as merely the means by which a kid is communicating that there are expectations, they're having difficulty meeting, still too much focus on behavior and modifying it and not enough focus on and expertise in identifying and solving the problems that are causing those behaviors. So I think schools are getting a lot, right. And I think that schools got a lot right during the pandemic, when they were working under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. And I'm quite frankly, not saying anything differently now than I was pre pandemic. This is all about identifying the expectations. Students are having difficulty meeting, what we call unsolved problems, and solving those problems. Rather than relying so heavily on strategies that are merely aimed at modifying kids behaviors.

Tim Villegas

How did we get to this point anyways, in education, because it seems like the emphasis on using behaviorist ideas to solve these challenging problems or challenging behavior in students, it seems like a relatively newer phenomenon. I started teaching in 2004. And by the time I left, it seems like that's all we were talking about is how, you know, PBIS, how to think about students' behavior and the function of it. Interventions.

Ross Greene

Well, B.F. Skinner was around a long time ago, applied behavior analysis has been around for a very long time. There are many applied behavior analysts in schools, but I do think that believe it or not, things took an interesting turn with Columbine.

Tim Villegas

Hmm, okay.

Ross Greene

Columbine prompted the rise of zero tolerance policies, allegedly to keep us safer in schools. So, although B.F. Skinner and applied behavior analysis have been around for a very long time, I think that fears about school safety actually prompted us to create school environments that were less user friendly for kids, less focused on social emotional learning, less focused on relationships, and more focused just on coming down hard and having zero tolerance for inappropriate behaviors.

Tim Villegas

You know, we have a lot of educators that listen, that's mostly our audience is educators, and they are steeped in this behaviorist thinking. They're steeped in this framework. So what are educators supposed to do when they want to do what's best for kids? They hear you, and they're like, that's, that's good. I want that. I want relationships. I want to believe that children do well if they can. But yet, they also are trying to reconcile what they've been taught, and maybe they're even at a PBIS school and they're doing rewards. And they're, they have this framework. So do we actually need to separate ourselves from that framework? Or is there any middle ground?

Ross Greene

Well, many schools are implementing Collaborative and Proactive Solutions within their structures of PBIS. So clearly, they do not have to be separated. PBIS flows from the applied behavior analytic tradition. So it's no accident that schools that are implementing PBIS. Given the B word of PBIS, have a traditional definition of function, the function of a kid's behavior and are primarily focused on teaching and reteaching appropriate, here we go again, behaviors. So while there are schools that are implementing CPS within the three structures of PBIS, when you get to the interventions that are often applied as part of PBIS, that's where life can get particularly interesting in the fact that PBIS is still primarily focused on the B word, behavior. And in Collaborative and Proactive Solutions, we are focused on the problems that are causing those behaviors, and solving them. So there are definitely differences in approach and lenses of those two ways of doing things. But that doesn't mean we have to throw the baby out with the bathwater. It means that many schools, as I've just said, are implementing CPS within the structures of PBIS. If that's all PBIS, is easy peasy. That's not all PBIS is. PBIS has certain lenses that go along with it that flow once again from the applied behavior analytic tradition, and is primarily focused on behavior. In the CPS model. We view behavior as simply the signal. It's not something we focus on. So I think that the biggest issue is that it can be confusing for people in terms of what are we focused on? And what interventions are we applying to help our most vulnerable students?

Tim Villegas

Let's say a school administrator is listening to this conversation and they're like, well, what's, what is CPS anyways?

Ross Greene

Well, the CPS model draws upon 40 to 50 years of research, telling us that kids who are responding poorly to problems and frustrations are lacking skills, not motivation. That's huge. Skills like flexibility, adaptability, frustration, tolerance, problem solving, emotion regulation. The research tells us that that is so. There's actually no research telling us that kids who are responding poorly to problems and frustrations are unmotivated. Zero. That study does not exist. Therefore, in the CPS model, we are not applying motivational strategies to try to help these kids. We are helping adults and kids solve problems proactively and collaboratively, meaning together and outside the heat of the moment. And what we find, and I was trained as a behaviorist too, so changing lenses is something I know a little bit about, because my own lens has changed, right? That said, I actually think that the CPS model fits well, under the social learning theory umbrella, under which other behavioral approaches actually sit as well. So we're not necessarily talking about different universes here. But there's the sort of Reader's Digest version of the CPS model. We find that if people are focused on behavior, they are missing the forest for the trees, they're not focused on the problems that are causing those behaviors. You can reward and punish a kid till the cows come home for their behavior, and still not solve a single of the problems that are causing those behaviors. And in the kids that I've worked with 1000s of them at this point, many of them in prison, and inpatient psychiatry units and residential facilities. Kids who are being suspended perpetually out of school kids are still being hit at school, kids who are being restrained and secluded at school, one thing's for certain in my mind, focusing primarily on their behavior, rather than on problems that are causing those behaviors, is a big part of how we've been failing these kids.

Tim Villegas

I don't mean to put words in your mouth Dr. Greene, but, you know, PBIS is referenced in IDEA. So, and the last time it was reauthorized is 2004. I mean, would you say and I'm not saying you want CPS to be it written into the law, but that would help? Change--right? We are ripe for a realignment, in education, specifically around special education and general education. And I know it's not working, you know, it's not working. Our audience knows it's not working. You know, we need a unified system. In your view, does CPS fall within that it's not just for special education students its for all students. Right?

Ross Greene

That would certainly be my view. And I am aware, because I'm in contact with legislators and their aides, that PBIS is often the go to in legislation. But I think that there are many people who write legislation and ponder what would be the best ways to fix things, who are aware of the fact that PBIS has had a very long run here, the results are before us. And if PBIS was all we needed, then we'd be in good shape right now. So I think that there are people who are beginning to question whether PBIS is all we need, whether those three tiers are as useful as

people feel they are. And whether focusing on a kid's behavior, is really the best way to help them create better relationships, create better communication. I think that there are a lot of people who are questioning that right now. In answer to your first part of your question, what I love to see CPS written into legislation? Heck, yeah.

Tim Villegas

Let's say it an administrator or district administrator, is listening to this conversation. And they're saying, Okay, well, you know, Dr. Green said that CPS fits well within, you know, like a PBIS structure or let's say, a three tiered structure or even a multi tiered system of support. Right? So, can you conceptualize that for our listener? How would CPS fit within that structure?

Ross Greene

The bad news is, I don't think about the structure. I don't think about the tiers at all.

Tim Villegas

Okay.

Ross Greene

I think you're doing CPS at all three tiers. You're doing it for everybody. You're doing it at tier two, you're doing it at tier three. Also, tiers are not waystations. Same kid could look like they are different tiers, even within the same hour of the day. Right? So you're asking somebody who really doesn't have a lot of use for the tiers, to talk about how you would implement CPS within the tiers, which I don't have a lot of use for. Right? What I always say is that I'm very well aware that there are schools that are implementing CPS within the three tiers of PBIS, or multi systemic, multi tiered systems of support, right, more power to them. It's not something I give any thought to whatsoever. My answer is you're doing CPS at all three tiers. And by the way, if you're doing CPS at all three tiers, then the tiers sort of start to lose their meaning. You know, the tiers are an attempt to organize the effort. The effort should be aimed at making sure every kid gets what they need. That is also the definition of equity. So interestingly enough, we should be asking ourselves the question, are the three tiers, helping us ensure that every kid gets what they need? And if we were instead focused on making sure that every kid got what they need, are the three tiers helping us or are the three tiers getting in the way? Different people might have different answers to that. I don't really want people focused on the three tiers. This is not a religion. Religion, for me, making sure everybody every kid gets what they need. The definition of equity. Are the three tiers helping us with that, or getting in the way? Those are the questions we should be asking ourselves.

Tim Villegas

And so to be clear, you're not just talking about behavior, you're talking about just education in general, because, you know, multi tiered systems of support isn't just about behavior, it's academics and social skills and behavior, you know, and and other things. So, if our goal is equity, do we really need the tiers?

Ross Greene

Everybody has to answer that question for themselves? My answer is, and I know people who, who I respect greatly who have found those three tiers to be very useful to help them organize the effort. Great. I'm not anti tier, right? Tiers are sort of of a benign thing, sort of. But if people are thinking more about the tiers than they are about making sure every kid what gets what they need. That's a problem. What tier is this, is the wrong question. How do we make sure every kid gets what they need, is the right question.

Tim Villegas

For educators who have students who have some significant or complex support needs, extensive support needs. So students with autism, students with intellectual disabilities. I mean historically, the students with that kind of profile, don't even have access to general education classrooms. They are typically somewhere else. And academics aren't necessarily the focus for them. Behavior the focus, social skills are the focus, how do you see CPS if at all help with including students who have been historically marginalized or segregated?

Ross Greene

First of all, the diagnoses mean nothing to me, the special ed labels mean nothing to me. What tells me about a kid is the information we get from the instrument we use in this model, called the Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems. So I always say, it gives us the information that's been missing. What are these kid's lagging skills? What expectations is the kid having difficulty reliably meeting? So quite frankly, I've worked with probably a 1000 kids who were diagnosed with autism, they were all completely different. They all had completely different capacities to access general education. Some were special ed, some were not. Some were in a segregated setting. Many were accessing general education classrooms, when they were able to. So the categories that we use for these kids, not just diagnoses, but also special ed categories, leave me cold, I don't think that they move the ball forward when it comes to our definition of equity, making sure that every kid gets what they need. But here's in my, in my level of analysis, are we focused on solving the problems that are causing these kids to not be able to access general education settings? Some kids it's not going to be in the cards for a while. In extremely rare circumstances, it may not be in the cards at all. Keywords, extremely rare. But if we are not solving the problems that are causing this kid to not be able to access general education, the kid will never be able to access general education, because we're not doing what we need to do to improve the possibility of that happening. So now I'm freeing myself of the labels, freeing myself of the special education categories, trying to meet this kid where they're at and trying to make sure this kid gets what they need. For me, that means solving the problems that are making it difficult for the kid to access education, general education, be safe at school. Those are the problems that we are trying to solve in this model. The more problems we solve, the more collaborative we are, the more proactive we are in doing all of that, because unsolved problems are nowhere nearly as unpredictable as people think they are. The more we do all of that, the more optimistic I am that this individual kid is eventually going to be able to access the most they are able to access. And that's the goal. If you're suspending a lot of kindergarteners in your school system, you are depriving kids of their education, probably because of their behavior. But remember, that behavior is being caused by unsolved problems. If we're doing this from the get go, and we don't look back, and we keep doing it, we're no

longer focused on the kids concerning behavior. We're no longer worried about three tiers. We're no longer worried about a special ed categorization though it might be necessary. We are no longer thinking about primarily about the kids psychiatric diagnosis. We're focused on solving problems with this kid. And the biggest hurdle, by the way, in some of the schools that I work with, that are just beginning to use this model, is that they are dealing with massive piles of unsolved problems, because they're just getting started. And no one's done it before. That's the biggest challenge of all, coming in and getting this going from scratch, in kids who've been struggling for a really long time. That's a big lift, we do it, but it's a big lift. I'd much rather start this the minute the kid walks in the building on day one. Let's figure out what's making it hard for this kid. Let's start solving those problems collaboratively and proactively, then let's see what things look like.

Tim Villegas

Let me see if I can reflect back what you've been saying. What I've been learning about CPS. So this model is done at a school level. At the very least it could be done at a district level, but it's most likely at a school level.

Ross Greene

And sometimes, by the way, even at an individual classroom level.

Tim Villegas

Okay, okay.

Ross Greene

There are schools that I work with that are trying to get rid of restraint and seclusion. But it's not the whole building that's used in restraint and seclusion, it's special ed classrooms that are using restraint and seclusion. If that's the goal, we're going to be focused on those classrooms. Now it might bleed out to the rest of the building. But some schools were just focused on the individual classrooms in which their practices need to be adjusted.

Tim Villegas

And so where it starts is an assessment. Is that correct?

Ross Greene

Correct. Well, actually, let me say this. It starts with lenses.

Tim Villegas

Okay.

Ross Greene

Lagging skills, not lagging motivation, problems, not the behaviors that are being caused by those problem. Then we're ready for the assessment tool. Keep going.

Tim Villegas

And then I feel like I'm getting, I'm being tested now. Okay. And then it's--

Ross Greene

It's always interesting for me to hear what people are hearing.

Tim Villegas

Okay. All right. So yeah, so lenses, then assessment, then I would assume some sort of procedure or teaching is involved.

Ross Greene

There's training involved in how to solve problems with kids and how to use the assessment tool.

Tim Villegas

Okay, but it's not just the assessment tool is what I'm hearing that there are like intervals. So let's say we were going to redo this assessment every couple of weeks, 30 days, 60 days.

Ross Greene

We do the assessment once--

Tim Villegas

Okay.

Ross Greene

Then you prioritize the unsolved problems that you're going to be working on with the kid.

Tim Villegas

Gotcha. Okay.

Ross Greene

A lot of these kids who've been struggling for a long time, have 30, 40, 50 expectations they are having difficulty meeting reliably. First of all, can you imagine being that kid? And I always say, can you imagine that kid waking up in the morning on a school day, knowing that they're going to be 30, 40, 50 expectations they're having difficulty meeting that day? As I always say, I'm not sure I'd show up, many don't. I'm not sure I'd get out of bed.

Tim Villegas

Yeah.

Ross Greene

Many don't. Right? We're gonna have to prioritize. Something, by the way that IEPs are not very good at doing. IEPs tell us everything that's the matter and everything we're going to be working on often all at once. Good luck, have to prioritize, have to actually take a close look at our expectations and ask ourselves. Does this kid even have a snowball's chance of meeting a

lot of these? Why are we putting expectations on kids and pushing hard on those expectations, when we already know they can't meet them, and when we know that by pushing them, we are going to cause the concerning behaviors that cause us to restrain, seclude, suspend, expel, hit, why are we doing that? So this is a--the Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems is a huge piece of the picture, because it forces us caregivers to really ask questions we frequently don't ask ourselves, can the kid even meet the expectation? If not, why are we putting the expectation on that kid?

Tim Villegas

Sure.

Ross Greene

Keep going.

Tim Villegas

Alright, so there's some sort of training, there's prioritization of what we're going to be working on.

Ross Greene

Correct.

Tim Villegas

And then. So an educator or whoever is, is supporting the students. They have to do something. Right? So what is the what is the thing that they do?

Ross Greene

First, they figure out lagging skills and unsolved problems, then they prioritize--

Tim Villegas

Right.

Ross Greene

And then they take the unsolved problems that they've decided they're prioritizing right now. And the top priority is safety. So any unsolved problems that are causing safety issues are going to be a high priority? Now we start solving those problems collaboratively, and proactively.

Tim Villegas

Okay, so is there a structure to that?

Ross Greene

Solving a problem collaboratively involves three steps, I'm happy to go through them if you'd like me to. But if that's not our focal point, I'm happy not to as well.

Tim Villegas

No. I'm interested. I think I think people want to hear this.

Ross Greene

Solving problems consists of three steps. The first step is called the empathy step. Second step is called the define adult concerns step. Third step is called the invitation. The main ingredient of the empathy step is information gathering. Gathering information from a student about what's making it hard for them to meet a particular expectation. As I always say, the empathy step is where we learn that what we thought was getting in the kids way, is not what's getting in the kids way. Yes, we do this with kids who are nonspeaking. Yes, we do this with kids who haven't talked to a caregiver for eight years. We do this with reluctant participants, what we find is that once us caregivers stop trying to talk with kids about their concerning behaviors, the signal, and start talking with them about the problems that are closing those signals, they talk. Some of them, good luck getting them to shut up. And these are kids who haven't talked in forever. The second step is the define adult concerns step. This is where the caregiver is entering their concern into consideration. Why do they think it's important for the expectation that the expectation be met? I'm always saying to caregivers, if you don't know why it's important that the expectation be met, then I don't know why you have that expectation. The third step, the invitation, this is where kid and caregiver are collaborating on a solution that addresses the concerns of both parties. All of this is being done proactively. Because we've already identified the unsolved problems, we've already decided what our priorities are, we already know what we're working on, we already know what we're not working on. Now, believe it or not, the main response I get is that it's going to take a lot of time, we find that people are worried about time when we first start working with them, we find that they're not even talking about time three months in. This is more an issue of commitment. Is our school committed to carving out the time to solve problems with our students? If the answer is no, okay, you're going to keep spending an enormous amount of time on what happens because those problems are unsolved. In which case, the answer is eventually going to be yes. And if the answer is yes, how do we make slight modifications to our structures, our schedules, how we're using our time to make sure that we have time to solve problems with kids? And that is why this model has a pretty stellar track record for dramatically reducing discipline referrals. And all of the punitive, exclusionary things that happen after discipline referrals. There aren't really discipline referrals, because we are not sending behaviors to principal/assistant principal to deal with, we are solving problems in the environments in which they are recurring with the people with whom they are occurring with. And that is a much better system than sending kids to somebody else for justice to be administered. So that's the picture. Now, here's the interesting thing. We've done that in a lot of schools. The big issue is one of scaling. Because we are very confident about what this looks like. And what it accomplishes, in the schools that we've worked with, and that's in the hundreds at this point, maybe 1000s. I'm not sure. We don't keep count. How do we scale this so that it find its way into policy, finds it's way into practices. How do we make this as easy as possible for schools to adapt? Now you know what I spend all of my waking hours doing.

Tim Villegas

This seems flexible enough to be implemented anywhere.

Ross Greene

This is--we have implemented this everywhere kids hang out, families, schools, general and special ed, inpatient psychiatry units, residential facilities, prisons, group homes, adult facilities. We still got to figure out the individuals lagging skills and unsolved problems, got to get rid of a lot of the debris that we tend to be focused on that just distracts us. We've got to get people good at solving problems collaboratively and proactively. I hate to make it sound so simple. But that's kind of what it comes down to.

Tim Villegas

Is there anything that you wanted to say that I didn't--I didn't bring up.

Ross Greene

We have covered an enormous amount of territory.

Tim Villegas

We have!

Ross Greene

I cannot--You're an excellent facilitator, and I cannot think of anything off hand and that we haven't talked about.

Tim Villegas

You're making my heart feel so happy Dr. Greene. I hope you're not just saying that. I don't think you are. I don't think you are.

Ross Greene

No believe me. I've had not wonderful facilitators, and it's a lot easier for me to talk about what we're trying to do here, when I've got a good facilitator, so I'm not just saying it.

Tim Villegas

I appreciate it. Okay. Well, to close this out here. Let's say you were advising Dr. Cardona on education policy, what would be your advice to them?

Ross Greene

Let's pull together educators, unions, administrators, law enforcement, to the degree that they are present in schools, mental health staff. Let's have a really honest conversation about how we want to make sure that every kid gets what they need, how we achieve equity, what structures and systems and lenses are getting in our way. And how do we embark on a long term plan for fixing all of that? And Mr. Secretary, I'm delighted to participate in that conversation.

Tim Villegas

Dr. Greene it has been a pleasure to speak with you on the Think Inclusive Podcast we appreciate your time and knowledge and wisdom.

Ross Greene

Thank you very much for inviting me to do this.

Tim Villegas

Think Inclusive is written, edited and sound designed by Tim Villegas and is a production of MCIE. Original music by Miles Kredich. I hoped you enjoyed today's episode and if you did, here are some ways for you to help us grow the podcast. Share it with your friends, family and colleagues. And if you haven't already, give us a five star review on Apple podcast or Spotify. Special thanks to our patrons Melissa H., Veronica E., Sonya A., Pamela P., Mark C., Kathy B., Kathleen T., Jared T., Gabby M., and Erin P. for their support of Think Inclusive. Another way you can help support Think Inclusive is to become a patron. Go to patreon.com/thinkinclusivepodcast and become a patron today at the \$3, \$5, and \$10 per month levels. For more information about inclusive education or to learn how MCIE can partner with you and your school or district, visit mcie.org. We will be back in a couple of weeks. Thanks for your time and attention and remember, inclusion always works

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