

Helping Children Overcome Socio-Emotional and Behavioral Problems Based on the Kids' Skills Method

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Abstract: *Developmental, emotional, social and behavioral disorders of children and adolescents are a worldwide problem. Many of them can be avoided by undertaking a therapeutic and personal development intervention aimed at helping children overcome their problems. Children are able to solve some of them on their own, with the participation of adults including relatives. Finding a solution and its effective implementation results in better functioning of children in the social context and in assuming responsibly the roles assigned to them. It is also an investment in the future of children, because the solved difficulties will not be baggage in adulthood. Experience points out to the effectiveness of the Finnish Kids' Skills method in solving children's problems. It consists in learning new skills, the lack of which can be the cause of the children's malfunction and of behavior that is inconsistent with the expectations of the people around them.*

Keywords: *emotional, social and behavioral disorders, children and young people, the Kids' Skills method.*

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Introduction

Problems with emotional disorders in children and adolescents include several types, including destructive behavior, depressive and anxiety states, developmental disorders (e.g., autism). The most common behavioral problems in preschool and school children are tantrums, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or disruptive behavior disorders (Ogundele, 2018). The nuisance of these problems concerns both children and the people around them. In consequence, it affects the functioning of children and young people, and thus difficulties in fulfilling social roles and fully using the potential inherent in children.

As the World Health Organization points out, one in seven children and adolescents aged from 10 to 19 worldwide experience mental disorders, accounting for 13% of the global burden of disease in this age group. Depression, anxiety and behavior disorders are among the main diseases and disabilities among adolescents (WHO, 2018). The consequences of adolescent mental health problems, often beginning in childhood, extend to adulthood, worsen both physical and mental health, and limit the ability to lead a satisfying adult life.

Emotional and social problems are particularly visible in the group of premature babies. It is estimated that each year 15 million children (more than 1 in 10) worldwide are born prematurely, i.e. before the 37th week of pregnancy (WHO, 2018). As a result of medical advances in neonatal care, the viability of premature babies has increased significantly. Nevertheless, the adverse neurodevelopmental consequences of children who are born alive remain a problem. Extensive evidence indicates that children and adolescents born before the 32nd week of pregnancy are at high risk for cognitive and socio-emotional disorders that can persist into adulthood (Aarnoudse-Moens et al., 2009; Siffredi et al., 2021). During social development, children acquire skills that enable them to live in society. Their development is the most important task of upbringing. Socio-emotional problems are related to the perception and understanding of themselves and other people. Children with better social skills achieve better learning results in their first years of school education. Children with limited social skills are significantly more prone to problems, less able to cope at school and in various social situations. They are also at risk of emotional and behavioral development problems (Lilleoja et al., 2019, p. 39).

It is also necessary to add to the causes that trigger or strengthen mental, emotional and behavioral disorders in children and adolescents, inappropriate educational interactions of adult caregivers, a poor atmosphere

and relationships in the family and other family dysfunctions, as well as a lack or insufficient psychological and specialist support in the living environment.

The problems of children and young people are not restricted to one country, continent or region. They are present all over the world and cultural issues should be taken into account when analyzing the problems. This approach does not preclude the use of educational, therapeutic and specialized methods of interaction adopted in one country. Their adaptation, taking into account the cultural context, can bring positive effects in working with children and young people from distant countries and cultures. Unresolved childhood problems do not disappear, but turn into difficulties in adult life. Big problems are often a consequence of unresolved small problems. Therefore, in the case of problems manifested by the child, regardless of their severity, educational and specialized intervention should be undertaken.

In this article we describe the Finnish Kids'Skills method, which is applied to overcome children's problems and thus the difficulties experienced by families in everyday childcare. It is a safe method, and through its simplicity – quite effective and culturally adaptable. But, similarly to any other available method, it is not ideal.

Assumptions and history of the Kid's Skills method

Kids'Skills is a solution-focused method¹ that is helpful in learning different skills and in overcoming a child's emotional and behavioral problems with the help of people closest to the child. These can be friends, parents, acquaintances, or other people whom the child trusts and is in good contact with. The group of people professionally applying this method in working with children includes educators, guardians, teachers, social workers, pedagogues, psychologists and therapists. They cooperate in the implementation of the procedure with the persons indicated by the child.

¹ Solution-Focused Approach; Solution Focused Brief Therapy – SFBT) is a method of working with a client consisting in "searching for solutions to problematic situations (basically regardless of the nature of the problem itself), without referring to the analysis of the causes of a given problem, its nature and background. The essence of the Solution-Focused Approach is to develop the clients' motivation and change process by strengthening their effective actions leading towards the expected goals. The Solution-Focused Approach (SFA) is used both in working with individuals, couples, as well as families and other groups." (Krasiejko, 2009, p. 267). This model of psychological help originated in the USA, and Steva de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg are considered to be its authors. The approach is successfully implemented in schools and in cooperation with parents.

Due to the fact that the method is easy and safe, it can also be used by parents. The procedure (method) is a solution to problems that hinder development, interfere with the daily and social functioning of the child.

Kid's Skills is designed for children aged 3 to 12, but in some problems it can also be used in a group of teenagers and even adults. This method can be used to help children with a wide range of emotional and behavioral problems. It also applies to children with ADHD and autism spectrum. It also fosters cooperation between teachers and parents, because it is devoid of grounds for mutual blame and treats parents as relationship partners whose task is to support the child in learning a new skill.

The source of inspiration for the Kids'Skills method were numerous psychological ideas. Their authors include Milton H. Erikson, Jay Haley, Insoo Kim Berg, Steve de Shazer, Michel White and David Epston. The method uses the assumptions of solution-focused therapy and narrative therapy (Furman, 2010, p. 16).

The Kids'Skills method was developed in the 90's of the twentieth century at the Helsinki Brief Therapy Institute. Its authors are considered to be Ben Furman and his associates: Tapani Ahola, Sirpa Birn and Tuija Terävä. Initially, the method was used as a practical tool for working with problems manifested by preschool children. The set of rules and practical exercises that the method had originally been, has been verified, modified and supplemented over the years. In 2003 a book was published in Finland which contained a detailed description of the 15 steps to learn new skills (Furman, 2010, p. 15). Training of the "I can do it!" method is available in many countries, and the register of ambassadors of the method can be found on www.kidsskills.org.

The method is used to eliminate emotional and behavioral problems manifested by a child/children. It is applicable to individual and group work, e.g. to improve the atmosphere in the classroom, to increase motivation to learn or to improve relations with teachers. Available examples show that the Kids'Skills method can be used to limit time spent on playing computer games, improve the mood of the child after the divorce of parents, weaken laziness and activate children to act, regulate family life, overcome the fear of spiders, break the habit of swearing, learn to walk calmly, learn punctuality, control aggression, behave properly in social situations, improve relationships between siblings, control enuresis and train how to use the chamber pot as well as many other problems (Furman, 2010). The method can be used in working with a child in the intellectual norm and with a child requiring special educational intervention (reduced intellectual norm, ADHD, autism). It can be applied to the problems of children with self-

regulation, which is fundamental for child development and learning (Hautakangas et al., 2021; Zatloukal et al., 2020), in the work of a child with stuttering (Faściszewska, 2022), in the work with children with special needs (Lilleoja et al., 2019), with children exhibiting undesirable behavior such as: refusing to cooperate, ignoring requests from adults, violating discipline at school, aggressive and provocative behavior (Khymko, 2021).

How should you think about changing a problem into a new skill?

The way adult care-providers and other people from the child's environment think is important in the search for a solution to the problem manifested by the child. Typically, adults see children's problems as symptoms of deeper disorders that need to be treated. However, many of these problems are a lack of skills that children need to learn. And although many of them often avoid talking about the problem, they are eager to learn new solutions, new ways of behaving and acting (Furman, 2009; 2010, p. 14; 2012; 2018).

There are important questions in the process of solving the children's problems by teaching them new skills: "Why should the child change? ", "What's going to come of it for the child? ", "What exactly is the child to learn? ". The question most frequently asked in the search for solutions to the problem - "why?" - "anchors" adults in the past, tells them to focus on the causes, and the answers given most often take the perspective of an adult. An example would be the problem of a child misbehaving during the lesson described below.

Description of a situation

John, 8 years old. During lessons, he performs tasks faster than other children, and then walks around the class, disturbs other children, disrupts the work of others through loud statements about interests (cars), distracts other children. It also happens that he disrupts lessons by speaking too long, asking questions not related to its content. The above had already been discussed with John, but the situation changed only for a moment. Meetings with parents, during which the discussions about John's behavior were held, did not help, either. The child was not diagnosed with retardation.

How do adults see the problem?

Teacher: John is naughty, he is ill-mannered, he misbehaves, because of him other children cannot learn. Parents are to blame for this situation, because they have no influence on the child, because they

do not cooperate, because they are not able to explain to the child why he goes to school. In short: he misbehaves.

Parents: after all, they talk to Jan, but it is the school that provokes his behavior of that kind. It is the teachers who are not competent enough to "reach" the child. At home, John does not disturb others, he is polite. In short: they know he misbehaves, but not at home.

How does John see the problem?

John: "I'm bored at school."

It can be seen that adults focus on the answer to the question: "Why is this happening?". John talks about what really causes his behavior, which is not in line with the expectations of adults. He's simply bored, so he tries to fill in the rest of the time waiting for the other students to finish the task.

Needs are crucial to understand the circumstances, but, at the same time, they diverge in the individual people involved in the situation. Unfortunately, they are often overlooked or unconscious enough to be spoken. If we find that John does not take into account the needs of the children, then this will be a statement irrelevant to the solution of the problem and not entirely true, either. John may understand that he disturbs others with his behavior, but he has his needs, too. Thus, the reported improvement in his behaviour is temporary. Understanding the child's needs is essential to support him in learning a new skill, i.e. to start the process of change. This change leads to solving the child's problem, and thus to eliminating difficulties experienced by adults. In this approach, it is not important what adults want, but how much they can help the child in the search for a solution and in changing his behavior or emotions.

Needs of the persons involved in this situation

Teacher: he does not want John to disrupt the class; he wants John to change his behavior; he wants his parents to influence John and cooperate with him.

Or maybe the teacher wants to be competent and wants to have an influence on John?

Parents: they don't want to listen to the teachers' accusations; they do not want to hear that they are bad parents; they want John to change his behavior.

Or maybe: they want to feel competent and parents and have an influence on John?

John's friends: they want to do a good job and get a good grade.

John: I don't want to get bored in class.

Responding to a problem, adults focus on themselves, their emotions, expectations and needs. They know what they do not want and what they want, but they do not know what John wants. They expect him to conform to their expectations. Both groups of adults want to have an impact on the child. But are they aware that influencing the child also means helping the child to change the behavior by learning a new skill?

The solution to the problem should be future-oriented. Therefore, the following questions should be asked: "What should the child have in return"? , "What else is the child supposed to do rather than disturb the class? ". The solution is to teach John a new skill. It is necessary to focus on what the child should not do, but what new the child can do. John does not learn "not to disturb in class" and does not learn "how not to be bored" because it is impossible to learn something that is not there. John should learn to wait for the completion of tasks by other children. How? There are many possibilities, and it can be helpful to ask: "What can you do at this time (when you have finished the task) and other children are still working? "

The case in question may fall within the area of working with a gifted student, but working with such a student is not always obvious and possible, especially in class. It is the teacher who is responsible for the organization of the teaching process in class and it depends on him or her how each student will work, and how the teacher will share this work. Parents and teachers want a skill that is impossible to teach: don't disturb. John, on the other hand, may (want to) acquire a new skill – the proper use of time in class. The child can learn how to use the time spent at school in an interesting way. In the above example, this skill may be, for example: helping other students to complete tasks ("assistant"², the ability to be a helper) or documenting the team's life and work in class – in words, by drawing, photography, a short film ("documentary filmmaker", skill: documenting the life of the class). It is important to offer the new skill in an attractive way that it is accepted by the child. When presenting an offer, it is necessary to indicate the benefits that the child will have from the new skill (the child will have friends, will be the author of a film, a photo exhibition about the life of the class, will spend time in an interesting way). It should be remembered that the benefits must lie with the child, not adults (although the benefits will appear indirectly). It's not about the teacher feeling good in class or the parents being happy with John's behavior. These are the benefits of adults. The benefits must not be distant, they must be "here and now", or in the time cognitively accessible

² Contrary to appearances, John in the role of a teacher's assistant is not a threat to him or her, but a person whose logic can be more understandable to children.

for the child, for example, as in the case of "celebration", which will be discussed later in the text.

The sense of self-agency and competence of adults will appear when these feelings are also shared by John (it is he who is to solve his problem with the help of adults). Working on a problem – a change in behavior – works best when children themselves indicate the skills they want to learn. They have their own beliefs about the change and solutions needed, but it is the child who has to take responsibility for learning skills. It is easier for them to take it when they are active in their decisions and choices. The Kids'Skills method allows children to become the authors of the solution to the problem.

Children's skills and needs are in line with their developmental age, but also with their views. It is them who know what they need to learn in order to function better in a group and better cope with tasks and expectations. Children who do not recognize or poorly recognize the problems and skills needed should be told how they can make them feel more satisfied. The aim of the actions of adults should be to encourage children to look for a solution, i.e. to learn the skills thanks to which children will overcome the problem and organize their actions. For children acquiring a new skill must be attractive, pleasant, satisfying, noticed and rewarded.

Kids' Skills – 15 steps to solve a problem

The Kids'Skills method is a collection of 15 well-ordered, practical guidelines. It is quite simple and possible to be implemented by specialists and parents with specialized support. The outline of the procedure is as follows (Furman, 2010, pp. 21-30):

1. *Converting a problem into a skill to learn* or determining what skill a child needs to acquire or develop in order to overcome the problem. One can apply the brainstorming technique with adults who care about the change, or the child's independent work on ideas.
2. *Making an agreement with the child about the skill to learn.* Children are usually aware of their weaknesses and willing to improve new skills. At this stage it can be helpful to ask: "Is there anything difficult for you, and you would like to learn how to do it better?" The following statement can be used to provide a suggestion from an adult: "I would like you to cope better with ...".

3. *Identifying the benefits of a new skill.* Children must be convinced that the new skill will benefit them. This increases their motivation to gain it. These benefits should be discussed with children. It is important to indicate what children will get, not what children will not be (a child will not shout vs the child will be calmer).
4. *Naming a skill.* Ask the child to name the skill he or she will be learning. You can use neologisms, words that are mysterious, funny and serious, the meaning of which will be understood by the child and people supporting him or her in the process of change. The child's independence in the search for a name makes the child identify with it more closely.
5. *Choosing an imaginary supporter.* It can be an animal, a man, a being or a fairy tale hero who will be an assistant in acquiring a new skill. The idea of a powerful being is something natural for a child, because at a certain point in their lives, children have their imaginary friends. They play with them, talk to them and confide their secrets to them.
6. *Building social support.* At this stage children choose people that they can ask for support. They can be close people, friends, a stranger that the child likes (e.g. a lady from a store). The person helping to acquire a skill (e.g. the mother) contacts these people and talks about the plan. In the course of the process leading to a change, they praise, congratulate on achievements, suggest ideas, remind, celebrate the acquisition of a new skill with the child.
7. *Building self-confidence.* The person coordinating the process of learning a new skill asks the people indicated by the child to say why they believe that the child is able to learn this skill. This reinforces the child's belief that he or she is capable of doing this. You should also ask the child, "Do you believe you can learn this skill?" and "What gives you this confidence?"
8. *Planning a celebration.* Planning a celebration is a pleasant moment for children. They know that their effort can be rewarded, which further motivates them. The celebration is not just a reward, but an important social event, a summary of the child's effort and an opportunity to tell the child how the change was made, and to thank for the support. If the child does not want to celebrate with others, you can alternatively ask what would make the child happy (e.g. a trip with parents).

9. *Defining a skill.* Defining or naming the skill that the child is to acquire, does not mean that the child knows how to apply it practically. You should talk to your child about how they will behave when they already have this skill. Visualization, role-playing, or a modified question about a miracle in the case of older children can be useful (from the authors).
10. *Going public.* Together with the child, it is necessary to decide how to inform important people in the child's life about a new project. The information must not contain content about the problem, but about acquiring a new skill. Revealing is only an option that the child does not have to agree to. The will of the child must be respected.
11. *Practicing skills.* This stage a time to develop a plan for what the child will do to learn or develop a new skill. A skill must be practiced or put into practice in order for it to become a habit. If your child is having trouble finding a way to learn, you should share your ideas with the child.
12. *Creating reminders.* In learning new skills, there are situations when the child forgets about them. This should not be treated as a step backwards or a return to the problem, but as a natural situation – forgetting a skill temporarily. The child with adults decided on how to remind the child of the skill. It can be a catchword, a gesture known only to those involved in the process of change.
13. *Celebrating success.* When a skill is acquired by the child, the plan of celebration should become a realistic idea. During a meeting, the child shares impressions and expresses thanks to the supporters. The manner and content (for what?) of thanks should be agreed with the child. This is an additional social skill that the child acquires.
14. *Teaching others.* Teaching others is an excellent form of reinforcing and learning new things. A child who has acquired a new skill is an expert in this field and a reliable teacher. Teaching others raises a child's self-esteem and reputation among peers.
15. *Learning another skill.* Success in learning a new skill can encourage a child to acquire new, often more difficult skills. You can ask the child if he or she would like to learn another skill or recommend learning a new skill. Positive experiences strengthen children's self-confidence and thus motivate them to change and to look for new solutions.

It should be remembered that in order for the Kids'Skills method to work, it is necessary for adults to know about the protocol (its principles), their own intrinsic motivation and readiness to help. If a child has failed to master a skill, consider breaking down the complex skill into simpler elements, re-explaining the benefits of having it, and making the exercises for acquiring it more attractive. You should also make sure that the persons providing support are fully involved in the process of learning skills by the child.

Conclusion

Adults tend to see children's problems as symptoms of a disorder that requires treatment, specialized diagnoses and consultations. Children, on the other hand, perceive them as a lack of certain skills that need to be learned. They feel "a lack of something", often expressed in statements such as "I can't", "I don't know how", and in behavior that harms themselves. Parents perceive the child's problem as a difficulty of the child or a difficult situation that the child creates. On the other hand, they rarely point to gaps in self-knowledge and a lack of specific skills, for example in the field of educational methods. For a child, a lack of a skill means the need to learn it. For parents and guardians of the child, it means quite often a necessity to resort to a specialist consultation. The Kids'Skills method helps parents acquire new competences, so indirectly, they are also its addressees.

Kids'Skills is a method of helping children learn new skills to solve their own emotional and behavioral problems. The method is possible thanks to the cooperation of adults and children. Among the positives of the method one can mention the increase in creativity, a sense of self-agency, responsibility, self-control of the child, as well as raising the awareness of adults involved in the action. This awareness concerns the way of working with children, starting from the children's perspective of looking at the problem, and ending with acting together with children according to their scenarios.

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