

Introduction

As a clinical child psychologist involved in clinical practice in a children's mental health setting, I see children and families with a wide variety of presenting problems. On a typical day, my caseload might look like this:

- 8:00 A.M.—9-year-old Tony has a diagnosis of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). He has few friends, is picked on, teased and rejected by other children, and often says, “Nobody likes me.”
- 9:00 A.M.—13-year-old Jennifer has depression, and her stressed-out single father says she is increasingly irritable, moody, and argumentative, and her grades are declining.
- 10:00 A.M.—A busy single mother who owns a restaurant has a 7-year-old son named Carlos with ADHD/oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). He is very argumentative at home and school. He has just been suspended, which is increasing family stress as the mother tries to arrange child care. The boy and his mother are growing apart.
- 11:00 A.M.—15-year-old Franklin is on the path of a conduct disorder. He smokes cigarettes, breaks curfew, skips school, and occasionally smells of alcohol. His mother thinks that he is hanging out with the “wrong crowd” in their low-income neighborhood. He is flunking out of school.
- 1:00 P.M.—11-year-old Dominique has posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) related to his stepfather's physical abuse. He appears to be increasingly sad, irritable, and withdrawn. His mother says he is argumentative and fights with his sister nearly every day.
- 3:00 P.M.—15-year-old Melissa has bipolar disorder. Sometimes she “explodes,” destroys property, and is violent in the home. There is frequent family conflict, and her father admits losing his temper and verbally abusing his daughter, which causes marital strife. In the session Melissa's mother stated, “I have failed as a parent,” and her father noted, “I give up!”
- 4:00 P.M.—Parent group for children with a variety of diagnoses and presenting problems participating in a partial hospital program.
- 5:00 P.M.—Parent group for teens with a variety of diagnoses and presenting problems participating in a partial hospital program.

Finding the most effective ways to help children with such a broad range of behavioral–emotional problems (and their parents) can be challenging, even with extensive experience in intervention-focused research as well. My colleagues and I have dedicated our efforts to developing and testing child- and family-focused prevention interventions to use in school and community settings (see Bloomquist, August, Lee, Berquist, & Mathy, 2005), and as a “scientist-practitioner” I always strive to use research-informed methods in practice. But there are very few practical texts available to guide this endeavor.

Over many years I have gradually developed practice guidelines for skills enhancement that are informed by solid research in an attempt to fill this gap. The resultant *Struggling Kids* books are my attempt to bring it all together for myself and now for other practitioners. This practitioner volume is part of a two-book package that includes a corresponding parent volume. Together these books offer a toolkit to help families with a child who is delayed in, or struggling with, psychological development, as evidenced by broadly defined behavioral–emotional problems.

The ideas and methods in the “Struggling Kids” program are derived from proven behaviorally anchored practices, but they also integrate my 25 years of experience in providing skills-training interventions to families, training aspiring practitioners, and conducting applied research. The program is a practical distillation of the essential intervention ingredients observed across research-validated programs, and it is organized to allow for flexible use. The resulting specific methods have also been field-tested and refined extensively with families.

The “Struggling Kids” program can be applied with children and families in clinics, schools, community agencies, juvenile court–affiliated settings, and faith centers. It can be used by practitioners licensed to work with children and families in various professional capacities, as long as they are well trained in child and family behavior intervention methods. Together the two manuals can increase the effectiveness of parent and family skills training.

The strategies for building skills included in the “Struggling Kids” program are appropriate for children ages 5–17 years, and both books describe how to adapt the strategies for different ages in this span. In these books the term *parent* means any adult assuming a caregiver role, and *family* refers to any primary living arrangement(s) for a child.

How This Book Can Help the Struggling Child and Family

Struggling children display a wide variety of symptoms and functional problems, including disrupting the classroom, arguing with adults, fighting with siblings, mood swings, excessive worrying, difficulty making and keeping friends, and falling behind at school. At the root of these problems may be a variety of psychiatric disorders and symptoms, including externalizing difficulties such as ADHD, ODD, and conduct disorders, as well as internalizing

emotional concerns such as mood and anxiety disorders. Not all children who are struggling will, however, qualify for a psychiatric diagnosis. What all struggling children, as defined in this program, have in common is difficulty progressing and mastering psychological development-related tasks in behavioral, social, emotional, and/or academic domains. As practitioners know, the comorbidity of psychiatric diagnoses and multiple symptom presentation are more the rule than the exception. Therefore, most struggling children need help in more than one domain. The “Struggling Kids” program is designed to target multiple problems in a way that often is impossible for service providers focusing on one area of need, such as academics or behavior.

The primary goal of the “Struggling Kids” program is to facilitate parents’ and practitioners’ efforts in collaborating to help a struggling child and his or her stressed family get back on track. The program provides a platform from which the practitioner and the parent can agree on the child’s and parent/family’s difficulties and then collaborate to create and execute an effective and tailored intervention. The child can be trained in developmentally related skills to make gains in behavioral, social, emotional, and academic domains. The parent and/or family can also be trained in skills to enhance well-being that will boost the child’s development, reduce behavioral–emotional problems, and result in a more competent child.

The Importance of Parents

Although families typically seek help for problems exhibited by a child, the parent is the primary focal point of the skills-building approach espoused in the “Struggling Kids” program. Research, experience, and knowledge of child development confirm that a focus on the parent is effective in getting a struggling child back on track. Therefore, many of the ideas and procedures described involve either parents changing their own behavior or parents assisting their child to make behavior changes, with the practitioner teaching skills-building methods, guiding practice, and providing coaching and support. The child is still ultimately impacted by the intervention but often through the parent’s efforts. Although the practitioner should target the child more and more directly as the child matures into adolescence, the parent should always be in the loop and actively involved.

The Importance of Evidence-Based Practices

The primary theoretical and procedural models that are often applied with a struggling child include parent management training, social competence skills training, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and behavioral family skills training. The content and delivery procedures across these and other emerging intervention models are integrated within the “Struggling Kids” program via principles of evidence-based practice. The evidence-based practice framework incorporates research-validated procedures that are applied using practitioner experience

and tailoring to the characteristics and preferences of the client(s). Likewise the methods in the “Struggling Kids” program are informed and derived from research-validated models, but are presented in a manner that relies on the practitioner’s judgment, the use of shared decision making to fit the specific skills-building interventions to each unique family, and teamwork to carry out the plan. This is arguably the best approach for “real-world” practice where children and families have a wide variety of presenting problems and differ in their level of motivation.

How to Use the Practitioner Manual and Parent Handbook

This book and the parent book are based in part on a revision of *Skills Training for Children with Behavior Problems*, published in 2006. That volume presented the skills-building training methods and then included information for practitioners in a single chapter. To make the program more widely usable for a variety of needs and settings, and to reflect recent advances in the field of child-focused intervention, I divided the material into two books. In the process the work was significantly updated and reorganized, and there is much more skills-training content. The books also reflect a greater emphasis on preparing and motivating the parent and child to follow through in using skills. In addition, the new practitioner manual allows for much more guidance in applying the training methods for greater success with families, including:

- Up-to-date information on behavioral–emotional problems in children and corresponding effective methods for intervention
- Conceptualization of children’s problems as developmental struggles and of parent/family difficulties as setbacks in coping with stress
- Suggestions for tailoring skills-building efforts to the unique needs and preferences of each family
- Ideas for getting families to attend sessions and motivating them to use what they are being trained in at home
- Instructions for training a family in skills-building strategies to develop a child’s behavioral, social, emotional, and academic skills and to improve a parent’s coping and broader family interactions

Each of these topics is briefly summarized in Chapters 1 and 2 and then elaborated on throughout the practitioner book. Chapters 3–10 provide step-by-step instructions on how to deliver the skills-training methods to families. Chapter 11 shows application of the methods through carefully described case studies. The Appendix briefly outlines an implementation and quality assurance protocol that can be used to train practitioners and help them maintain fidelity or integrity in applying the methods.

The following suggestions are intended to maximize success with this book and the “Struggling Kids” program.

1. Read the parent handbook in addition to the practitioner manual. *The two books are best used in tandem.* The parent book contains step-by-step instructions for each skills-building strategy in layperson’s language. It is imperative that you, as the practitioner, also read and fully understand all of the content in the parent book in order to apply the delivery methods described in the practitioner book. You can use the appropriate chapters or sections in the parent book to teach parents the strategies and the corresponding chapters in the practitioner book for additional suggestions, troubleshooting, and customizing ideas. Worksheets, checklists, and other hands-on materials to be used by parents are included in both books.

2. Use the parent book and/or forms during sessions with families and as an at-home reference for parents. *The parent book is best used by parents with the guidance of a practitioner.* Parent and practitioner can literally be “on the same page” when you give parents the parent book at the beginning of your work with them and then refer to it throughout training sessions. With their own book to serve as a reminder of how to apply the skills-building methods and what the goals are, parents are less subject to misunderstanding and more likely to persevere with practicing and applying the strategies as intended at home. The combination of effective training by the practitioner and the availability of a user-friendly reference book for the parent to use at home can have a significant impact on progress.

3. Use the “Struggling Kids” program in either individual family or parent group meetings. If you are working with just one family, you have many options for organizing the intervention. For example, you can first train the parents, who then work with the child by themselves. You could also teach the child new skills alone and then bring the family in to teach the other members the same strategies. Another possibility is to work with the entire family at once. Finally, you can also conduct parent groups, which involves teaching the same skills to a small number of parents at once. The practitioner book illustrates some such applications, and the program is easy to adapt for your specific purposes. In any of these intervention approaches, provide the parent book to parents and use the practitioner book to guide the skills-training process.

The Author’s Hope

I hope you find the “Struggling Kids” books a valuable aid in your work. They should assist you in carefully planning and carrying out a collaborative and effective skills-building intervention with a child and family. This broad-based intervention will ultimately get the struggling child and his or her family back on track. Good luck!