

# Collaborative Problem Solving

## Parents and Children Working Together to Solve Everyday Problems in the Home

Her alarm went off, shattering the tranquility of yet another night too short on sleep. Only four hours had passed since Brenda had been doing laundry, putting away dishes, and preparing brown bag lunches for the morning stampede out the door.

She sat on the side of her bed for just a moment longer than usual, drinking in the peace before her wake-up rounds, a chore she had come to face with dread. Beth, 6, and Gregory, 7, were never easy to rouse from bed on a school morning, but Josh, 10, was by far the toughest. Her beloved, fair-haired firstborn, diagnosed with autistic disorder (now categorized as autism spectrum disorder in the DSM-5) when he was 4, was never short on surprises. But his latest quirk was becoming a real challenge.

A couple of weeks ago, for some reason, Josh started taking a stand against waking up on time in the morning—by not standing at all. In fact, sometimes Josh refused to move a finger, much less open an eye, in response to his mother's presence by his bedside each day. It was taking 20 minutes of reminding and pleading to get him up and going—which then made it very difficult to get everyone out the door on time.

At first, Brenda chalked up his behavior to typical pre-teen sloth. After all, she too had fought to stay in the warmth of bed each morning at that age. And she also knew that while the cocktail of medications Josh took at night hadn't changed in six months, it might be compounding his morning sluggishness—but she didn't think so.

But weeks of energetic efforts to cajole and coax



him out of bed with bright lights, cheerfulness and performances of the family favorite “You are My Sunshine”—precious time she would have loved to divvy up between Josh, the other kids, and pulling herself together for work—were shredding her patience. He must be testing me, she thought irritably. This is probably typical pre-teen rebellion.

Josh's stubbornness in the morning was endangering more than her patience. She had been late to work seven times in the past three weeks and just yesterday, her boss had warned that if she were late once more this quarter, he might have to “diminish her responsibilities.” As understanding as he usually was about the struggles Brenda sometimes faced raising a son with ASD, he was no longer willing to let productivity slip.

“Come on, Josh, rise and shine!” she said as she entered Josh's bright bedroom. “You know the drill, buddy! If you get up now, and you are ready for school on time, I'll let you watch *The Wiggles* before we leave. If you are not ready on time, then no *Wiggles*. It's your choice. *Wiggles* or no *Wiggles*.”

*The Wiggles* was her latest bargaining chip. With its upbeat songs, brightly colored costumes and lively dance routines, the children's show had grabbed Josh's attention early in his childhood and remained his favorite.

“Did you hear me, Joshy? *The Wiggles*! They're the best!” She tried again, with a forced excitement that nearly belied the hostility simmering below the surface. “You love *The Wiggles*!”

The form in the bed stirred slightly. Deciding she



needed a break, Brenda headed into the brightly lit kitchen to prepare breakfast for everybody else.

“What’s up for you two today?” Brenda asked her younger two, who sat patiently at the kitchen bar. She did her best to focus on their responses while glancing furtively at the microwave clock. 7:35. Only 30 more minutes until she was pushing her luck to have enough time to drop the kids off at the bus stop and get herself to work by 8:30. Setting plates of scrambled eggs in front of Beth and Gregory, she hustled back into Josh’s room, both her anxiety and irritation rising.

“Josh, I mean it this time! No playing around! Get. Out. Of. Bed. Now.” Brenda’s tone was just barely at a level where her next door neighbors couldn’t hear her, but she knew it wouldn’t be long before her temper got the best of her. She walked over to the window, slammed it shut, and raised her voice. “IF YOU DON’T GET UP NOW, YOU WON’T BE ABLE TO GO ON THE SWINGS AFTER SCHOOL! AND THAT’S FINAL! PLUS NO WIGGLES TONIGHT!”

Josh bolted out of bed.

FINALLY, she thought as Josh dressed and loaded his backpack. “Why do I have to lose my temper for you to listen to me?” she asked tersely. She watched as his shoulders barely moved in a faint shrug.

It was only 8:10 a.m., and Brenda felt like she’d already pulled off an eight-hour day.

Promptly at 8:30, Brenda arrived at her desk, slightly bedraggled and wearing a pair of ballet flats she’d kept in her trunk since the time she arrived at work still in flip-flops. Her desk mate, Sarah, gave her a sympathetic smile. The two had spent their lunch hours talking about their children for years, and Sarah could tell with one look how Brenda’s morning had gone.

“Good morning,” Sarah said. In addition to being a mom herself, Sarah had recently returned to school to get her master’s degree in child psychology, so she was especially tuned in to Brenda’s struggles with her son with special needs. “Josh giving you a hard time?”

“Yep,” Brenda said. “It took 30 minutes to get him out of bed this morning. I was flying to work. Lucky I didn’t pass any police officers, or I’d have gotten pulled over.”

She sighed. “I just don’t understand why Josh insists

on testing me and is trying to control everything in the morning. Maybe it’s his meds messing with him, but nothing has been changed in at least six months.”

“Maybe he isn’t testing you and maybe it’s not his meds,” Sarah said. Brenda crooked her head, so her friend continued. “In my child therapy class we’ve been studying this approach called Collaborative Problem Solving. It’s based on the belief that everyone wants to do well in life and the philosophy is ‘kids do well if they can.’ So if a kid is not doing well, we need to find out what is getting in the way—which are usually thinking skill deficits—so that we can help. I thought of you and Josh right away. I mean, Josh is a really good

kid—I don’t think he’s thinking to himself ‘I can’t wait to mess with mom in the morning and piss her off and get in trouble.’ Not likely, is it? It’s possible there is something else going on.”

Brenda’s eyes stung with tears, her exhaustion now mixing with guilt. She’d only thought that Josh was being stubborn and controlling; it hadn’t occurred to her that something else might be going on with him. She also realized that she had never even asked him what was going on, and just assumed he was doing all this on purpose.

Not for the first time, Sarah handed her a tissue with a gentle smile as Brenda said softly, “It is possible, yes, that there might be another reason for this mess.”

“Well, that’s part of what you need to find out,” Sarah said. “Basically, in collaborative problem solving you sit down with Josh, when both of you are ready and before the problem behavior occurs, in order to share each other’s concerns and work together collaboratively to arrive at a solution that works for everyone involved. You mentioned that Josh works with the school psychologist at school and I know Dr. Landry uses CPS with teachers and students for problems at school. Maybe you can reach out to her.”

Brenda nodded. It couldn’t hurt, she thought.

A quick call on her lunch break verified that Dr. Landry, who met with Josh every two weeks through his IEP, was familiar with Collaborative Problem Solving and interested in meeting. In addition to giving Brenda some basics about the CPS approach, she agreed

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to meet Brenda and Josh later that afternoon to demonstrate the approach and see if they could learn more about the problem Josh had waking up in the morning.

So that afternoon, after Brenda picked Josh up from his classroom, they stopped by the school psychologist's office for a quick chat. With a welcoming smile, Dr. Landry directed Josh and Brenda into the two vinyl chairs facing her desk.

Once they were settled, Dr. Landry turned toward Josh, being sure to smile and make direct, yet gentle, eye contact. "First of all, I would like to thank you for coming to see me, Josh, so we can talk things through, just like we do when something goes wrong in class," she said. "Josh, from talking with your mom, it sounds like it's not going so well when it is time to wake up in the morning. What's up?"

Looking off to the side, Josh said, "I don't know. Am I also in trouble here, too?"

"No you're not in trouble. We just want to know what's going on so we understand and can help," said Mrs. Landry.

"I'm just really tired in the morning," said Josh.

Dr. Landry nodded. "I understand that—it can be hard for a lot of people to get out of bed when they are tired. Sounds like this hard time waking up in the morning has been going on for about three weeks, is that about right?"

"I guess so, yeah," Josh replied.

"I wonder why that is? Any ideas on why it's been harder recently to get up in the morning?" Dr. Landry asked.

Josh was quiet a minute.

"I guess so, maybe," he said. "We got new neighbors and their patio light stays on really late, and I have a hard time falling asleep unless it's totally dark. I can't sleep if I can see patterns on the walls. They kind of freak me out. Then I'm really tired in the morning."

"Okay, I think I understand a bit better now," Dr. Landry said with a nod of her head. "So what I hear you saying is that the light from the neighbors' house has been coming in through the window at night and that's preventing you from falling asleep, which then makes you more tired and it's harder to get up in the morning. Does that sound about right?"

"I guess so," Josh said.

"Okay, thanks. That make sense. Our concern is that

when this happens in the morning you are then late for school and your mom is also late for work, which isn't good for anyone," Dr. Landry said.

Josh nodded, taking in Dr. Landry's words.

"You know, I wonder if there's something we can figure out here." Dr. Landry continued. "Something we can try so that the light coming in the window is not bothering you, so that you can sleep easier, and everyone can be to school and work on time. Do you have any ideas?"

"Yeah," Josh said, smiling shyly. "How about we unscrew their light bulbs?"

"Well every idea is a good idea, but let's take a look at it. A solution needs to work for you, your mom, be doable, and not raise any other concerns. Does this idea work for you, Brenda?" Dr. Landry said, looking at Brenda.

"Uh no. I don't think we should be unscrewing the neighbors' light bulbs, Josh," Brenda said. "That's just rude."

"Plus, it probably would also raise other concerns with the neighbors, so that idea won't work," Dr. Landry said. "Do you have any other ideas? Something we can try so that the light coming in the window is not bothering you, so you can sleep easier, and everyone can be to school and work on time. Any other ideas?" Dr. Landry asked, turning to Josh.

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Josh looked from Dr. Landry to his mom.

"Well," he said, gathering his thoughts. "Before, there were curtains in my room, and now there aren't. I think if I had curtains again, I would be able to sleep better."

Brenda sat back in her chair.

"Well, that's true," she said. "I hadn't thought about that. We used to have curtains for Josh, but the dog chewed them up a couple of weeks ago after I washed them, and I haven't had the chance to replace them."

"Okay," Dr. Landry said. "So, Josh, if your mom hangs curtains back up in your room, do you think that will help enough with the light at night so you can sleep and everybody will be able to get to school

and work on time in the morning?”

“I think so,” Josh said. “As long as I don’t see any light patterns in my room on the wall at night, I should be able to sleep so I won’t be so tired in the morning.”

“Okay, Josh, so it sounds like this would work for you. Does this work for you too, Brenda?” Dr. Landry said.

“Yep!” said Brenda with enthusiasm, relief apparent in her voice.

“Okay, great,” Dr. Landry said. “So it sounds like we have a solution to try. When do you think we can get this going?”

“Well,” said Brenda. “We can stop at the store on the way home and buy a new set and put them up tonight.”

“Great!” Dr. Landry said. “Let’s try it over the weekend

and let me know how it’s going early next week so we can see if the problem is solved, or if we need to meet and try again.”

The next day, Brenda arrived at her desk at 8:25 a.m. She was smiling before Sarah even looked up.

“Well?” Sarah said. “How did it go? I was thinking about you and Josh last night. From the look on your face, is it safe to assume your meeting went well?”

“Better than well!” Brenda said. “It’s amazing the kind of information you can get just by asking your child a simple question or two.”

“Even the best moms don’t have ALL the answers,” Sarah said.

“Amen to that!” Brenda said.

*This story is part of a series based on the experiences of educators, parents, and the staff of Genesee Lake School, a nationally recognized provider of services for students with special needs. GLS is part of ORP, an employee-owned family of companies whose mission is to make a difference in the lives of people with disabilities.*

*This article was written by **Rebecca Thomas** and can be found at <http://www.orplibrary.com/posts/collaborative-problem-solving-parents-and-children-working-together-to-solve-everyday-problems-in-the-home>.*