

CogniEnhance

UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHILD'S THINKING

A Guide to Behaviour, Capacity and Growth



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Introduction

Children can sometimes feel that life is overwhelming. They can also find themselves in situations that feel challenging. This can be very confusing for them. For many children, moments such as these happen often. These children can react very strongly when they feel too stressed. A small task that needs to be done could result in a big emotional outburst. A different task could cause a child to refuse to do anything. This can be very confusing for adults. Parents and teachers want to respond in a positive way that helps but at times, they do not know how to do this. This book looks at what is behind the reactions of children. It also gives practical guidelines on how to support and help children as their emotional and cognitive skills develop.

Purpose of the Book

Adults sometimes misunderstand why children behave in the way they do. The purpose of this book is to change how behaviour is understood. Behaviour is not seen as something to fix. How a child thinks and feels can sometimes be seen in their behaviour. If the task is very challenging, the child's reaction can show this. The child's behaviour can also reveal when too much mental effort is needed and which skills are being overloaded. A child's behaviour will change when attention, memory, planning, organization, flexibility, problem solving and emotional control are overloaded. This places too much stress on the child.

There are no quick fixes for children, and this book does not offer solutions that will work for every child in all situations. The book does not offer rules. Rather it helps readers notice patterns in their children's behaviour. It also explains why some situations are very difficult to manage. Support can be changed to fit the needs of every child. There are real life examples and daily stories in this book. There are also explanations of thinking skills that lie behind children's behaviour.



Readers of this book will learn to understand that the behaviour of a child is often the reflection of the task that the child is required to complete and not a reflection of the child's personality or motivation. Readers will also learn to recognize that the environment and the timing of tasks can affect a child's ability to cope. If adults react by lowering the mental load on children, it often helps them to cope easier. Children's thinking skills can be built very slowly when the activities that they need to complete are not weighed down by pressure and stress. This different approach will help children to develop independence, and they will learn how to control their emotions and behaviour.

Intended Outcomes

Adults often start feeling more confident when they support children and see positive change. The outcomes of this book include the following:

1. **Better Understanding**
Children's behaviour is more about thinking and emotional capacity, not naughtiness or being lazy.
2. **Better Support in the Moment**
By changing instructions and expectations, adults can prevent stress and children behaving badly.
3. **Stronger Thinking Skills**
Attention, memory, planning, organisation, flexibility, problem-solving and emotional control get better with practise and kind support.
4. **More Independence**
Children learn to start, carry on and finish tasks with less adult help.
5. **Greater Emotional Safety**
If children are being dealt with calmly and with understanding, trust will grow.
6. **Transfer of Skills**
Children will learn to adapt in different situations, which means they will be more resilient.



7. Confidence for Adults

Adults will be more patient and make better decisions. There will be less stress and uncertainty for both children and adults.

This book is based on modern day research which focuses on understanding why children behave the way they do. Behaviour gives insight into how children are coping mentally. Behaviour is also a reflection of how children see the world. In this book there are scenarios which help adults to see how they can help children grow, develop skills and have long term well-being.



Chapter 1: Understanding Behaviour Through Task Demands

If adults are to support children, they need to look beyond what can be seen. Often what is seen is bad behaviour. Bad behaviour shows that the child is having difficulty. Understanding this can help the adult to see where and how to assist. Many adults feel confused and do not know what to do in different situations. A child may handle a task easily one day but be unable to complete it the next day. This can create frustration for both the adult and the child because there does not seem to be a reason why the child can cope one day but not cope the next day. The task is the same, but the child's mind is unable to cope. This chapter focuses on what the child is being asked to do rather than the behaviour.

Children must manage a great deal in a typical day. Some demands can be seen by the adults, for example, dressing, finishing schoolwork or getting ready for bed. Other demands cannot be seen as easily. These still need effort. When a child has to move from one activity to another, there are many things that they need to cope with. Examples include background noise, remembering instructions, managing feelings and focusing energy. Think of a typical morning. A child must wake up, get dressed and eat breakfast. They must stop one activity, leave the house and go to a busy place. Each of these steps uses different thinking skills and the child often does not have a chance to pause.

If a child can manage what is expected of them, the child will be calm and will cooperate. Behaviour will change if the tasks become harder. Behaviour is not about effort or character. It is a reflection of how the child is managing the situation. Often it is not effective to ask the child why the behaviour happened. Rather ask what they needed to do.

If children are assessed using this view, it will explain why behaviour changes during the day. Mornings often feel slow. During the afternoons, a child could be irritable. This irritability can grow in the evenings. This does not mean that the child is inconsistent. The behaviour shows the load that the child is carrying. A child does not start each task without load from previous activities. A child uses mental energy for attention, emotional control, processing sensory information,



transitions and problem solving. Tasks that could be easy to complete when the child is fresh could feel very heavy later in the day. A child who completed schoolwork well can struggle with homework in the afternoon. The child's ability has not lowered. The child's capacity has been lowered because of previous demands.

The child's thinking systems that help them to function lie behind daily tasks. Selective attention helps children to focus on what is important. Sustained attention helps them to focus over time. Listening while acting or remembering instructions while doing a task need divided attention. Working memory and short-term memory need to hold information long enough for it to be used. Children use planning and organizing skills to help them know when to start a task and what comes next. Problem solving allows children to change their approach when they need to. When these skills work together children can manage tasks and their behaviour remains sound.

The behaviour of a child needs to be seen in terms of how demanding the tasks are. Sometimes a child will be ready and will complete a task without any issues. At other times there is too much mental load and more effort is needed. The child might slow down or be distracted. When tasks go beyond what the child is able to do mentally, the behaviour will change. There might be an outburst or the child will withdraw. This shows that the brain is protecting safety rather than performance. The child needs a few moments of relief. The child needs to move, play or be comforted. These responses are signs of overload not choices to be naughty or obstructive.

Children need to use many thinking systems at the same time to complete daily tasks. Dressing requires doing things in order, thus using memory. Listening to instructions needs attention and memory. Doing schoolwork needs effort, planning and emotional control. Children need to settle their bodies before they can sleep. Tasks become harder if one system is strained. When many systems are strained, behaviour will change more. This explains why a child might know what to do but they will not even start. It also explains why a child can manage a task on one day but not on another. Sometimes children can handle one environment but not another. The skill is still there but access to the skill has changed.

There are many things that influence how a child handles demands. These include the child's personality, sleep, health, relationships and large events. These all matter. This chapter looks at two factors that can be seen and changed. These



factors are the task and the conditions in which it needs to be done. If the task is within the child's capacity the behaviour will be steady. When tasks go beyond capacity the child's behaviour will change. This does not mean that the child is lazy or does not want to do the task. It means the thinking needed to do the task is not available.

Conditions in the child's environment affect balance. These include time pressure, noise, tension, tiredness and sensory input. If a child has to cope with many instructions and changes, load is added. A task can be manageable in one situation but unmanageable when circumstances change. When demands become too much, selective attention gets worse, sustained attention falls away, working memory changes and divided attention fails. Planning and organization become very hard for the child to do and problem-solving fails. The child's behaviour will change because the task is more than they can manage.

Thinking systems change all the time. If a child is properly supported, thinking systems can become stronger. Capacity can grow. Children will manage bigger demands without feeling too stressed.

Developing children's skills is not enough. Children need support to see how to use the skills that they have learned. This happens through transfer. Children can notice what skills fit specific situations and how these can also fit in different situations. Parents need to guide their children rather than rescue them. If children focus on what they learned and not where they failed, they will improve. With time children will be able to use skills in different tasks and situations.

Children do not need to be perfect for there to be progress. Progress can be seen in flexibility. It can also be seen in recovery after challenges and when children become more independent. When children become more independent, they need less support from adults. Mental capacity can grow in a way that protects safety rather than tiring it out.

Behaviour is information about the child, rather than a problem to be fixed. It is a reflection of the demands of the task and how adults can support. If adults respond with understanding, the child will feel calmer and safer. Development will evolve in a way that is more stable and enduring.



Chapter 2: How to Use the Scenario Chapters

The first step to improvement is knowing what the child is coping with. The challenge is using this information in everyday activities and social interactions. The chapters that follow show real life situations. They show how tasks can load a child's attention, memory, planning and emotional control. This book is not a rule book. A task can seem simple but can carry more weight than an adult would imagine. The chapters in this book show a way to see what is happening beneath the behaviour and responding positively.

All the scenarios focus on the tasks the children must finish. Some tasks seem easy, like morning activities, homework or bedtime. But these tasks use many thinking and emotional skills at the same time. Parents need to look at the task and the child's behaviour. It will become clearer why a child may succeed in one situation but battle in another. It is not about effort. It is about the needs of the task and how the child's mind is managing at that point.

It is not necessary for parents and caregivers to read the scenarios in order. It might work better to start with the task that is presenting problems at the moment. Some children find mornings are the worst. Others might think homework is too difficult. It is a good idea to focus on one task at a time because then advice given can be put into practice.

When parents or caregivers are reading a scenario, they should not judge. Rather they should try to understand. Look at what the child is being asked to do. Look at which skills the task needs. Notice how the child's behaviour could change when the task becomes harder. This way of looking at behaviour can change the parent or caregiver's perspective. How a child behaves is not about being naughty or resistant. It is a sign showing that the child is struggling with what needs to be done.

Each scenario gives suggestions about how to help a child who is struggling. The first suggestion is about helping in the moment. This can reduce stress and help the child. If a child is battling emotionally, it makes learning harder. The adults



should focus on making the task achievable. This could mean breaking it into smaller parts. It could also mean making instructions easy or giving visual clues. These suggestions will help the child to use the skills that they already have.

The second type of support focuses on strengthening skills to assist the child in the future. Children can develop stronger attention, memory, planning and emotional control. If children practice regularly, think about what they are doing and have guided support from adults, they will improve. Practice should happen in stress-free situations. Change will have taken place when skills are used in everyday life.

Progress does not happen quickly, so adults need to be patient. Children will not suddenly do tasks perfectly. Behaviour will not always be calm. Success happens slowly. A child may ask for help less and will be able to complete tasks by themselves. Small improvements matter.

Adults should not feel pressured to do everything perfectly. This is not possible. The chapters in the book are references that can be reread whenever needed. Strategies can be applied slowly. It is not necessary to do everything at once.

More than anything this book encourages adults to be understanding. Children are fragile. Their behaviour will change all the time. Sometimes they will manage better and then get worse. What changes is how hard tasks feel and how support is given. Adults should respond calmly, reduce stress and help children grow so that they feel more confident.

Start with the task that you feel is most important. This might be the task that is causing the most stress. Do what works and then move on to another scenario. This is how understanding grows. Every day moments are chances for growth rather than frustration.



Chapter 3: Rising and Leaving the Bed

Morning Challenges

Getting out of bed in the morning can be a real battle for a child. It might seem easy: wake up, get out of bed and start the day. But mornings are not easy. Sometimes the child will wake up early. Other days they will stay in bed and get annoyed. These changes can feel confusing for adults. The same child might be fine later in the day. What feels small later could actually feel huge for the child when the day begins.

What the Task Requires

Getting out of bed is not just a physical activity. The brain must change from rest to action. Thinking and emotional systems need to work together when energy is low. Even just sitting up involves many mental processes. A child must notice an alarm, sunlight or a parent's voice. The child will need to pay attention. Memory will hold on to the need to move and stand up. Short-term memory holds on to recent instructions. Planning and organization are needed to guide the steps of movement. The child also needs to have flexibility and problem-solving skills because the floor might feel cold. The child will struggle if any of these systems are overloaded and get distracted and feel overwhelmed.

How Behaviour Appears

On some mornings, the child will wake up and get up with little help. On other mornings, the child may need to use more effort to get up. Parents might need to give repeated reminders. If the task is too hard the child's behaviour might get worse. The child could get irritable, could start crying or could just shut down. They may need comfort or need to play in order to recover. Behaviour will show how



well they are handling the task.

Reading the Signs

The child's mental load can easily be seen in the morning. If the child gets up easily it shows there is enough capacity to handle the task. If the child is slow or distracted, clearly there is strain. Protective responses include shutdowns or outbursts. The child may need recovery behaviour to be balanced again. If parents understand this, they will respond calmly rather than with annoyance.

Why Mornings Are Hard

Waking up is hard for children because the brain needs to activate systems that might not yet be developed enough. It is hard for children to start their day if they have weak attention or memory. Early alarms, bright lights, noise and time pressure make getting up more difficult. When undeveloped skills meet high demands, there can be stress and tension.

Immediate Support

If children are struggling in the morning it makes little sense to add more pressure. Adults should support children by lowering the pressure. Calm, simple reminders work better than parents becoming irritated. If possible, give children extra time. One step instructions work better because there is less strain on children's memory and planning. Changing the lighting or noise helps children to focus. It is important to have predictable routines as then children know what is expected of them.

Adults can prompt the child with the next small step. An example would be encouraging the child to sit up and then adding that it is time to get dressed. Only give two steps if the child can cope with two steps. Gentle encouragement works well. Repeating cues helps the child internalize the order and then they can use those cues the next day.

Building Skills Over Time



To strengthen attention, memory, planning, and problem solving, use the same cues every morning. In this way the child has long term support. Encourage the child to think about stressful moments and to notice what works. Continuous prompts each morning reinforce strategies over time. When mistakes happen, focus on the skill and not the child's behaviour. This will help the child to develop problem solving skills and endurance.

Signs of Progress

Success does not depend on how quickly the child manages mornings or whether they seem happy. Success is when the child starts moving without cues and responds with more ease. Mornings will become more manageable over time. Children will learn to guide themselves using strategies that they have learned.

The Larger View

Getting out of bed each morning is not easy for children. This is because immediate action is needed. If adults understand children's thinking and emotional needs, mornings can change from a struggle into a chance to grow. Success is not about removing all difficulties. The goal is to enable children to get up and build skills to allow them to be independent and confident.



Chapter 4: Dressing for School

Morning Dressing Challenges

Mornings are stressful for children. First they have to get up and then they have to get dressed. Children are often tired in the morning and both getting up and dressing need many mental skills. Children can still feel frustrated even if their clothes are ready and they can dress alone. Sometimes children forget what their next step is and then they feel stressed. What looks easy can be quite difficult. There might be many mental demands on children at once.

What the Task Requires

When getting dressed in the morning, children need attention to notice and choose clothes. They need to ignore distractions. They need memory to help keep track of the order of steps, for example, underwear first, then pants, then a shirt. Short-term memory is needed to keep track of what is done so steps are not done again.

Children need to plan to know the order of the steps and to carry out each action. They need to sort out what is needed and what is not. Children might need to adapt and to do this they need problem-solving and flexibility. There might be missing socks or uncomfortable clothing. A small challenge like this can slow down the entire process.

How Behaviour Appears

If the child is not managing the mental demands, this will show in the behaviour. If



the task is easy, they will quickly dress without help. If it feels harder to get dressed, they might get distracted or put clothes on in the wrong order. If it feels too big a task to get dressed, the child might feel overwhelmed. This could result in refusal, shut down or crying. Some children need to play to get back control and then carry on. This is not naughtiness. This shows mental load.

Reading the Signs

The behaviour of children reflects how hard the task feels to them. If the task is easy attention, memory and sequencing skills are available. If children are distracted, there might be too much mental load. If there are emotional outbursts or withdrawal, this shows that mental demands are too high. Children could start playing or try to negotiate. These are efforts to self-regulate. This is not a child being naughty. It is a child trying to cope with the task.

Why Dressing Is Hard

Memory, sequencing, attention and sorting skills are still developing in children. If there are gaps in these areas there could be forgotten steps or difficult behaviour. Children could also withdraw or disengage. Time pressure, irritating fabrics and noise make it even harder for children to get dressed. When energy is low even competent children battle.

Helping in the Moment

The best way to help children is to lower the pressure. Get clothes ready the night before. This lowers planning demands on children. If there are fewer choices, there will be less strain on attention and memory. Always speak to children calmly. Allow extra time so that there is less panic. Changing the lighting and sound helps children to focus. Calm adults help children to progress and to use skills successfully.

Gentle prompts always help. The prompt should focus on the next step. An example could be asking which sock should be put on first or which shirt to put on. If attention is on one goal children will cope better. Doing the first step yourself will help children with coordination. Repeating the same cues every morning will allow



children to learn the sequence and eventually be able to get dressed by themselves.

Building Skills Over Time

Getting dressed is a multi-step routine and it takes time for children to master it. Adults need to give children long term support. They should support any activities that include sequencing, sorting and planning, memory and organization. Practicing activities that involve looking at progress and following steps will help children master sequences. In order to build decision making and flexibility, offer fewer choices to children.

Adults can also help children with self-reflection. Adults can ask how children knew the next step or ask them what helped them remember the different steps. During morning activities adults could guide children by asking what comes next. This means encouraging learning without adults taking over. One step at a time should be emphasized to make focus stronger.

The Larger View

Getting dressed in the morning is a complex mental task. Children usually have low energy and there is pressure because of limits of time. Adults should understand the skills that are needed to get dressed. They can then change conditions and focus on skills, not behaviour. Practice, self-reflection and support mean that mental systems will get stronger. When mental systems are stronger, children will become more independent. This will make mornings easier for both children and adults.



CHAPTER 5: Managing Morning Meals

A Common Morning Moment

Breakfast seems to be an easy part of the day. All the child has to do is sit and eat and then leave home. Breakfast can become a very difficult time. Children can eat very slowly. Children can lose focus. Children can leave the table over and over. Some children do not want the food that is offered to them. One morning can go well and the next morning may not. These changes can confuse adults. The child may seem to have a lack of interest or hunger. They just will not cooperate. Eating looks simple until it quietly asks for more than it seems. Eating actually needs thinking, control and memory. It also needs planning and emotional balance. If children do not have energy and time feels rushed, this might add to their emotional load.

The Hidden Work of Eating

Eating at a set time needs the use of many mental abilities at the same time. Children need to focus and block out noise and any movement. Children need ongoing focus to stay seated until they have finished eating. Children have to use their working memories when they have the goal of finishing their food. The short-term memory looks at actions that they have just made, for example, having a bite or drinking something. Children use planning to shape how the meal happens and which food they should eat first. Organization helps children to have access to plates, cups and tools, like knives and forks. Shared focus is used when



children listen to other people talking while they are eating. Children need to adjust their skills when food is hot or cold, even when they do not like the food they are eating. A small challenge can upset the entire routine. Breakfast may seem easy but there are heavy demands on thinking systems.

Behaviour During the Task

When children feel that the task is easy, they will eat calmly and finish on time. When the task becomes harder, children might slow down or talk often. Sometimes they will just get up and leave the table. When children feel that the task is far too demanding, they may refuse to eat or withdraw. Some children will eat very little and seem calm. Other children will be resistant and distressed. Behaviour can change every day. This does not mean that children are being naughty. It just shows that they are overloaded mentally.

What the Behaviour Communicates

How a child behaves is a reflection of how the child is experiencing a task. If a child is eating with ease, that means focus and memory are available. If the child eats slowly and needs many prompts, it shows that the effort is high but the task is possible. Emotion that is very strong shows that the demands on the child are too big. If the child gets up from the table and walks around, it could be their attempt to regain balance. This behaviour shows that the child needs to reset and gain the capacity to complete the meal.

Thinking Systems at Work

Having breakfast relies on many mental systems that work together. Focus allows children to attend to the food that they need to eat. Shared focus allows children to listen to others speaking. Continuous focus is needed to ensure that children stay sitting at the table. Children are using working memory to keep the goal in mind. Short-term memory allows them to keep track of what they are eating.



Order and speed of eating are shaped by planning. Organisation is about where items are placed. If food is presenting difficulties, adjustment skills come into play. If one system is weak the task can become slow and it can be very stressful for the children and the adults.

Why This Moment Is Hard

When children are young, they are still building skills to pace, focus and keep goals in mind. If there are gaps in these skills, it can lead to problems with eating or many reminders. Where children eat can increase the load. There can be noise and many voices. There can also be strong smells and too many choices. If adults stress children, it adds pressure. Even capable children can struggle when their mental energy is low.

Helpful Changes Right Now

Adults can lower the pressure on children by changing the setting. If children eat in quiet places, there can be fewer distractions. If there are fewer food choices, there will also be less decision strain. Calm talking allows children to focus on eating. If extra time is given, this will reduce urgency. Adults should be calm and support the process of eating. These changes will help children to eat with ease.

Building Skills Over Time

Long term support from adults strengthens children's thinking skills. Support will assist children in eating more calmly and with more ease. Structured play builds memory, focus and planning. Games with steps help with pacing for when children eat. With repeated practice, children will hold goals in mind and maintain effort. Skills that children learn while playing can become part of daily routines. Adults who try to help children to self-reflect after calm activities will become aware of how they are coping themselves. Gentle reminders from adults help



when children need to use their skills in everyday activities. Children will learn how to use strategies by themselves.

The Wider View

Eating breakfast is not just about food. It is a demanding process at a time when children are low in energy. If adults are aware of this, they will support rather than try to control children. Guidance enables children to become independent. Mornings will be calm. Families will have a better start to the day.

CHAPTER 6: Moving Out the Door and Changing Activities

A Daily Pressure Point

After finishing breakfast children might have to leave home to go to school. This becomes a very stressful moment. Children must stop what they are doing. They must collect the things they need for school. They need to move from a safe place into a new place. This seems easy. The routine often causes problems because children might refuse and not want to leave the comfortable environment of home. Some children will forget things at home. Others might be upset because they are hurried. Some children will freeze or focus on a toy to avoid leaving. These reactions are about strain rather than children being naughty. Leaving the house in the morning is more complicated than it seems.

When children leave home, they need to handle change. This might seem ordinary but there is heavy mental demand. Children must stop one focus and must complete steps in order. If children have strong feelings and there is time stress, the difficulty will increase. Leaving the home is often not smooth for children and families.

The Work Behind the Exit



When children leave in the morning there are many thinking skills that need to be used at once. Children need to focus on important items, like shoes or bags. They also have to block focus on toys and pets. Ongoing focus allows children to move without stopping. Children have to hold the aim of leaving in their working memory. Short-term memory tracks all the steps of leaving home. This prevents missed actions.

Children need to plan carefully to decide the order of the steps in leaving home in the mornings. If they are organized there will be smooth action. The child needs sorting to help decide what goes to school and what stays at home. Shared focus is necessary when the child listens while moving towards leaving. The child needs to use adjustment skills because there might be lost items that they need or it might be very cold or very hot. All systems must work together. Weakness in one area can cause overload and a simple thing like leaving home in the morning can be very stressful.

Visible Reactions

When the task feels easy, children will react and leave home with ease. They might not need the help of their parents. When children experience difficulty, that is when the delay starts. The child may feel distracted. They might forget items and reminders need to be repeated. If the demand is too heavy, strong emotions may appear. This is because when there is too much mental load, children are unable to cope.

Meaning Behind the Behaviour

How hard the change feels will be reflected in the child's behaviour. If the behaviour is smooth, it means that thinking systems are available. Slow actions show that behaviour needs effort. Complete refusal or shut down shows overload. If the child starts to play, it is an attempt to get back balance. Supporting the child shows understanding. The child is not being naughty or defiant.

Thinking Systems Involved



Leaving home smoothly requires many thinking systems. Focus chooses what matters while ongoing focus sustains action. Shared focus allows children to respond while they are moving. Working memory holds the goal while short-term memory tracks progress. Planning helps with ordering steps while organisation has to do with finding items that are needed. Sorting means that children are separating what they need from what is distracting them. Children need to adjust when they do not know exactly what is next. Weakness in one system can upset the entire process.

Why This Task Is Hard

Leaving home is challenging for children because they are still building memory, planning, flexibility and focus. If there are gaps in one of the skills, the steps of leaving home will be harder to remember. Organizing items becomes harder. Leaving preferred tasks causes distress. Outside factors and time pressure increase load. Noise and emotion can overwhelm thinking processes. Capable children even struggle under rushed conditions. If children have stronger systems, there will be reduced stress and increased independence.

Support During the Moment

Pressure will be reduced if children have kind support from adults. If children have advanced notice, they will also be more prepared. If steps are clear the demand on memory will be lower. Fewer words protect focus as well as understanding the process. Extra time will allow children to think about what they are doing and move through the necessary steps with ease. If adults are calm, children will feel calm and safe. Children will do better if there are predictable routines. These supports build success without pressurizing children.

Skill Growth Across Time

Long term support will help children with their thinking processes. It is a good idea for children to practice activities that allow them to disengage. If children practice the order of the steps, this will develop planning. Play time builds pacing and calm



thoughts build awareness. Reminders support transfer and guidance takes the place of control. Errors become learning moments. If children are prepared and sequence what they do in the morning, it means that progress is happening. Leaving home becomes easier and calmer.

The Larger Meaning

When children leave home, they need to think and they also need to control their emotions. If adults understand mental systems, they can adapt their responses to their children. Changing the conditions lowers conflict. Strategy can replace control. Over time children will gain confidence and strength. Movement between spaces becomes smoother. Struggles will be replaced by growth.



CHAPTER 7: Arriving Calmly and Starting the Day

The First Moments

When a child arrives at school or a day program, there can be difficulties. The child leaves a safe and known place and goes into a space that feels loud and busy. The child must put things down and must find a place to sit. The child must look toward the adult and then must begin an activity. These early minutes often have hidden strain. Some children need a few moments before their body seems to catch up with the room.

Some children stop at the door and others refuse to be separated from the adult that brought them. Others move into the room but then stop. They will not take their bags off their shoulders. Some children look at peers instead of the teacher. Some ask questions over and over. A few children might settle but difficulty starts as soon as more effort is needed. This is a challenging time for children because the body must calm down and attention must become more focused. The children are expected to balance and then start with activities.

The Act of Settling



Settling needs a few steps. There is separation from a caregiver and then the child needs to move through a new space. Attention moves away from home thoughts and feelings. Children have to choose where to put their things and then choose where to sit.

The child must listen to the adult and needs to block distractions. The first instruction must be remembered and then action must follow. This may be opening a book or starting a task. Each step needs the child to focus and start. Emotional control is needed and sensory input must be managed. Settling means feeling comfortable in the space and understanding what is expected. Settling means starting even though the child might feel uncertain.

What Behaviour Shows

The child's behaviour will be a reflection of how hard the task is. If there are challenges, the child will hesitate and they might move slowly. They might wander about or sit but not do anything. They might just watch others. If the demands get bigger, the child might respond with more emotion. They might start crying or clinging to an adult. They might freeze or just withdraw. Some children do what is asked but just do not engage.

This does not mean that children are naughty or immature. The demand might just be too high. If the demand is not too high, separation will be smooth. Escalation happens when there is overload and the child feels overwhelmed.

Thinking Systems at Work

Settling involves many thinking systems. Focus chooses useful information and allows distractions to fade. Ongoing focus keeps things happening. Working memory keeps instructions and short-term memory tracks steps that are finished. Planning puts actions into steps. Organisation helps with efficiency. Sorting helps to separate important information from noise. Flexible thinking helps children adapt to change and problem solving helps children cope with new routines.

Small strain in one system can slow the whole process down. Stress can rise even if children are capable.



Why Arrival Feels Hard

Many children are still building thinking skills. If children have memory limits, they will not be able to hold all the instructions. If they cannot focus properly, they will be unable to do the tasks that they are expected to do. Weak planning will slow them down. Children will become distressed if their flexibility is not good. If there is noise in the environment, the load on the children will increase. If there are unclear expectations, children could feel energy drain from them. Children who cope later may struggle at arrival.

Support During Arrival

Helpful support lowers demand. If the starting points are clear, children will know how to carry on. If they know exactly where to put their things, there will be less strain. There should be short instructions, as this helps with memory. Clear starting points guide movement. If routines are predictable, there will be less uncertainty. If conditions are supportive, children will start becoming independent. Stress and hesitation will get less.

Building Strength Over Time

If children practice, these skills will grow. Structured routine environments will help to build these skills. If there is less pressure, they will learn faster. In order to build awareness, sequence games help. If children know exactly where to put their things, organisational skills will grow. If children are encouraged to think about what they are doing, it builds self-awareness. Mistakes can become learning. Success shows when strategies transfer even if there is heightened emotion.

The Wider View

Settling into school impacts on the whole day. The shift is both mental and emotional and adults need to understand this. Children should not be judged. Children will adapt with support and they will become independent. Confidence builds. Participation becomes steady and carries on.



CHAPTER 8: Keeping Focus and Energy During Learning

Entering the Learning Phase

Once the child has settled into a learning place, this is when a different challenge starts. Teaching starts and children must focus and listen carefully. Learning needs mental engagement. Children need to learn to listen, think, read, and write even though there is noise and they feel tired. They might actually even feel bored.

The Learning Demand

When children are learning they need to use many mental skills at the same time. They need to listen carefully and block out any interruptions. Split focus is needed to get tools ready and think ahead. Active memory is busy holding on to what will happen next. Memory also needs to hold on to what has just been finished. Children need to plan to shape when new work begins. They also need to be able to solve problems and have flexibility to cope with change. All these skills have to work together.



Visible Responses

How a child is coping with a task will be reflected in their behaviour. If mental capacity is up to completing the task, the child will listen, start with the work and work smoothly. If the child has difficulty, behaviour will change. The pace of work will slow down and attention will wander. Work will not be finished and writing might be untidy. When demand is bigger than what the child is able to cope with, behaviour will shift further. Some children will even refuse to do the work. Some children will be quiet but their attention drifts. This shows that mental demand is too high. It might look like the child is working but he cannot cope with what is being expected of him.

Meaning Behind the Behaviour

Behaviour is not about the child's attitude towards the work. If the child engages with the work, it shows that mental skills are balanced. These mental skills include focus, memory, planning, organisation, sorting, problem solving and flexibility. If the child is restless, it shows that these skills are being stretched. If the child refuses to do the work, this shows protective behaviour. If the child fidgets, they are trying to recover.

If the child is ready to do the work, the mind supports listening, tracking, sequencing and starting. If there is too much strain on the child, the memory will weaken, focus will fade and planning becomes too much. These skills can collapse under load. Emotional control becomes less and every step feels heavy. The child needs to restore balance.

Mental Systems at Work

In order to learn properly, children's mental systems have to work together. Ongoing focus holds attention. Selective focus blocks distractions. Split focus allows children to listen and write at the same time. Active memory is responsible for keeping goals and directions. Memory also keeps track of steps that have just been completed. Planning and organisation help with structure and flow. Sorting helps the child to work out what is important. Problem solving and flexibility help



with adjustment after mistakes are made. Emotional control helps with frustration. When any one of the systems gets tired, all systems are affected.

Why Learning Endurance Is Hard

Children need to practice in order for their mental systems to work. If children have weak focus, memory, planning or problem solving, it makes the learning difficult. When there is too much mental demand, children's mental energy is limited. Tasks that seem easy can become too much. It is not that the children cannot do the task. It is that they do not have the mental processes to do them.

Helpful Changes During Learning

Adults need to support children with very little pressure. Small steps will lower the load on memory and planning. Clear stopping points will help focus. Instructions should be short and given once. Added instructions just cause overload. Children should have short breaks to allow them to start focusing again. Environments should have little noise or movement. Calm adults will help with effort. If the adult is frustrated, it increases the strain on the child.

Building Strength Over Time

Ongoing support will strengthen the child's systems. Growth happens better outside of stressful moments. There are activities that help with developing systems. These activities include puzzles, crafts, building and simple games. Once children can cope with the short games, longer games can be included. Repetition allows transfer into real world experiences.

Children should be encouraged to think about their activities in order to build awareness. Adults can ask questions to help them develop self-awareness. Adults should not control children. They should rather guide them. When children face difficulties, attention should be paid to what they are doing rather than how they are behaving. This helps with pacing, sequencing and self-awareness. Overtime,



independence and persistence will grow. Success does not mean perfect behaviour but rather when children are able to use strategies correctly.

Looking at the Whole Picture

Enduring focus and effort are very complex mental tasks. They are not about motivation or children being obedient. Support should focus on growth and transferring skills, not on behaviour. Children should be encouraged when trying to deal with challenging situations. Overtime, resilience will get better and frustration will lessen. This will show that mental work is becoming more possible.

CHAPTER 9: Handling Errors, Feedback, and Frustration in Learning

Facing Mistakes

Making mistakes is a very normal part of learning. A wrong answer or effort that does not lead to success can cause strong emotional reactions. A moment like this can slow a child down. The child just needs to learn to manage mistakes.

Children react to mistakes in many ways. Some children will be very frustrated and might even tear up their work. Some children will just refuse to carry on. Some might even argue or withdraw. Sometimes children will seem calm but will rush future tasks. These reactions can happen suddenly even though there was focus earlier. These children are not misbehaving. They are trying to cope and stay engaged but cope with discomfort at the same time.



The Mental Task

When children try to cope with mistakes, they are also trying to think about uncertainty. The child must see the mistake, remember the feedback, and decide what to do next. To do this, there needs to be emotional tolerance, focused attention and flexibility.

In written work, the child must fix the answers and try again. If the child makes a mistake while reading, they might have to reread or change how they read. They might have to lose old ways of doing things and try new ways. This is a challenge. The child must focus and process feedback. They must then continue even though they are frustrated.

Signs in Behaviour

If children can cope with mistakes, they will accept the feedback and carry on. They might be frustrated but they might still be able to focus. If it becomes more challenging for the child, they might hesitate, check again and ask if what they are doing is correct. The child might slow down and doubt themselves. If it is just too much for the child, they might start crying or be angry. Some children will just stop working or rush. Some might seem calm, but they are not mentally engaged

If children are distracted or start fidgeting, it could be that they are trying to recover. Behaving like this shows that there is mental strain. This is not about effort. If adults look at the behaviour carefully, they can see which mental systems they need to help with.

What Behaviour Shows

Behaviours show mental demand and not children being naughty. If children are able to adjust after making mistakes, it shows that they are ready to learn. Memory, planning, organisation, problem solving, flexibility, attention and emotional control all need to work together and well.

Mental Skills at Work



If children are to manage mistakes successfully, they need to be flexible and change strategies. They need to hold on to feedback and goals while new steps are being planned. Recent actions are tracked by short-term memory. Sustained attention helps focus after disruption. If children doubt themselves, they need to use selective attention to filter this out. Problem solving is very important. The child needs to analyze mistakes and plan what to do next. If the child is well organized, they can restructure work after they have made a mistake. To cope with frustration, children need emotional control. If the system is overloaded, the child will struggle even if they know the answers and what to do.

Why Errors Are Hard

It is difficult for children to cope with mistakes. They need to learn how to deal with this. It is difficult to cope with mistakes if there is little flexibility or emotional control. Mistakes might come across as being threatening or confusing and this does not help a child to feel secure.

It also depends on how the child is made aware of the error. If it is a public correction, the child might feel humiliated. The child might feel worse if comparisons are made with other children. In a case like this, easy tasks can feel too difficult to do. Child needs to access mental resources rather than skills.

Helping in the Moment

It is better to change the conditions when children are working rather than increase pressure. Feedback should be short and neutral. Private feedback reduces emotional load and allows children to solve problems themselves. Children should pause after mistakes to help them focus again.

Language should focus on what the child is doing and not judgment. Questions like “What could you try next?” or “How can this step change?” help with problem-solving and being flexible. Calm adults help with emotional weight.

Building Skills Over Time



Long term support will help children cope with errors and frustration. Children should practice activities like puzzles, logic tasks and simple games. These will train flexibility, memory, planning and problem solving. Adults should expect children to make mistakes, but they should correct them gently. To help children with these strategies, use games that have changing rules. These will help with attention and emotional control.

Children will be able to deal with mistakes if they practice and practice. Reflection will also help children notice their mistakes and use strategies that could work better. Questions like “What did you try after that error?” or “How did you carry when it was hard?” build awareness. Adults should try not to control children but rather support. Focus should be on skills rather than behaviour.

Success is shown when children see their own mistakes, fix them and carry on.

Seeing the Full Picture

Mistakes are chances to grow. Adults should focus on thinking strategies and not behaviour. Frustration is a learning moment. Over time children will focus, solve problems and stay engaged even when tasks are hard.



CHAPTER 10: Finishing Tasks and Completing Work

Starting the End of Work

Children can sometimes start tasks easily but have difficulties when they reach the end of the tasks. This is when children will hand in work that is not finished. The important parts of the work might be rushed or not even done. Children may report that they are finished but most of the work has not even been done.

Children's focus may drop when the hardest part of the task is over. Their energy may drop. They will feel frustrated when there is still more to do. Some children will hurry to finish but others will just not finish at all. This is not laziness. It shows how the brain is managing mental tiredness. The end of the task also needs mental control, but energy and attention are low.



The Task in Focus

When children are finishing tasks, they have to keep the goal in mind, even though their energy is low. Children might already have used their attention, memory, planning and emotional control. The last part of the task might be too demanding. Children need to remember instructions and track their progress. They might also have to correct errors and control their feelings.

Children need to work hard to see what is still left to do. They need to pace what they do and try to finish everything. This means that children have to be aware of focus, tiredness and skipped steps. They have to adjust behaviour and carry on. This needs monitoring and control. It also means managing effort.

Examples are finishing questions on a worksheet, adding a conclusion to work or finishing the last part of the problem. Children must be aware of their progress and control their effort. They also need to control emotions, like relief, boredom or frustration. This means their children need to sustain organisation, focus and effort.

Behaviour and Signals

Finishing tasks is easy for some children. They will complete all the steps, check work and hand it in to the teacher. They may be tired, but they will just carry on with the work. When children need more effort, their behaviour can change. They can slow down and will get distracted. They could also ask for help over and over or say that they have finished. Leaving out last steps is usually about tiredness, not naughtiness. When tasks are too hard, children might just stop and refuse to carry on. Some might rush the last part, make careless mistakes or just not do it. This has nothing to do with perseverance. It has to do with strain. The child may intend to complete the task but just does not have the cognitive capacity.

Understanding the Behaviour

Children's energy is stretched the most when they are completing tasks. The hardest sections need memory and planning. Sometimes children have awareness and they will notice that they are getting tired. These children will adjust their pace or change the way they are doing things.



When children reach the end of tasks, they are solving problems and checking errors. This drains energy. They might hesitate or skip steps altogether. Some children will recognize this in themselves, and they will go through the work to be sure of the next steps or reorganize how they are completing the tasks.

As children reach the end of tasks, they might be overwhelmed by tiredness and demotivated. They might rush to finish or skip steps. Children who have learned ways to cope might divide the last steps into smaller parts and pace themselves. If children have this awareness, it will allow them to adjust. This will mean that they can focus, use their memory, plan and solve problems even when they are very tired. Without these skills, work might be left undone or rushed.

Mental Skills Involved

When children finish tasks they need strong attention, while they are losing energy. They use their memories to keep the goal in mind and to track the steps that are left to be done. They use their planning and organisational skills to complete the final part of the task and manage their effort. The skill of sorting allows children to separate finished from unfinished work. Selective attention is used to block distractions. Problem solving is needed if mistakes are seen. Emotional control is needed to help with tiredness, boredom or frustration. Flexibility is needed for children to notice what is left to do. If any of these skills are weak, children might not finish effectively.

Why This Stage Is Hard

Children are still building skills to complete tasks. Attention, memory, planning and emotional control are most taxed at the end. Stress can make focus, sequencing and carrying on very difficult.

External factors make the challenge worse. Long tasks or rush increase mental load. Even simple tasks may feel too hard by the final steps.

Helpful Support



Adults should help children by changing conditions. They should not add pressure. Children need to understand that there is a beginning and an end. This will lower memory load. If children know what is finished and what is not finished, it will allow them to focus better. If children have more time, there will be less stress. Adults should give clear instructions so that children do not feel overloaded. Calm adults will help children feel safe. If adults are frustrated children will feel the strain.

Building Skills for the Future

Adults should help children to complete tasks. It is better to do this with games. Games include puzzles, short projects or any games that allow practice. This will help children to see the beginning and the end and help them to continue trying right until the very end. These activities will help skills to develop. Children should be encouraged to track their progress even when they are nearly finished. Breaking the last part into smaller steps lowers frustration. Carrying on through tiredness builds resilience. Children should check work before it is handed in.

Adults should help children to reflect because this builds awareness. Adults should ask questions about what helped, how did children establish a pace and how they managed their tiredness. It is very important to focus on skills and not how children behave. Questions should be about timing or steps as this will help children to finish what they start. Success should be measured in skills, not speed or having everything right. Children who are able to see their progress and pace themselves are showing growth.

Seeing the Whole Picture

Children sometimes struggle to finish tasks, especially when they have very little energy. If children do not finish tasks they should not be disciplined because they are not being naughty. If adults understand their children might feel overwhelmed, they should support them and help them with finishing tasks. Over time, children will start feeling more confident. This will help them to become more independent.



CHAPTER 11: Moving From School to Home and Resting

After School Moments

When school is over there is a new challenge that children need to face. They have put in a lot of effort during the school day, and all of this can now catch up with them. At school there are routines and adult guidance, and this helps with focus, self-control and socializing. At home this structure is gone. Children need to unpack, greet family, do homework or join afternoon activities. To do this they need attention, planning and self-control.

Changes in Behaviour

Behaviour can change quickly. Some children will chatter away and talk about school. Other children might cry or withdraw. Some children can be calm and become emotional later. Sometimes children are restless and silly. This can be



confusing for adults because children often behave at school. This behaviour shows a release of energy and focus.

The Mental Task

Coming home means that children need to shift mentally and emotionally. The child has moved from a structured place into one that is more flexible. The child can lower focus and self-control. They also need to change to fit in with home expectations. Attention and planning are needed to fit in with home routines. Children need to do the normal activities that they usually do at home, like unpack, answer questions, speak to brothers and sisters and start homework. These activities draw on attention, memory and planning. Children need to change their behaviour but still be alert in a new setting. Behaviour might shift.

How Behaviour Appears

If children are able to cope with the transition, behaviour will be manageable. These children might just unpack or find a quiet place. Other children might look for people to talk to. These children can cope with changes. They might seem tired, but they are able to settle. Some children have changes in behaviour and this shows that the transition is harder for them. These children might cry or argue. Some might even withdraw. Some children swing between having energy and almost falling apart. This does not mean that any of these children are naughty. It is just showing mental strain.

Tiredness can cause attention to weaken. It can also mean that memory fails and planning becomes harder. Children will then struggle with many tasks at the same time. They might not be able to unpack and talk to their brothers and sisters. When there is system overload, behaviour can become impulsive. Some children move quickly when others shut down. These patterns are protective and are to get back mental balance.

Meaning Behind Behaviour



How children behave when they come home shows the mental and emotional load that they are carrying. If children adapt with ease, this shows that there is enough mental capacity. If children are irritable, this shows that they are stretched. If they lose control, it shows that their systems are exhausted. Allowing children space will help them to get back balance. These actions are not about personality or naughtiness. They are about natural recovery. If adults can see this, they can give proper support.

Mental Skills in Play

Children use many systems when they have to change behaviour when they come home. They need to be flexible to move from school rules to home rules. They could feel tired, so they are more easily distracted. This means that focus and self-control are not sound. They have to use their memories to check their belongings and the events of the day. They have to use selective attention to filter out noise. They use divided attention when many things happen at once. They have to control themselves emotionally if they feel tired and stressed. They need to plan to do their homework even if they are tired. When systems are overloaded, the behaviour will change.

Why This Time Is Hard

Children regulate in many ways. It is important for adults to know that children are fragile after school. This means that focus, self-control and flexibility are weak. Long days, social or academic load, noise, even interactions with family members can raise expectations. Children might struggle to follow new expectations because their energy is low.

Helping in the Moment

It is important that adults support their children rather than control them. Do not have too many demands as soon as children come home. Instructions and tasks can wait until the child has calmed down. Less noise will help attention and emotion to feel better. If children are allowed to rest, they will feel better. Calm adults will allow children to feel safe. If children feel pressured, their behaviour can become worse. Adults should try to have the same after school routines because



this will reduce planning needs. This will allow children to focus, control themselves and return to normal.

Supporting Growth Over Time

To strengthen children's recovery skills, children should practice when they are rested. This will lead to long-term growth. If children apply themselves and then rest, it teaches them important lessons about tiredness, regulating themselves and balancing. Over time, this will help with improving self-control, being flexible and self-awareness.

Children's strategies can develop naturally as they gain more experience. They can recognize when they are tired and know that they need to recover. This will assist them with self-regulation. If children reflect on their behaviour, it will help with them transferring skills to different situations.

Progress does not mean there will be no difficulties. Progress can be seen when children can use strategies themselves. Children will have progressed if they need shorter recovery time. If they can communicate accurately, this also shows growth. If children can use these strategies without being told to, this shows real cognitive and emotional growth.

Seeing the Whole Picture

After school is a time for children to release energy and focus. This has nothing to do with bad behaviour. Adults need to understand the mental and emotional demands their children have had and should help them to recover. This support from parents can help children build self-awareness and the ability to cope with mental and emotional effort.



CHAPTER 12: Handling Free Time and Sudden Shifts

When Structure Drops Away

Children can have difficulty with coping with free time. Sometimes there are moments where there are no clear rules. These moments can be very difficult for children to handle. When plans change, this means that children need to change attention and possibly also change behaviour. When children must decide themselves what happens next, they can feel uncomfortable. Some children might seem confused. Others will just get stuck or be restless.

Behaviour can often change at these times. Children might look around for things to do. Others might ask questions about what they should do next. Some children do not want to change what they are doing. Sometimes children will withdraw and step away from interacting with others. These behaviours are not being naughty. These are indications of uncertainty and they are causing stress.

This chapter looks at what happens when children have to entertain themselves. It looks at free time, when children have to wait and change plans when there is no external structure.



What the Task Really Is

When children have free time, they have to create their own structure when they have been given none. Children need to decide what to do, how long to do it and when to stop. Making these decisions does not come easily. Sometimes children sit with uncertainty.

When plans change it becomes even harder for children. They have to let go of one idea and pick up another. Both these ideas can sit in their minds at the same time, creating tension. When children have time without structure, they have to plan an activity, start it and manage their feelings. They might feel bored or anxious. Planning, attention, flexibility and emotional control all have to work at the same time.

How Behaviour Appears

If children can manage spare time, they will be calm and choose an activity. They might ask a question and then start doing a task.

Behaviour will change if the demands become too great on children. Children may fidget and they might ask many questions. It will be harder for them to plan and to focus. Children might change activities and struggle to stick to one.

If the situation becomes too much, children's reactions will get stronger. Some children will not want to change what they are doing, and they might cry or argue. Some children will withdraw. This does not mean they are being naughty. It just means they do not have the capacity at that moment.

What These Reactions Mean

When children have free time, there is uncertainty. Children's behaviour will show how they handle this. If they have enough mental capacity, they will be able to use their spare time and manage their emotions. If children ask many questions or show that they are a little bit upset, it could show strain. If there are huge emotional reactions this shows overload.

If children delay starting a task or ask questions, it will help to lower the mental demand. Behaviour shows how heavy a task is rather than the child's attitude. Sometimes the child just does not know what to do.

The Skills Involved



When children have to cope with free time or sudden changes, thinking skills are involved. They need to plan so that there is order. They need their memories to keep track of choices, time and changes. Children need to be flexible to allow one idea to move away and pick up another one. When there is no clear sequence, children need to solve problems to put one in place.

Why This Is Often Difficult

Children must develop skills to manage things when they are unpredictable. Planning and emotional control are very delicate when children are stressed. When there is no external structure, children must cope and put structure in place.

Support in the Moment

Supporting children is best by changing conditions slightly rather than forcing behaviour change. Adults should give children time to recover. Setting time limits will help to reduce planning load. If adults give children warnings in advance that situations will change, this will allow mental preparation. Small choices will not overload children. These choices give direction.

Simple tools also help. These include timers, visual cues and routines. These help with structure. Adults should be calm because pressure on children can increase distress. Sometimes less means that children have space to make choices and develop.

Supporting Growth Over Time

If adults continue to support children, they will learn to handle uncertainty. Activities should not add to children's pressure. Activities can change but adults need to support children with the change. Even open-ended play with limits can help children with planning. This will reduce them feeling overwhelmed.

Children should be encouraged to gain self-awareness. Adults should assist them with self-reflection. Gentle reminders without taking control are encouraged. When children experience challenges, reflections should focus on the situation and not the child.

Seeing the Whole Picture

When children suddenly have free time or there are sudden changes, their behaviour might change. These are not behaviour problems. There are mental challenges. Adults need to support children with their planning, attention and



emotional control because then children will cope more easily. If children cope, their confidence will grow and they will eventually become independent.

When children are supported, they will learn to handle emotion and uncertainty even though there might not be structure. The skill that children need to learn is not to avoid difficulty but rather to stay present when the task is unclear.

CHAPTER 13: Handling Strong Feelings and Upset

The Situation

It can be difficult for children to handle strong emotions. Children can be calm and then suddenly start crying or even hide away. They can behave like this if they have made a mistake or if there has been a change in plans. It does not matter to children how big the event is. The reaction is more important.

Some children will show their feelings very loudly, but others might be very quiet. Some children will recover fast, but others may stay upset for a long time. Adults might assume that this is overreaction. It is not really. The behaviour shows that children's minds are under stress.

The challenge for children might not necessarily be the task. Children need to have self-awareness to understand that their emotions are taking control. Sometimes the feeling is huge, but the task is very small.



The Task

Children need to learn to handle their feelings without becoming overwhelmed. They need to learn to allow the feelings to pass and stop acting too quickly. Children should also stay present in their feelings and let the strength of the feelings pass. There are no clear steps how to do this. Children need to work out for themselves how they can control feelings. The goal is not to stop the feeling. The goal is to move through the feeling and then carry on with what needs to be done

How Behaviour Shows Stress

When the feeling is small children can talk about it. They can talk about their frustration or say how upset they are. In a situation like this, thinking is still working. As feelings grow, the mind has too much to cope with. As a result, stability is lost. Children will struggle to see different views.

It is hard for children to keep attention when they are dealing with huge emotions. Memory may fail. This makes it hard for children to explain what they need or what they feel. If the stress continues, behaviour can change. The child could shout or even withdraw. This shows that thinking, attention and memory are not working together. If stress rises even further, children will protect themselves. Some children will explode but others will just become quiet. Both these reactions show the same process. The feeling is stronger than the brain can control. Children need to have time to calm down and recover.

What Behaviour Means

Behaviour shows what the child can cope with in the moment. If children cannot slow down or name the feeling, it means that they are struggling with mental overload. Adults should support children when they see signs that their children are overwhelmed. Signs could be tense muscles or fidgeting. If adults witness this, they should start with calm guidance.

If children are aware that they are experiencing huge emotions, they can use strategies that could help them to calm down a little. If children are not aware, adults must guide children. These behaviours are not about being naughty. They show that children have been stretched beyond their limits.

Thinking Systems in Use

Emotional control is needed to cope with huge emotions but there are also other skills that children need. Children use their memories to keep strategies in their



minds while their feelings get bigger. They use their attention to move to something that feels safe. Sustained attention allows them to move to the strategy that will make them feel safe. Flexibility is needed to allow children to let go of rigid thoughts like “This is impossible” or “This should not happen.” Children need to learn to stop acting too quickly so that they can regulate their feelings. When systems fail, it is possible for feelings to explode or children can withdraw completely.

Why It Is Hard

Emotional control develops very slowly in children. When children are tired, there are high demands and it makes emotional control weaker. Emotional outbursts can happen when children have little support. When feelings are intense, it is very hard for children to be controlled. The brain focuses on protection, not learning. Adults must first help to calm children down.

Creating Safety in the Moment

When children are feeling huge emotions the best thing to do is to reduce pressure. Adults should be calm to help children to calm down. If adults escalate, it just makes the situation worse. Adults should use simple language. Complex words will be too difficult for children to cope with. Just the quiet presence of a loving adult will provide comfort. Changing the environment can help. If there is less noise and more space, children might start feeling calmer. The goal is not to get children to be compliant. The goal is to calm them down.

Building Control Over Time

Children will learn how to control their emotions in safe settings. If there is little pressure on them, they will have the chance to pause. They will also be able to name their feelings and recover. These moments will help children to be aware of their feelings. Over time, children can use these skills with less help.

After children have had strong feelings, adults should focus on not blaming them. Adults should understand what causes stress and what helps children to recover. They should support future control without children feeling ashamed. Children will



show progress when they recognize feelings and recover more quickly. Feelings will still be there, but children will be able to manage them.

The Bigger View

Strong feelings are not failures. They happen when demand is more than what children can control. Calm adults who support strategies show children that feelings can be handled. Over time, this builds resilience, awareness and the ability to stay connected during emotional challenges.

CHAPTER 14: Putting It All Together

Understanding Behaviour

Behaviour is often seen as a problem to fix. This book sees it differently. Behaviour shows what the child can manage. When a task is easy, behaviour stays calm. When it becomes hard, behaviour changes. When it is too hard, behaviour changes more. This pattern is the same for all children and situations.

This main idea is not a new trick. It is a new way to look at children. Instead of asking what is wrong, look at what the child must do. When the task is clear, behaviour makes sense. What looks like refusal or strong emotion often shows the brain is busy and tired. Sometimes the brain is too full to act the normal way.



Tasks ask children to use memory, attention, planning, flexibility, problem solving and control of feelings. Behaviour shows which skills are available. When support is good, children cope. When demands grow, behaviour shows strain. Support in the moment means adjusting tasks. Growth over time comes from building skills and helping children use them in real life. At times this understanding arrives slowly rather than all at once.

Responding to Difficulty

When a child struggles, pause first. Do not react too fast. Lower the demand if needed. Some moments need calm and safety. Some moments allow learning and practice. This way makes responses clear instead of rushed.

Helping a child now is different from building skill for later. When a child is overwhelmed, learning is not possible. Support means slowing down and making things simpler. This does not lower standards. It gives back access to skills.

Skill grows when children practise in calm, low-pressure situations. Repetition makes skills stronger. Children must use these skills in many situations so that they can improve. When children start coping in different places, growth has happened.

Progress is not only about ease or obedience. Signs of progress include when children recover faster and ask for less help. Other signs are coping with frustration. Behaviour may still vary, but underlying skills improve. These signs matter.

Relationships and Understanding

Seeing behaviour as information changes adult-child interactions. Adults are not enforcers. Children are not problems. Both work toward making tasks manageable. Children will feel safer and grow. Children will also learn better.

Challenges are normal and cannot be removed. Children must learn that mistakes and disappointment are part of life. Adults can control how they respond. They should help children without blaming them.

Everyday Pressure



Children face many demands every day. Attention, memory, planning, feelings and flexibility are needed constantly. Even small transitions test these skills. When demand grows too much, behaviour can seem unpredictable.

When children are cross or cry, it is showing mental strain. These are not refusal or bad behaviour. They are signals of the brain reaching its limit.

Strong Feelings

Frustration or anger usually happens when many skills are needed at once. Memory, attention, planning, predicting and emotional control all work together. When the brain is full, regulation fails first.

Outbursts happen during mistakes, hard tasks or slow progress. They are not failures of will. They show the brain is overloaded. Understanding this allows calm help. Emotion is information, not defiance.

Withdrawal

Some children go quiet instead of acting out. Silence is a way to reduce load. It is not refusal. It protects the brain. Reducing expectations and giving space helps. Children will learn that they are allowed to pause and wait. They are allowed to take a break and then carry on.

Anxiety and Change

Children start to feel anxious when there are too many demands on them. The brain must plan and they must remember and try to be emotionally balanced at the same time. If there is too much explanation, they can start feeling strain. Adults should give children simple, clear instructions. This will help children to manage change.

Even small changes can cause worry. Anxiety happens when the brain must plan,



remember and control emotion at the same time. Extra explanation or repeated reassurance can increase strain. Simple, clear instructions and predictable routines reduce stress. Guided support helps children learn to manage change safely.

Starting Tasks

Children often struggle to begin work. Saying “I can’t” is not refusal. It is the brain saying the task is too much right now. Starting needs memory, planning and attention. Reducing the first step helps the child succeed. Over time, children learn to start new tasks without fear.

Staying on Task

Some tasks are hard to keep doing. Children may need reminders. This is not stubbornness. The brain is trying to cope with too much. Adults should break tasks into small steps. They should also give simple instructions so children can focus. If children pause, it might be because they do not have capacity.

Fatigue and Effort

Children may start strong and then slow down. Mistakes appear, frustration grows and persistence drops. This is usually tiredness, not lack of motivation. Mental energy runs out. Support means adjusting the environment, not pushing harder. Children will become more able to endure over time.

End of Day

Evening shows the cost of a full day. A child calm at school may be irritable or withdrawn at home. This is not choice. It shows exhaustion. Adults can support recovery. They should not try to correct. Behaviour at the end of the day signals need for rest.

Moving Between Activities

Shifts between tasks are hard. The brain must stop one task and control feelings



at once. Small changes can trigger strong responses. Resistance is strain, not misbehaviour. Adults should give children clear instructions and allow them to pause when they need to. Practice in save situations builds ability over time.

Final Thoughts

Behaviour is a signal. Struggle is information. Support and skill development are different but both needed. Pressure gives way to adjustment. Reaction gives way to understanding. Children are not only helped to cope, they are given space and conditions to grow.

When Questions Have No Clear Answer

As behaviour repeats, new questions appear. Why do challenges look different each time? Why does a strategy work now but fail later? Why can a child do well with one adult and struggle with another? These questions can feel strange. Clarity seems to move away when it was almost there. Sometimes it is hard to know what is really happening.

Such questions show awareness. Behaviour does not stay the same. Thinking capacity changes from moment to moment. Not every situation fits one category. Many moments are shaped by effort, feelings, timing, place and expectations. A child may manage one day and fail the same task the next. This is not failure. It is normal for a growing brain. Sometimes it is confusing even to the grown-ups.

Differences with adults are not trickery. Each interaction asks different things from attention, emotion and flexibility. Tone, speed, safety and predictability change how much capacity is left. A strategy may work sometimes and fail at other times. It is not broken. The brain just cannot use it then. It does not mean the child is trying to trick anyone.

Seeing this allows adults to change the situation instead of chasing perfect solutions. Fatigue, overload or readiness can guide timing and expectations. This reduces stress and encourages curiosity. It may feel strange to wait, but it works.

The guides in this book are for reference. They help interpret what the brain is handling. Often seeing the pattern is enough. Asking, "What is the brain managing now?" is steadier than asking, "Why is this happening?" Children find support in steadiness.



Reflection at the End

It is easy to expect every response to be perfect. That is not the goal. Behaviour should be seen through what the brain must manage. It is not about flawless action. It is about understanding.

Challenges are not labelled. They appear as worry, confusion, frustration, or tiredness. They happen when emotions feel large or progress seems uneven. Pausing and reframing the question changes the moment. Sometimes the brain just does not cooperate.

Instead of asking how to stop behaviour, ask what the brain is asked to do. The answer rarely depends on willpower. It depends on attention, memory, flexibility, and regulation. Some days capacity is high. Some days it is low. This is not failure. It shows a nervous system growing.

Seeing these changes allows adults to respond with understanding. Moments that felt urgent become chances to observe. Space can be given when capacity is low. Growth can be encouraged when the brain is ready. Steadiness becomes a strong foundation. Children feel seen, not judged.

Hard days will come. Confusing moments remain. This framework makes these moments part of a bigger picture. Growth comes from timing, safety, and understanding.

Questions and Situations

Some questions return often. What makes big emotional reactions happen? Why does the child go quiet? Why does panic appear when the next step is unclear? Why do children say "I cannot" before trying? Why do they need many reminders? Why do they give up near the end? Why do things fall apart at the end of the day? Why are transitions hard?

Answers are in different scenarios. They explain the brain's demands and give ways to support children. Sometimes noticing patterns is enough. Support follows naturally when the brain's load is clear. Sometimes adults notice things too late.



Understanding Emotional and Behavioural Responses

Children face pressures every day. They have to cope with frustration and often worry about situations. Parents notice when children react strongly. Parents also notice when reactions seem to happen with little reason. Outbursts or withdrawal do not just happen by chance. They show limits in attention, emotion and effort. They show that children are not coping.

Daily life asks for coordination. Adults should help children cope with planning for mornings. Children need to focus and use memory for school. Transitions ask for flexibility. Even play asks for regulation. When demands are too high, behaviour changes.

Strong Reactions

Frustration triggers strong reactions. Multiple systems work at once. Attention must stay, steps must be remembered, effort must continue and feelings must be controlled. Regulation fails first. Crying, yelling or refusing show that capacity is exceeded.

Reducing demand is more helpful than asking about the emotions that children feel. If tasks are simple, children will recover. Practice with small frustration strengthens regulation over time. Children learn coping while staying capable.

Quiet Withdrawal

Some children withdraw silently. They become quiet or stop speaking. This is not stubbornness. It is a way to reduce demand.

If adults ask too many questions, children might withdraw even further. Adults need to use a few words and give clear structure to help children. Over time children will withdraw less because their confidence will grow. Sometimes children withdraw for no clear reason and adults should be sensitive as this is an indication of cognitive load.

Anxiety from Uncertainty



If change happens, children can feel very anxious. Even small differences can feel overwhelming. This shows that children's brains might be struggling with vague instructions. If there are predictable routines, children's anxiety will lessen. If there are clear steps and structure, this helps children's brains to plan. Small changes can help children to build flexibility. The goal should not be to take away all vagueness but rather to help children manage it.

Difficulty Starting

"I cannot" often appears before starting. It is not refusal. It shows the brain finds starting too hard. Planning, effort and success must be decided before acting. Too much makes avoidance protective.

Support at the first step matters most. Clear and simple steps make starting possible. Children gain trust in their ability to begin with practice.

Delay and Repetition

Children may delay or need reminders. This is not ignoring instructions. The brain struggles to hold steps and plan. Adults should allow children to pause. This will reduce load. Reducing memory load helps children focus and stick to tasks. Independence grows as tasks become manageable. Sometimes reminders just confuse further.

Fatigue and Effort Collapse

Focus can drop over time. Mistakes increase. Frustration rises. Mental energy is low. Pushing harder does not help.

Adults should help children by making the tasks shorter. They should also help them by teaching them how to pace their work. Children can build cognitive strength when the tasks they are given to do match what they are able to do.



End-of-Day Behaviour

Even children who do well at school may struggle at home. Behaviour shows exhaustion, not defiance. Adults should allow children time to recover and balance. When there is routine and calm, this helps children to reset. They might also need to rest. Children will learn what their limits are and adults should respect this.

Transitions

Shifts between tasks are demanding. Attention must leave one task and prepare for another. Change can feel too much when energy is low.

Adults should help children to transition between tasks. They can do this by structuring time and giving clear prompts. The more children practice, the better their flexibility becomes. Children learn to adapt when they are able to cope with what they are being asked to do.

Beginning and Focus

Starting tasks may feel blocked even when the child wants to act. Planning and memory are often full. Distractions increase strain. Clear starting points and calm conditions allow action. Attention may lock onto small details. Moving forward feels hard.

Adults should help children to refocus without blame or without criticizing them. Children will learn how to prioritize themselves in a safe environment.

Multiple Instructions

Many instructions at once are hard. The brain must hold, order and act on them. Steps may be missed. This looks like defiance but it is overload.

Slowing instructions helps. One step at a time is easier. Visual reminders reduce memory load. Practice increases capacity over time. Sometimes children forget the first step before the second even starts.



Sudden Change

Unexpected changes feel hard. The brain must reorganize and manage feelings. Attention must shift. Expectations must adjust.

Calm explanation and warning help. Focus on the next step. Adults should speak clearly and offer children comfort if they need it. Games and practice strengthen flexibility. Reflection on success builds confidence.

Daily Routines

Routines ask for attention, organisation and regulation. Children can feel frustrated and tired. Adults should try to understand when children are overloaded and then help them to balance.

Morning Routines

The start of the day means children need to get up and be organised. Some mornings feel overwhelming. Tasks like dressing or preparing for school require momentum. Hesitation or avoidance shows uncertainty.

Adults can help children reduce stress. They can do this by having the same routine every day. Adults could also have visual schedules or even checklists. If adults are calm and they guide children, children will engage more easily. When there are clear routines, children will feel confident that they are coping.

Homework and Tasks

An enormous amount of effort is needed for children to complete homework. When children are tired, they have less control over what they are doing. If they



break work into smaller parts, this helps. Having short breaks helps them to focus better. If adults are calm, children will learn that doing homework is something that they can cope with.

Transitions

When children have to move from one activity to another, there can be stress. Children can resist change. Adults can help by giving cues. When children practice changing tasks, it will become easier for them.

End-of-Day Tasks

Evenings can be difficult for children because the strain of the whole day has added up. During the evening it will be difficult for children to complete tasks. Adults need to support children by having calm routines and allowing children to recover. Children will learn about their own limits and will be able to move smoothly from working hard to resting.

Closing Perspective

Children's behaviour shows what they are able to cope with. It is not a reflection of their character. If children are not coping, they will react strongly. These reactions could be outbursts or children could withdraw. If adults understand this, the focus will move from correction to supporting children. Adults can support children by changing routines and expectations. They can also help children with pacing by using time limits. These are all opportunities for children to grow. Progress might be slow. Children grow when the environment that they are in matches what they are capable of doing. Sometimes things look messy, but growth is possible.

Table of Common Questions and Scenarios

Common Question	Linked Scenario(s)
Why Does My Child Have Such Big Emotional Reactions?	Managing Emotional Reactions and Frustration (page 68); Managing Mistakes, Feedback, and Frustration During Learning (page 47)



Why Does My Child Go Quiet or Withdraw When Things Feel Hard?	Managing Emotional Reactions and Frustration (page 68)
Why Does My Child Panic When They Don't Know What's Going to Happen Next?	Waking Up and Getting Out of Bed (page 7); Managing Unstructured Time and Unexpected Change (page 64)
Why Does My Child Say, "I Can't" Before Even Trying?	Waking Up and Getting Out of Bed (page 7)
Why Does My Child Delay, Avoid, or Need So Many Reminders?	Waking Up and Getting Out of Bed (page 7) Sometimes reminders just seem to make things worse.
Why Does My Child Give Up Easily or Fall Apart Near the End?	Completing Tasks and Finishing Work (page 54)
Why Does Everything Fall Apart at the End of the Day?	Transitioning From School to Home and Decompression (page 59) Sometimes the meltdown is not explained.
Why Does My Child Struggle with Transitions or Changes?	Leaving the House and Managing Transitions (page 28); Managing Unstructured Time and Unexpected Change (page 64)

Summary

This book explains how learning readiness, focus, behaviour and emotional control develop together rather than separately. It shows that many learning difficulties are not caused by poor motivation or attitude but by mental systems being overloaded or not yet strong enough. Sometimes the problem is not effort but access to effort, which sounds odd but matters.

Early chapters describe how attention, memory, planning and emotional regulation shape a child's ability to learn. These skills do not switch on automatically. They grow slowly and can work well one day and poorly the next, which can be confusing for adults watching from the outside. The same task can feel manageable in the morning and impossible later on, even when nothing obvious has changed and that can be hard to explain properly.

Learning becomes harder for children. They then need to focus for longer and follow instructions. They must also organise materials and cope when they feel frustrated. When mental energy drops, behaviour often changes first. Movement,



distraction, rushing or avoidance are described as signals of strain rather than defiance. This idea can feel uncomfortable at first because it asks adults to look past behaviour and consider load, which is not how people usually think about it.

The book explains that sustained learning requires cooperation between several mental systems at once. If one system weakens, the whole process becomes harder. A child may know the work but still struggle to complete it. This is where learning often breaks down quietly rather than dramatically and it can feel like it happens without warning.

This book has many suggestions for how to support children. Adults should change conditions rather than putting more pressure on children. Changing conditions could mean breaking tasks into smaller units. It could also mean just having a calm adult present to offer comfort. If there are predictable routines, children will know what is expected of them and mental demand will be less. These changes do not remove challenge but make challenge usable. It is not fast work and sometimes it feels slower than expected.

Skill building is described as something that happens best outside moments of stress. When children are playing games, it is an ideal opportunity for them to develop skills because there is little stress. The more children practice, the more they will strengthen their cognitive skills. It might not look like progress is happening because progress is slow but steady.

This book emphasizes that children should not be controlled. It also emphasizes that children should be given structure in order to assist them. When children feel understood and supported, their resilience will grow. When adults respond to behaviour with curiosity instead of urgency, learning becomes more stable. This approach supports long term independence even though it requires patience and some trust in the process, which is not always easy to sit with.

