

## Understanding why children “act out” and how to help in ways that actually work

(For teachers, support staff, SENCOs, pastoral teams, and school leaders)

This guide explains using **neurobiology and psychological theory**, why children’s behaviour can escalate under stress, why this is especially common in **SEND (including autism/ADHD)**, and what schools can do to reduce distress and improve learning, safety, and relationships.

This approach is **not** “soft on behaviour.” It is **science-led behaviour support**: you change outcomes by addressing the *systems that generate behaviour*—stress, threat perception, sensory load, executive functioning, attachment needs, and emotional regulation.

### 1) Key idea: behaviour is communication under stress

When children are calm, they can:

- think
- reflect
- take perspective
- use language
- accept feedback

When children are stressed, they may:

- fight (shout, hit, refuse)
- flee (run, avoid, hide)
- freeze (shutdown, silent, “blank”)
- fawn (over-please, mask, agree then melt down later)

These are not “attitudes.” They are **survival responses** driven by the nervous system.

### 2) The neurobiology behind behaviour

#### 2.1 The “upstairs/downstairs brain” (functional model)

- **Prefrontal cortex (PFC)**: planning, impulse control, flexible thinking, language, learning from consequences.
- **Limbic system (amygdala + related circuits)**: threat detection, emotional salience, memory tagging.
- **Autonomic nervous system (ANS)**: physiological arousal (heart rate, breath, muscle tone).

When threat is detected:

- the **amygdala** increases urgency and arousal
- the ANS shifts into **sympathetic activation** (fight/flight)
- the PFC becomes less available (“offline”)

**Translation for school:**

If a child is in fight/flight/freeze, **reasoning, sanctions, and lectures will not teach.** The learning brain is offline.

**2.2 Stress systems: HPA axis and cortisol**

Repeated or intense stress activates the **HPA axis** (hypothalamus–pituitary–adrenal), increasing cortisol and keeping the system “on alert.” Over time this can lead to:

- irritability
- reduced frustration tolerance
- sleep disruption
- attention difficulties
- explosive reactions to small triggers

**Translation for school:**

Some children arrive already “half full” of stress before first lesson.

**2.3 Executive function (EF) and working memory**

Executive functions include:

- inhibition (stopping impulses)
- cognitive flexibility (shifting plans)
- working memory (holding instructions)
- emotional control

Stress and SEND can reduce EF capacity quickly. Tests, time pressure, and observation demands can overload working memory and trigger distress.

**Translation for school:**

A child may “know it” but cannot *access it under pressure*.

**2.4 Interoception and alexithymia**

Many children, especially autistic children, have differences in:

- **interoception** (noticing internal body signals)
- **alexithymia** (difficulty identifying/labeling feelings)

They may not feel “a bit anxious.” They go from fine to overwhelmed quickly.

**Translation for school:**

By the time you see anger, the child may already be in physiological overload.

**3) Psychological theory that explains “big reactions”****3.1 Emotional regulation and co-regulation**

Children learn regulation through **co-regulation**:

- a calm adult nervous system helps a child's nervous system settle
- over time, this becomes self-regulation

**Key principle:** “Regulate first, teach later.”

### 3.2 “Underdeveloped drives” (developmental + emotional model)

A **drive** is a basic motivational/emotional need (not a “want”), such as:

- safety
- attachment/connection
- autonomy/control
- predictability
- competence/status (not feeling embarrassed)
- fairness/justice
- sensory comfort

When a drive is **overwhelmed** or not yet well regulated, it emerges as **instinctive behaviour** (fast, automatic, non-verbal).

That's why children show stress as behaviour rather than words.

#### **Translation for school:**

“What looks like defiance is often a drive for safety/control under threat.”

### 3.3 Defence mechanisms (protecting the self under threat)

Under stress, children may use unconscious “ego defences,” such as:

- avoidance (won't start work)
- denial/minimising (“don't care”)
- projection (“teacher hates me”)
- externalising blame (protects shame)
- shutdown/dissociation (“not here”)

These are protective, not manipulative.

#### **Translation for school:**

Don't punish the defence. Support the underlying need and build skills.

### 3.4 The “window of tolerance”

Children learn best inside a manageable arousal range:

- too low: shutdown, disengagement
- too high: fight/flight, explosive behaviour
- just right: learning, connection, problem-solving

#### **Translation for school:**

Your job is to help the child return to the window—then teach and repair.

#### 4) Why SEND children are at higher risk of stress-based behaviour

Children with autism/ADHD/SEND may have:

- sensory processing differences (noise, light, touch, crowding)
- reduced predictability tolerance
- slower processing speed
- language drop-off under stress
- heightened threat perception (social/being watched)
- difficulty shifting tasks
- intense “all-or-nothing” emotional states

**Important:** This is not a character issue. It’s a **neurodevelopmental load** issue.

#### 5) Common school triggers and what they mean neurobiologically

##### 5.1 Tests and performance tasks

Why tests trigger stress:

- time pressure → sympathetic activation
- being observed → social threat circuits
- fear of failure → shame threat
- uncertainty → amygdala activation
- working memory overload → EF collapse

**What staff may see:**

- anger, refusal, “I hate this,” ripping paper
- leaving seat repeatedly
- silly behaviour to escape shame
- freezing, blank staring, tears

##### 5.2 “Being watched” / high scrutiny

Some children experience direct observation as threat:

- increased self-consciousness
- fear of mistakes
- masking fatigue
- social evaluation stress

**What helps:**

- reduce hovering
- side-by-side support
- private feedback
- opt-in check-ins (“Do you want me close or a bit further?”)

##### 5.3 Transitions and unpredictability

Transitions load EF and uncertainty systems:

- end of break → sudden demand shift
- change of teacher/room → novelty stress
- timetable change → predictability drive threatened

**What helps:**

- visual schedule
- “what’s changing/what’s staying the same”
- pre-warning and countdown
- transitional objects or roles (helper job)

**6) A practical school model: Prevent → Respond → Repair**

**6.1 Prevent (reduce load before behaviour occurs)**

**Universal adjustments (good for all children)**

- predictable lesson structures (“first–then–next”)
- clear success criteria
- short instructions + visual support
- reduced public correction (protects shame)
- consistent routines and calm transitions
- movement and hydration opportunities

**Targeted adjustments (for higher-need children)**

- sensory supports (ear defenders, seating choices, reduced glare)
- planned breaks (not earned breaks—regulated breaks)
- reduced demand density (chunking tasks)
- processing time before answers
- alternative output methods (typing, scribe, oral response)
- “safe exit” plan (agreed place/person)

**6.2 Respond (what to do in the moment)**

**When a child is escalating**

**Goal:** reduce threat and return to regulation.

**Do:**

- lower voice; slow pace
- use fewer words
- give space (if safe)
- offer simple choices (control without negotiation)
- remove audience pressure
- keep instructions concrete and brief

**Say things like:**

- “I can see this feels too much.”
- “You’re safe. Let’s take a pause.”
- “Do you want space or do you want me nearby?”
- “We’ll sort the work after your body feels calmer.”

**Avoid:**

- “Why are you doing this?”
- “Calm down now.”
- public demands
- threats or consequences in peak arousal
- arguing about facts

**If behaviour becomes unsafe**

Use your safeguarding policy and trained procedures. Still keep language minimal and non-escalatory:

- “I won’t let you hurt anyone.”
- “We’re moving to the calm space.”

**6.3 Repair (after the storm)**

Once the child is calm, repair is where learning happens.

**Steps:**

1. **Reconnect:** “I’m glad you’re back with me.”
2. **Name** the pattern (not blame): “Your body went into stress mode.”
3. **Identify** likely triggers: pressure, noise, fear of mistakes, being watched.
4. **Plan** for next time: a cue + a strategy + a staff response.
5. **Restore dignity:** avoid shame, sarcasm, public post-mortems.

**Restorative script:**

- “What did your body feel first?”
- “What made it worse?”
- “What would help earlier next time?”
- “What can I do differently to help you stay in the window?”

**7) Practical strategies for tests week (high-impact)**

**For the classroom**

- offer a quieter seat or smaller room if possible
- allow a non-obvious fidget/squeeze item
- reduce “walk-around” invigilation near the child
- provide clear time markers (e.g., “10 minutes left” can spike threat—use gentle pacing)
- allow micro-breaks (30–60 seconds) without penalty

- give permission to pause: “If your brain jams, put your pencil down and breathe.”

#### **Reasonable adjustments that often matter most**

- extra time
- reduced number of questions
- breaks
- alternative method (oral, typing, scribe)
- separate room / reduced observation

#### **8) How to understand “anger” correctly in SEND**

Anger often protects:

- fear of failure
- sensory overwhelm
- shame (“I can’t do it”)
- loss of control
- social threat (“being watched”)

#### **School takeaway:**

Treat anger as a **signal**, then look for the earlier signs:

- agitation
- avoidance
- perfectionism
- physical complaints
- increased fidgeting
- irritability

Intervene early = fewer incidents.

#### **9) What schools should document (so support is consistent)**

A simple, useful pattern log:

- **Trigger** (demand, noise, observation, time pressure)
- **Early signs** (fidgeting, refusal, tense posture)
- **Escalation** (shouting, leaving seat, ripping paper)
- **De-escalation that worked** (space, choice, break, quiet)
- **Recovery time** (how long until back in window)
- **Repair plan** (what we’ll do next time)

This keeps responses consistent and reduces “guesswork discipline.”

#### **10) Partnership with parents (best practice)**

Schools and parents succeed when they share:

- what triggers look like early

- what regulation strategies work
- what language the child responds to
- what increases shame or threat

**Avoid framing** incidents as “compliance issues.”

Use shared language:

- “stress response”
- “overload”
- “regulation”
- “support plan”
- “reasonable adjustments”
- “return to learning”

### **11) Staff wellbeing matters**

Supporting dysregulated children is demanding. The science applies to staff too:

- your nervous system influences theirs
- teams need predictable scripts and routines
- debrief after incidents reduces burnout and inconsistency

A regulated team is an intervention.

### **12) Quick-reference: staff cheat sheet**

#### **If the child is escalated**

- **Less talk**
- **Lower tone**
- **Reduce demands**
- **Offer choice**
- **Remove audience**
- **Regulate first**

#### **If the child is calm again**

- **Repair**
- **Plan**
- **Restore dignity**
- **Teach a strategy**
- **Adjust the environment**

#### **Final message**

Children do well when they can. When they can't, it's usually because:

- the nervous system is overloaded,
- key emotional drives are threatened (safety/control/predictability/competence),

- and regulation skills are not accessible under stress.

A school that understands this does not “excuse behaviour.”  
It **changes the conditions that produce it** and gets better outcomes.