



Understanding Behaviour Through a Curious Lens

A Brain–Body Perspective for Families at The Nurturing Hand

A Gentle Reframe

At The Nurturing Hand, we start with a simple but powerful belief: your child is not giving you a hard time - they are having a hard time.

When children show behaviours such as meltdowns, shutdowns, refusal, aggression, withdrawal, or constant movement, it can feel confusing, overwhelming, and deeply personal for parents. Many families are told their child is being “naughty”, “defiant”, “lazy”, or “manipulative”. Modern neuroscience tells us something very different.

Behaviour is not a reflection of poor parenting or a child choosing to be difficult. Behaviour is a communication. It is the body and brain’s way of saying, *“Something inside me is not feeling safe, settled, or supported right now.”*

This handout invites you to step away from blame and towards curiosity. When we change how we see behaviour, we change how we support children - and that changes outcomes.

What Behaviour Really Is

Behaviour is what we see on the outside, but it is driven by what is happening on the inside. A child’s brain and nervous system are constantly taking in information from three places:

- their **body** (hunger, tiredness, pain, sensory input)
- their **environment** (noise, expectations, transitions, demands)
- their **relationships** (tone of voice, facial expression, connection)

When these systems feel balanced and safe, children can access their thinking brain. They can listen, learn, problem-solve, and cooperate. When they do not feel safe, the nervous system shifts into survival mode – and behaviour changes.

A helpful phrase to remember:

Regulated, connected children who feel safe behave well.

This does not mean children are calm all the time. It means their nervous system has enough support to stay within a manageable range, even when emotions are big.

Connection and Protection: Two Brain States



The brain operates in two main modes:

Connection Mode

When a child feels safe and supported:

- the thinking brain is online
- learning and communication are possible
- impulse control is stronger
- cooperation comes more naturally
- play, creativity, and curiosity emerge

Protection Mode

When a child's brain detects danger (real or perceived):

- the survival brain takes over
- fight, flight, freeze, or shutdown behaviours appear
- logic and reasoning are unavailable
- behaviour becomes reactive, not intentional

In protection mode, a child is not being oppositional – they are **protecting themselves**.

This is why consequences, lectures, or reasoning often do not work in the heat of the moment. The brain simply cannot access those skills until safety and regulation return.

Felt Safety: Why It Matters More Than Logic

Safety is not just about being physically safe. It is about **felt safety** - how safe the body *experiences* a situation.

Two children can be in the same environment and experience it very differently. What feels manageable to one nervous system may feel overwhelming to another.

Felt safety is influenced by:

- predictability
- relational connection
- tone of voice and facial expression
- sensory input
- internal body states (fatigue, hunger, illness)

When felt safety is present, behaviour improves not because a child is “trying harder”, but because their nervous system is supported.

Regulation Is Not Calm or Compliance

A common misunderstanding is that regulation means being calm, quiet, or compliant. In reality, a child can look calm on the outside and still be highly dysregulated on the inside.



Regulation means balance. It is the nervous system's ability to reach the *right state of arousal* to meet the demands of the activity or environment.

Another way to think about regulation is this:

Is my child's energy, attention, and emotional state well-matched to what is being asked of them right now?

For example:

- Sitting and listening requires a very different state of arousal than playing on the playground
- Learning something new requires more alertness than watching a familiar show
- Being in a noisy classroom requires more nervous system capacity than being at home

When a child's arousal level matches the demand, participation becomes possible.

A regulated child may:

- feel angry but stay present
- feel excited without losing control
- feel upset and still accept support

Upregulation and Downregulation

Regulation does not mean staying in one state all day. Children naturally move *up* and *down* in arousal depending on what they need.

Upregulation happens when a child needs *more* energy or alertness to participate. This may look like:

- movement, jumping, or climbing
- increased noise or vocalising
- seeking intensity, speed, or pressure
- appearing fidgety or restless

Upregulation helps the brain become more alert, organised, and ready to engage.

Downregulation happens when a child has *too much* energy or stress in their system. This may look like:

- seeking quiet, stillness, or closeness
- slowing down, withdrawing, or resting
- needing deep pressure, cuddles, or containment
- avoiding additional demands

Downregulation helps the nervous system settle and recover.

Neither upregulation nor downregulation is good or bad. They are simply tools the nervous system uses to find balance.



Some children need movement, noise, pressure, or intensity to regulate. Others need rest, quiet, or closeness. Many children need a *combination* across the day.

There is no single “right” way to regulate. Regulation is individual, dynamic, and changes based on the child, the context, and the demand.

Becoming a Behaviour Detective

Instead of asking:

“How do I stop this behaviour?”

We invite you to ask:

“What is my child’s nervous system telling me?”

Curiosity shifts us from reacting to understanding.

Helpful detective questions include:

- What was happening **before** the behaviour?
- What does my child’s body look like during the behaviour?
- What helps them settle **after**?
- Is my child overwhelmed, under-stimulated, disconnected, or exhausted?

Remember: **there is always a reason behind behaviour**, even if it is not immediately obvious.

The Hidden Drivers Behind Behaviour

Challenging behaviour is rarely caused by one thing. Often, multiple factors interact at the same time.

Some common influences include:

- sleep quality and routines
- hunger, digestion, or gut discomfort
- sensory overload (noise, light, movement, crowds)
- emotional stress or anxiety
- demands exceeding current capacity
- changes, transitions, or uncertainty
- relational disconnection

When one area is strained, the whole system works harder. Behaviour is often the first sign that something needs attention.

Why Adult Regulation Matters

Children borrow regulation from the adults around them.



Your calm presence, tone of voice, facial expression, and pacing send powerful safety signals to your child's nervous system. This does not mean you have to be calm all the time – repair and reconnection matter more than perfection.

When adults slow down, soften, and stay curious, children's nervous systems are more likely to settle.

What Actually Helps at Home

Supporting behaviour means supporting the nervous system first.

Helpful strategies may include:

- connection before correction
- reducing demands during dysregulation
- predictable routines and transitions
- movement, pressure, or sensory input that meets your child's needs
- validating feelings without needing to fix them
- staying present during big emotions

Instead of focusing on stopping behaviour, focus on **building capacity** over time.

Behaviour Is an Invitation, Not a Problem to Eliminate

At The Nurturing Hand, we see behaviour as an **invitation to understand, connect, and support** – not something to control, manage, or eliminate.

When behaviour is approached only as something to be stopped or fixed, we often reach for quick solutions: scolding, consequences, rewards, or strategies designed to make the behaviour disappear. While these approaches may sometimes change what we see on the surface, they rarely address *why* the behaviour is happening. This is what we call a band-aid approach – it covers the behaviour without tending to the underlying need.

Behaviour is information. It is the child's most effective way of communicating when words, skills, or nervous system capacity are not yet available. Instead of asking, *"How do I manage this behaviour?"* we invite families to ask:

- What is my child communicating right now?
- What might their nervous system be responding to?
- What support is missing or needed in this moment?

When we shift from managing behaviour to **exploring behaviour**, our responses change. We become more curious, less reactive, and more connected. We start supporting the nervous system rather than fighting against it.

This does not mean there are no boundaries or expectations. It means boundaries are held through connection and safety, not fear or punishment. Children learn best when they feel understood, not controlled.



Over time, when the nervous system feels supported and safe, behaviour changes naturally, not because a child was forced to behave, but because they *can*.

A Final Reassurance

Progress is not linear. Some days will feel easier than others.

Behaviour does not define your child, and it does not define you as a parent.

When we slow down, get curious, and respond to what behaviour is communicating, we build trust, capacity, and long-term regulation – not just short-term compliance.

At The Nurturing Hand, we believe that understanding comes before change, and connection comes before correction.

When children feel safe, supported, and understood, growth follows.

