



Understanding Challenging Behaviour at Home

Supporting children and young people through moments of distress

Behaviour is Communication

When a child or young person presents with challenging behaviour, it is important to consider **what the behaviour may be communicating** rather than focusing only on stopping the behaviour.

Sometimes children and young people may not have the words, skills, or emotional capacity to explain that they feel overwhelmed, worried, frustrated, or unsafe. Their behaviour may be their way of communicating that something feels too difficult.

Challenging behaviour is often a sign of distress, not a deliberate choice to be difficult.

 Think about...	Instead of asking...
What is the behaviour communicating?	"Why are they behaving like this?"
What might they be finding difficult?	"How do I stop this behaviour?"
What support does their body and brain need?	"How do I make them comply?"

Sensory Needs

"My body feels overwhelmed"

Some children and young people experience sensory information differently. Sounds, touch, movement, crowds, smells, or changes in their environment may feel overwhelming. Others may seek additional sensory input because it helps their body feel calm, organised, and ready to engage.

 What you may notice	 What it may mean
Covering ears, avoiding noise, becoming distressed in busy places	The environment may feel too overwhelming
Seeking movement (jumping, running, crashing, bouncing)	Their body may need movement to feel regulated
Touching objects, exploring textures	They may be seeking tactile input
Chewing objects or seeking food	They may benefit from oral sensory input

Becoming distressed during changes or unexpected events	They may need more predictability and preparation
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How adults can help

Support strategy	Example
Identify sensory triggers	Notice when, where, and why distress happens
Provide sensory regulation opportunities	Movement breaks, quiet spaces, sensory tools
Reduce unnecessary sensory demands	Reduce noise, simplify the environment
Prepare for sensory challenges	"Assembly will be noisy. Let's take your ear defenders."
Respect sensory behaviours	Recognise these may help the child regulate

Helpful language:

- "The noise feels too much. Let's help your body."
- "Your body needs a quiet moment. I am here."

Emotional Needs

"I cannot explain how I feel"

Some children and young people find it difficult to recognise, understand, and communicate their emotions. When feelings become intense, they may struggle to explain what has happened or ask for help.

 What you may notice	 What may be happening
Crying, shouting, swearing	They may feel overwhelmed and unable to communicate
Hitting, kicking, pushing, throwing objects	They may be communicating distress
Saying "I don't know"	They may not yet understand what they are feeling

 What you may notice	 What may be happening
Becoming quiet or withdrawing	They may be shutting down to cope

How adults can help

Before distress	During distress	After distress
Teach emotional language	Stay calm and reassuring	Reflect together
Practise coping strategies	Reduce demands	Explore what helped
Help identify body signals	Provide co-regulation	Plan for next time

Helpful language:

- “I can see this feels really hard.”
- “You are safe. I am here.”
- “Let’s help your body feel calm.”

The Stress Response

Fight, Flight, or Freeze

When a child feels overwhelmed, their brain may move into a protective state. At these moments, they may have reduced access to thinking, problem-solving, listening, and self-control.

This is an **automatic response from the nervous system**.

Response	What it may look like	What the child may need
 Fight	Shouting, swearing, hitting, kicking, pushing, throwing	Safety, calm adults, reduced demands
 Flight	Running away, avoiding, leaving, hiding	Reassurance, space, predictable support
 Freeze	Going quiet, shutting down, not responding	Time, patience, fewer questions

Helpful adult responses

Avoid	Try instead
Long explanations during distress	Use short, calm phrases
Asking lots of questions	Give time and space
Punishing the emotional response	Support regulation first
Expecting problem-solving immediately	Talk when calm

Helpful language:

- “You are safe.”
- “I am here to help.”
- “We can work this out together.”

Helping Children Develop New Skills

When children are calm, trusted adults can support them to understand their experiences and develop new ways of communicating.

Help children explore	Example questions
What happened?	“What was difficult?”
Feelings	“How did you feel?”
Body signals	“Where did you feel it in your body?”
Support strategies	“What helped your body feel calmer?”

Children can practise:

- ✓ Asking for help
- ✓ Asking for a break
- ✓ Using words, pictures, or signals
- ✓ Recognising emotions
- ✓ Choosing regulation strategies

Remember

 Instead of seeing...	Consider...
“They are being difficult”	“They may be experiencing difficulty”

 Instead of seeing...	Consider...
"They are refusing"	"Something may feel too overwhelming"
"They are choosing this behaviour" "Their brain may be responding to stress"	

Behaviour is communication.

Children and young people are not trying to give adults a hard time; they are often experiencing a hard time.

When adults respond with curiosity, compassion, and consistency, children are more likely to feel safe, understood, and supported to develop emotional regulation and communicate their needs.