

 Sarah Emerson

CHILDHOOD UNDERSTOOD

Keys to behaviour and big
feelings in the early years



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KEYS TO BEHAVIOUR AND BIG FEELINGS
IN THE EARLY YEARS

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CONTENTS



Acknowledgements.....	vii
Introduction.....	1
1 Keys to behaviour	6
2 Foundations of wellbeing	21
3 All about feelings	39
4 Understanding complex behaviours	53
5 Creating emotionally safe environments.....	68
6 Being a child's safe person	88
7 Emotionally safe communication.....	103
8 Co-regulation in action.....	120
9 Supporting specific challenges	135
10 Activities and play experiences	154
Conclusion.....	170
Books and resources.....	172
References.....	174
Index.....	180

INTRODUCTION

Welcome...

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Welcome to *Childhood Understood*. If you have picked up this book, chances are you are working with young children or are a parent or caregiver.* It is also highly likely that you are encountering some challenges around behaviour and big feelings. The good news is that you have come to the right place, and I am delighted you have found this book!

When I started teaching, I was taught that dysregulated behaviour was mainly about attention seeking and boundaries. I was told that if children couldn't manage their behaviour, they should be asked to sit out until they could. The approach was one of firm adult control.

A couple of years into my career, one warm summer day, I wandered into a bookshop in Hampstead, North London. A book that brought together child development, neuroscience, and parenting leapt out at me. I picked it up, started to learn about the brain, and didn't look back. I had found information that connected intuitively with how I wanted to work with children.

I began a journey into learning about regulation and co-regulation; about how our communication affects children; about the importance of movement in regulation; attachment and how to talk with children about feelings.

Since those early days of my career, I have been diagnosed as autistic and having ADHD, and have become a mother to a neurodivergent child. After the

* For ease of reading I will use the word 'parent' throughout the book, but it is important to acknowledge the immense contribution of the many different people involved in the life of a child, so I include in this term all caregivers of children including foster parents, grandparents, temporary caregivers and all types and structure of families.

CHILDHOOD UNDERSTOOD

birth of my daughter, and following over twenty years working in early childhood education, I wanted to offer support to both parents and professionals, and *Childhood Understood* was born. I now help parents and professionals find ways of supporting children that are nurturing, respectful, trauma-informed and neurodiversity-affirming.

Changing our approach to behaviour and neurodivergence is the foundation of effective teaching and learning. These things are also the key to making professional working lives rewarding, as we reignite the passion and commitment that first brought us to working with children.

Parenting can be emotive, joyful and exhausting. It can be both rewarding and triggering, as we find ourselves reflecting on our own childhoods, our values and our hopes during the inevitable highs and lows it brings. Understanding our children and their childhood experiences can go some way to helping us navigate the rollercoaster!

My child is neurodivergent: is this book for me?

Yes! As someone with lived experience of neurodivergence, it is a central aim of my work to be neurodiversity-affirming and sensitive to the preferences of those in the neurodivergent community. I am also aware my perspective is just that; it is *my* perspective and I do not speak for all neurodivergent individuals.

We have a lot of work ahead to effectively support the needs of neurodivergent children and families. Many professionals are still taught that showing neurodivergent children how to appear more neurotypical should be a key aim. Whether we are discussing play, communication, relationships, learning styles or simply how to act and think, being neurotypical is still seen as the gold standard. Kerry Murphy* challenges this idea of 'neuronormativity', explaining:

* Kerry Murphy's work on neurodiversity-affirming practice is a breath of fresh air, and I recommend checking out her work on Diverse Pathways.

‘Measures of ‘normal’ often privilege those with typical minds and non-disabled bodies, creating barriers for neurodivergent and disabled individuals. In contrast, neurodiversity-affirming practice resists neuronormativity and embraces human differences as valid and integral to society.’

(Murphy, 2025, p.xii)

We could drastically alter the experience and future outcomes for many children if we were to challenge neuronormative ideas and focus on creating environments and practices that are truly neurodiversity-affirming. I hope this book can contribute to a move towards empowering children, educators and families to embrace the diversity of play, learning, communication and ways of being.

Conversations about behaviour matter

Behaviour is never just about the behaviour, or actions we see on the surface. As we will discover, behaviour is about the journey towards being able to regulate our feelings and actions; it is about communication, relationships, experiences and a child’s overall sense of wellbeing. The behaviour is what we see, but it is only one small part of the picture of what a child is experiencing.

Behaviour is also never about a child in isolation. A child is part of a family unit, a nursery or school and a community. They are affected by the people around them, by the way we communicate with them, by the physical, emotional and social environments they find themselves in and by the relationships they build with other children and adults.

One of my primary motivations in writing this book is to help parents and professionals feel less alone, and to provide them with practical strategies. Very often parents share with me that they want their child to grow up to be happy. While we can’t control what will happen in a child’s future, we can help them to know

CHILDHOOD UNDERSTOOD

that it is okay to ask for help when they come face-to-face with the inevitable ups and downs of life.

This knowledge starts when children are young. Behaviour is often a sign that a child needs our help. How we respond to it has the power to communicate to children that they are worthy of our help, and to show them there are different ways to manage the difficult feelings and experiences they are having. This book will show you how to move away from trying to change children's behaviour, into enabling them to:

- understand and process their feelings.
- identify their needs and find safe ways to meet those needs.
- access an environment that supports them.
- learn strategies for when they are struggling.

Chapter One sets the scene for behaviour, reflecting on questions such as 'Is it possible to stop behaviour?' and 'Are feelings problems to be solved?'. We look at evolving approaches to behaviour and introduce the 'keys' to behaviour that underpin the book: regulation, self-control and self-compassion.

Chapter Two looks at the foundations of wellbeing in the early childhood years, including social justice, inclusion, play, independence and parent-professional relationships. We explore how each of these impacts children and what we can do to support them.

Chapter Three is all about feelings. We ask whether a focus on feelings or obedience is at the root of our approach to behaviour, and we think about topics such as empathy, kindness and regulation.

Chapter Four explores complex behaviours and the importance of curiosity in supporting children. We look at the role of the nervous system, and think about how and why children feel safe and what happens when they don't feel as safe as we assume they do.

Chapter Five is about creating emotionally safe environments. We explore ideas around belonging, feeling safe and how this can come to life in Early Years environments, including a case study in a reception class.

Chapter Six is about you, the grown-up. We explore how we can help ourselves to regulate and look at self-compassion in action with a particular focus on parents. Our educator focus for this chapter is on how we create a culture of wellbeing.

Chapter Seven focuses on the idea of emotionally safe communication. We explore punishments and rewards, and why they can work against us when it comes to supporting children's behaviour. We also introduce the idea of low-demand communication and how it can help.

Chapter Eight is about co-regulation, rules and possible triggers for children's behaviour. We explore how we can help children to regulate with the support of a responsive adult.

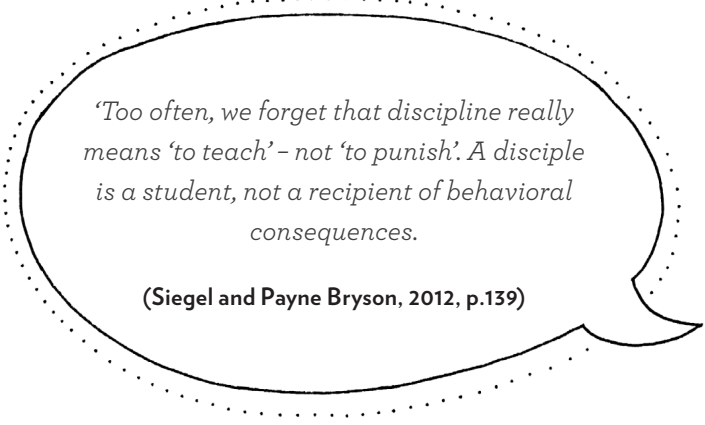
Chapter Nine is all about the different challenges we can face in day-to-day parenting and teaching. We look at eating and mealtimes, hitting, biting, throwing, big emotions, listening and conflict between children. There are lots of practical tips and strategies.

Chapter Ten looks at the activities and play experiences that we can introduce to children to support them with their wellbeing. We explore mindfulness, teaching children about apologies and repairs, spaces for regulation, sensory regulation and look at strategies for approaching screen time.

Wherever you are on your parenting or teaching journey, I want you to know that I understand it isn't always easy! Throughout the book I will make suggestions that may advocate for different approaches than are traditionally suggested, because I passionately believe it is time to shake things up when it comes to how we approach behaviour, feelings, and meeting children's needs. From this mum and teacher to you, a very warm welcome to *Childhood Understood*.

1

KEYS TO BEHAVIOUR



'Too often, we forget that discipline really means 'to teach' – not 'to punish'. A disciple is a student, not a recipient of behavioral consequences.

(Siegel and Payne Bryson, 2012, p.139)

Let's talk about behaviour

I love conversations about behaviour. Behaviour tells us a great deal about what a child is experiencing and the support they need. The way we respond to children's dysregulation is a golden opportunity to influence their wellbeing in the present, and their mental health in the future. Helping children develop their ability to manage their feelings is one of the most important life skills we can teach them. When we respond to 'behaviour', we are not just responding to a child's actions, we are also responding to how they feel and what they are experiencing.

Behaviour is the way we respond to our inner and outer worlds. It is influenced by how we feel and what is happening around us, as well by our life experiences and genetics. When we say the word 'behaviour' as an educator or parent, we tend to focus on it as being 'good' or 'bad'. Throughout the book I will frame the behaviour

we think of as 'negative' or 'unwanted' as instead being 'dysregulated'. Being regulated means we can manage our feelings and actions safely and in a considered way. When children are dysregulated, it can be for a multitude of reasons and can be expressed in different ways, as we will explore in the coming chapters.

Whether children are in your life professionally or personally, you will have come across many opinions on behaviour. Our thoughts and feelings about it play into many different aspects of who we are and how we see the world.

Each time we encounter 'behaviour', some (or all) of the following have the potential to come roaring to the surface:

- our value systems around how children should be taught and parented
- our own experiences of being parented and disciplined when we were a child
- experiences we had at school
- our fears over not being a good enough teacher or parent
- anxieties about whether we are doing enough to raise our children to be kind people.

As parents, we may feel protective of our own parents and try to emulate the way they did things. Conversely, we may be desperate to avoid repeating generational cycles and be actively trying to change the way things were done in the past. As educators, we are likely to be influenced by the expectations of our leadership team, current policy initiatives, as well as colleagues who inspire us and our own belief systems.

Among all of this, it can be hard to hear the voice of the child. I hope that throughout this book you will feel heard, seen and validated in the challenges you face professionally or personally. I also hope that you will hear the voice of the child.

In moments of dysregulated behaviour, we often find ourselves saying to children, 'Use your words'. We forget that if they could do this instead of hitting or screaming, they would. To help them eventually find their words (in whatever their preferred communication style), we need to recognise the voice beneath the behaviour. That means wondering, getting curious and trying different approaches before we get to the right support. It is this approach that is the foundation of *Childhood Understood*.

Is it possible to stop unwanted behaviour?

The first question most professionals and parents ask me is: 'How do I stop unwanted behaviour?'. This isn't surprising. It can feel as though society defines parenting by how well we measure up to having the traditional view of a 'well-behaved child'. For educators, the image of a classroom without any form of dysregulated behaviour is held up as the gold standard.

However, this way of thinking about and seeing behaviour has the potential to be problematic. It leads us to focus mainly on how we change the behaviour. We end up trying to change the external manifestation of a child's feelings and experiences (in other words, 'behaviour'), instead of addressing the feelings and experiences themselves. A child who is regulated – feeling safe, able to manage themselves, their feelings and their actions – will be able to act safely and express their feelings appropriately.

It is unrealistic to think we can create a utopian Early Years classroom or home environment, in which dysregulated behaviour is non-existent. Behaviour in young children can be a typical and understandable response to their feelings, environment and sense of dysregulation. It is one of the ways children show us where we need to focus support needs and what we need to change in their environment. This is particularly true for our youngest children, as psychologist Mona Delahooke explains:

'...learning to think ahead and reliably control one's emotions and behaviours...is a developmental project that begins to emerge in toddlerhood and continues all the way through the mid-twenties. In short, we often expect more from toddlers than they can deliver.'

(Delahooke, 2022, p.217)

This doesn't mean we ignore behaviour, or that we accept harmful behaviours as inevitable. It does mean we need to focus our attention on what children are

experiencing beneath their behaviours, and what kind of environment they need to enable them to feel safe and thrive.

Feelings as signals

As psychologists Doan and Borelli (2022) point out, our feelings are a great source of information about how we are doing and what we need. Learning how to identify and listen to those feelings is important for the present moment and in the future. If children don't know how they are feeling and how to express this safely, we are more likely to see their feelings expressed through dysregulated behaviour. As they grow into adolescence and adulthood, they will benefit from being able to take note of their feelings and finding ways to process and move through them.

We can't teach children to pay attention to the signals their feelings are giving them if we don't pay attention to them first. Recognising dysregulated behaviour as the child raising a flag that says, 'Hey! I have an unmet need over here and I need help!' helps us to shift perspective. Instead of seeing their actions as being about 'good' or 'bad' behaviour, we can start framing the challenges they are facing within a discussion about regulation (Desautels, 2020).

Our goal as parents and educators is to create emotionally safe environments and relationships in which children thrive and their needs are met. When this happens, we can respond to behaviour effectively and quickly within an approach that prioritises relationships, connection and regulation. However, if our aim is to 'manage' behaviour through adult control, demanding compliance, and not addressing the feelings and experiences a child is having, we ready ourselves – and the child – for failure.

Feelings: problems to be solved?

Much of this comes down to the fact that we see behaviour, and the feelings beneath it, as 'problems' to be solved. We find ourselves thinking: 'A child in my class is angry – how do I stop them from being angry?', or 'My child is feeling sad – how do I make them happy?' Whether you are reading this as a parent or as a professional, you may relate to the instinctive question so many of us find ourselves asking: 'How do I fix the difficult feelings?'

CHILDHOOD UNDERSTOOD

Part of the aim of this book is to consider the question, 'What would happen if we could get comfortable with the idea of a child experiencing uncomfortable feelings?' My hope is that, in exploring this, it might be possible to change the narrative from one in which we see certain feelings as problematic, to accepting that those very same feelings are an inevitable part of life. Co-founders of Slumberkins, the emotional learning tools company, family therapist Kelly Oriard and early childhood educator Callie Christensen (2024) explain:

'When we welcome all our feelings, seeing them as friends and messengers giving us information about our needs, we build the foundation of emotional courage.'

(Oriard and Christensen, 2024, p.153)

The hidden curriculum of emotions

The idea of the 'hidden curriculum' was initially developed by Philip W. Jackson (Thornton, 2014). It refers to the messages and learning that children experience in an education setting away from the intended curriculum and formal teaching. Many Early Years settings and schools teach children about feelings through activities and resources (see Chapter Ten for some ideas). What isn't always taken into consideration is the messages children receive about feelings; particularly the messages we may not have planned for them to receive. Let's take an example of a child who is taught that all feelings are valid and acceptable using a set of emotions cards, but when they cry, they are given the message that they need to be 'brave', and that they need to stop crying. In this case, the 'hidden curriculum' is working against the positive messages the educators have been trying to convey.

Evolving approaches to behaviour

The most common approaches to behaviour to date have been founded in behaviourism. This is when we reward and praise ‘good’ behaviour’ and punish or ignore ‘poor’ or ‘bad’ behaviour. The idea is that the child will repeat the ‘good’ behaviour because they associate it with something positive happening, and they will avoid the ‘bad’ behaviour because they associate it with a punishment or being ignored.

Behaviourism

Behaviourism is based on the idea that behaviour can be changed through ‘conditioning’, for example, by using rewards or punishments. It privileges this above the impact of thoughts and feelings on an individual’s behaviour.

The appeal of this approach has possibly been because it appears to provide a straightforward approach to a challenging topic. Taking a behaviourist approach means we don’t need to look beneath the surface at all the messy, complex and emotive ‘stuff’ that is going on. We don’t need to get into potentially difficult conversations about feelings, and we don’t need to seek a deeper understanding of a child’s experience. In behaviourism, adults see a behaviour and look to change it.

Behaviourism aims to teach children to obey adults based on an external motivator (in other words, the reward or the punishment). This removes the opportunity for children to learn how to think for themselves, develop mental flexibility, develop a growth mindset (Dweck, 2017) and ultimately, lowers resilience and empathy for others. These skills are what psychiatrist Daniel Siegel and psychotherapist Tina Payne Bryson refer to as having a ‘Yes Brain’ (Siegel and Payne Bryson, 2018b).

Behaviourist approaches focus on the external motivator, whereas throughout this book I will be advocating for looking deeper to find out what’s happening for the individual child. To do this, we need to get curious. Traditional discipline approaches don’t advocate for curiosity, they advocate for changing the behaviour through compliance, regardless of what is happening for the child on the inside.

Attachment and neuroscience: moving towards a relational approach

The implementation of the key person approach in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) marked a significant step towards the recognition of the importance of relationships, connection and the idea of 'professional love' developed by Dr. Jools Page (2017).

Professional love

Dr. Jools Page's research into relationships between professional caregivers and the children they care for suggested that mothers in particular valued attachment relationships in Early Years settings. With parental permission, a relationship based in attachment can offer children the experience of professionally loving care while they are away from their primary caregivers (University of Brighton, 2026).

In conversations with both nurseries and parents, I find the practitioner often referred to as the child's 'key worker'. There is a fundamental difference between a 'key worker' and a 'key person'. The word 'person' is crucial. The role is about an attachment and a relationship with the child and their family. This isn't just a question of semantics; it goes to the heart of a pedagogy (teaching approach) founded in relationships.

It is because of the importance of relationships in children's development that the role of the key person really matters. I encourage professionals to frame their work within an approach that values and prioritises relationships, connection and professional love above control and compliance.

Educator focus: why is behaviour getting worse?

Many professionals believe that behaviour is on the decline. There is a feeling that children are struggling with respect for others, respect for the physical environment and are struggling with their emotions on a level not seen previously. The possible reasons for this escalation are as many, as they are complex. Some of those most often mentioned to me as I talk with practitioners around the country include:

Screen time

This is often top of the list when people tell me why they think dysregulated behaviour is increasing. However, research on screen time is divided. In 2012, psychologist Dr. Aric Sigman was advocating for limits on screen time (Richardson, 2012), a position many continue to take, including the campaign group Smartphone Free Childhood. More recently, researchers have argued that the headlines are misleading and that conversations around screen time need to be far more in depth and complex than at present (Kleinman, 2025).

Part of the issue with the research to date is the lack of context and discussion of all the 'grey areas' that exist in any conversation about child development. This is being tackled by an exciting new model from Beatty and Egan (forthcoming) called the RECIPE framework. The framework advocates for looking at factors including:

- looking at the interplay of screen time and development over a period of time
- engagement with others during screen time access
- the nature of the content being watched
- whether the screen time involves interaction
- factors relating to the individual child such as temperament, age and gender
- environmental factors including parent-child relationship, the family's socio-economic status as well as factors relating to school.

(Beatty and Egan, 2025).

Turn to Chapter Ten (p.154) for specific suggestions around screen time, including guidance on how to make choices in a balanced way that reflect some of those factors mentioned in the RECIPE framework above.

CHILDHOOD UNDERSTOOD

Parenting approaches

Another commonly held view is that ‘gentle parenting’ is causing an increase in dysregulated behaviour. Gentle parenting doesn’t – or shouldn’t – mean parenting without boundaries. It is possible to approach parenting ‘gently’ and create clear boundaries for children at the same time. It is also possible to have a more traditionally ‘strict’ approach but struggle to maintain boundaries because of inconsistency and unpredictability.

The key thing to remember is that we want to avoid being ‘permissive’ or ‘authoritarian’. In the former, there are low expectations and few, or ineffectively set, boundaries. In the latter, rules and expectations are high in demand and low in flexibility while little time is given to the child’s emotional life. Consistent, predictable, safe environments which guide and teach children are vital.

In creating these environments, we have a choice that goes beyond the polarised view of either the adult who has high demands and expects immediate compliance, or the permissive adult who doesn’t set boundaries at all. The position of this book is that we need boundaries but how we set them, through relationships, connection, regulation, flexibility and compassion, matters. We can set boundaries through connection, guidance and clarity, or through control, fear and unpredictability. How we set boundaries can define our relationship with children.

Children need us to guide them, help them to express their feelings and experiences appropriately and be clear with them about safe ways to act towards themselves and others. We will explore the things we do that make this possible, and the things we do that can act as barriers.

The section ‘Parent focus: What is connection-based parenting?’ (p.16) looks at this topic in more detail. (Please don’t think this is just for parents; if you are working as an educator or with families in any capacity, this section will make for useful reading!).

Formalisation of education

I am often surprised by the number of teachers and practitioners under the illusion that they are only doing their jobs well if they can get very young children to sit ‘nicely’ for extended periods of time, apparently in the name of supporting listening, attention and school readiness.

Aside from the fact that for many children this is developmentally almost impossible at a young age, I would also challenge the notion that sitting still, with crossed legs, and staring at an adult is indicative of being able to listen. There are

many extremely attentive children (and adults) who need to move while they are listening. Learning can (and should!) involve movement. Author Dr. Luke Beardon refers to this as the idea of ‘reconceptualising what good behaviour looks like’ (Beardon, 2022, p.96).

I hear from practitioners trying to do circle time with 18-month-olds, wondering where they are going wrong because the children aren’t ‘listening’. The answer is that children of this age want to move and explore. Learning involves curiosity, exploration, being creative, communicating with others, solving problems and collaboration. Very little of this happens when a child is sitting still, listening to an adult. During dinner recently my four-year-old said to me, ‘My body is telling me I need to move.’ I am grateful to her teacher for showing her how to listen to her body, pay attention to the signs she is uncomfortable and to know that needing to move isn’t a flaw.

The COVID-19 pandemic

Behaviour, feelings and experiences are intricately connected. For many families, parenthood looked very different in the pandemic. Children born into and experiencing their early years during COVID-19 lived through a time of immense stress. The pandemic saw mothers birthing their children alone, families contending with serious illness and bereavement and parents attempting to work from home while home educating older children and providing care to their youngest children.

Socialising was off the cards, and baby groups or classes were held online. It was a period of great fear and uncertainty, closely followed by a period of international political instability and a cost-of-living crisis.

Children don’t live in a vacuum. They pick up on our stress and anxieties, and they form their opinions about the world from their early experiences. While many adults have been able to move on from the pandemic, we are perhaps at risk of forgetting that children were disproportionately affected (Save the Children UK, n.d.). Children are reported to have experienced an adverse impact on their communication, language and social and emotional development.

Societal issues

Interestingly, while the above reasons are often mentioned to me during discussions with professionals and parents, there are some other key issues that are missed. The impact on families of poverty and discrimination for example, are issues that are rarely talked about. These are explored in Chapter Two (p.12).

CHILDHOOD UNDERSTOOD

Modern society

I am not one for reflecting on the past through rose-tinted spectacles. Each generation has its challenges and high points. However, it is important to acknowledge the challenges this generation faces. The pace of life is faster than at any time in history; the constant presence of mobile phones and email is an added pressure. Social media has been linked to increased anxiety, depression, bullying and poor sleep (RSPH, 2026).

Many people balance work and parenting while facing rising childcare costs. Inequalities and mental health challenges continue to rise. Twenty-four-hour news at the touch of a button has raised awareness about issues at home and globally but has also led to 'media anxiety' and increased levels of the stress hormone cortisol from constantly accessing negative news stories (Mental Health UK, 2025). Just as with the pandemic, it is likely that these issues are impacting children who pick up on adults' stress and lack of downtime. In Chapter Six (p.88) we look at how to help ourselves become regulated and maintain our own wellbeing so that we can support the children in our care.

Parent focus: what is connection-based parenting?

What we do with babies and toddlers from the start makes a difference. It builds their understanding of the world, the expectations they have, their feelings of safety and security and affects the way they see themselves and others.

I describe my approach as connection-based, responsive parenting. Connection-based parenting is – unsurprisingly – about prioritising connection between caregiver and child. One of the reasons I use the phrase 'childhood understood' is that a constructive narrative around children's behaviour based in understanding why they do the things they do, makes it easier for us to connect to them.

Many traditional approaches to parenting and discipline have focused on disconnection. They have focused on seeing children as 'naughty', with adults encouraged to see children as some sort of alien species that can't be understood or communicated with. This is incredibly unhelpful for parents, and unhelpful for our children. It pits us against each other, instead of putting us on the same page.

Connection-based, responsive parenting is about making ourselves vulnerable to our own emotions and those of our children. It involves connecting even in the most difficult moments. When a child does something we would rather they hadn't done, these are the hardest – yet also the most important – moments to focus on connection. It is through connection that children learn. When we remove connection, we remove the opportunity for them to learn how to manage their feelings and experiences.

Stress and the brain

When children are stressed, their prefrontal cortex takes a hit. This is the part of the brain responsible for our executive function skills including working memory, decision making, flexibility of thinking and impulse control. Under stress, the brain heads into fight, flight or freeze (there is more on this in Chapter Four, p.53). When a child is dysregulated and this shows in the way they behave, their logical, rational brain is not in charge. The last thing we want to do is add more stress to the situation and prolong their time in fight, flight or freeze. Instead, we want to bring their executive function skills back online by reducing stress. The fastest way to do that? You've guessed it: connection with a trusted person.

Keys to behaviour

Before we conclude this chapter, I would like to introduce the 'keys' to behaviour referred to throughout the book. The word 'key' is important. These are skills to be unlocked and discovered. They are not goals, they do not have a mandated timescale for development and they are far from straightforward. They present differently in different children, and the way they are expressed varies too. Children learn these skills through their relationships with adults and through the environments we offer them.

CHILDHOOD UNDERSTOOD

Regulation*

Regulation involves being in a state of balance, so that we can manage our thoughts, feelings, and actions as we respond to our internal and external environments.

Children aren't born able to regulate; this develops over time (from birth until our mid 20s!) from experiencing what we call 'co-regulation'. This is when an adult responds to a child's feelings and experiences sensitively to enable them to return to a state of emotional and cognitive balance. Being in balance also involves our nervous system, including our sensory systems.

Self-control

Self-control means that a child can control their actions and stop themselves from doing something when they need to. The crucial thing to know is that it develops from experience. In other words, we can't give a child self-control by controlling them. They need real-life experiences that develop the area of the brain responsible for self-control. Self-control sits within our executive function skills, alongside working memory, flexibility, problem-solving and perspective-taking.

Self-compassion

Developing self-compassion means helping children to treat themselves with kindness and without judgement, especially when they get things wrong. Self-compassion involves acknowledging that difficult feelings are an inevitable part of being human, and this connects us all. Children learn that we need to acknowledge difficult feelings, while also trusting that they will pass. The shame involved in so many approaches to behaviour works directly against the idea of self-compassion.

* I have chosen to use the word 'regulation' rather than 'self-regulation' to convey the importance of connection in regulation, and the importance of the responsibility held by the community, society, family and education setting, for supporting a child's ability to regulate.

Chapter summary

- How we see behaviour depends on our value systems, how we were parented and taught and on our worries over being a good enough parent or teacher.
- To hear the voice of the child, we need to get curious and look beneath the behaviour to see what they are experiencing and feeling.
- Neuronormativity places a high value on neurotypical norms of development, placing neurodivergent and disabled children at risk of failing.
- Feelings can act as signals to tell us what we need, and getting curious about children's feelings and experiences is vital in supporting behaviour.
- Behaviourism focuses on changing behaviour, while a relational approach prioritises the role of responsive and regulating adult-child relationships.
- The keys to behaviour that this book focuses on are regulation, self-control and self-compassion.

Reflective questions

- What approaches to behaviour did you experience at school and home as a young child?
- How have these affected how you see behaviour?
- What has influenced the way you approach behaviour in your parenting or professional work?
- What are your thoughts about the possible reasons for dysregulated behaviour increasing in recent years?

Tips for supporting babies

- Hold in mind that babies do not yet have the ability to regulate by themselves. They need a connected and compassionate adult to support them in times of stress and dysregulation.
- The keys to behaviour start with this age group. Co-regulation strategies such as providing cuddles, validation of feelings, narration of problem-solving and a sensitive tone and facial expression all help when a baby is distressed.
- Remember that self-control develops through experience – babies need to move and explore, learning to trust their bodies. Try to encourage more opportunities for babies to move freely.

Tips for supporting toddlers

- Next time you see dysregulated ‘behaviour’, challenge yourself to understand the motivation behind their actions.
- Remember that children of this age need to move and explore! Try reducing the amount of time children are asked to sit still.
- Introduce activities that support the development of self-control such as Simon Says, musical statues and activities such as gardening and cooking.

Tips for supporting pre-schoolers

- Teaching children self-compassion starts with the way we respond to them. Showing compassion while setting clear boundaries is not only possible, it’s essential!
- When you see a behavioural response, start with curiosity and connection. This might mean saying, ‘Are you okay? How can I help?’ – this models empathy and enables you to approach the situation through connection not conflict.
- If you work in a classroom environment, reflect on your expectations for neurodivergent children. Do you have neuronormative expectations?