

# Seeing beyond the behaviour

Young children don't always have the words to explain what they're feeling, so their behaviour often becomes their way of telling us something. Instead of seeing behaviour as "good" or "bad," it can help to think of it as a message about what a child needs- comfort, connection, support, or help calming down. When we look beneath the surface, we can understand what's really going on and respond in ways that help children feel safe, learn, and grow.

## What's going on beneath the surface?

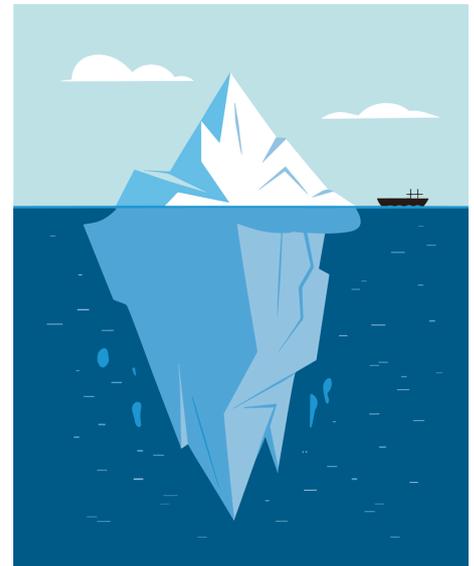
Children's behaviour is like an iceberg. What we see on the surface is only a small part of the story. Underneath are feelings, needs, and experiences that the child may not yet be able to communicate.

### What you see (surface behaviours):

- Shouting, crying, or screaming
- Running off or refusing
- Hitting, throwing, pushing
- Clinginess or withdrawal
- "Not listening" or "shutting down"

### What might be underneath:

- Big emotions (frustration, fear, excitement, sadness)
- Physical needs (hunger, tiredness, illness, sensory overload)
- Changes (new baby, new home, routines changing, transitions at school)
- Communication challenges (limited language, unable to explain feelings)
- Learning needs (tasks too hard or too easy, struggling to understand expectations)
- Previous stress or uncertainty (anxieties carried over from earlier experiences)



***Understanding the "why" behind behaviour helps adults support children more effectively.***

## The Brain's Role in Behaviour

Young children's brains are still developing, especially the areas responsible for managing emotions, calming down, planning, and self-control. This means that when a child is overwhelmed, their brain reacts quickly and powerfully. As these skills are still maturing, children often need extra support and guidance from adults to help them navigate big feelings and respond in more manageable ways.

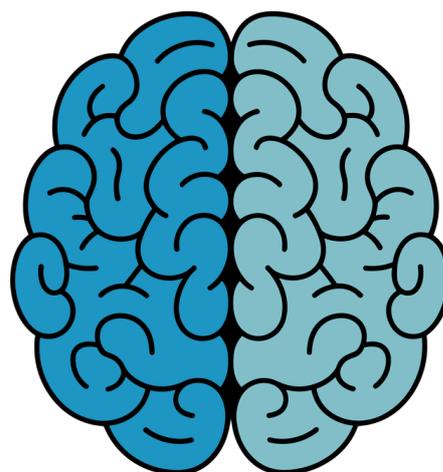
## The Thinking Brain vs. the Feeling Brain

### The Thinking Brain (prefrontal cortex)

- Helps with problem solving, listening, reasoning and self-control.
- Is still "under construction" until adulthood
- Switches off easily when emotions get too big

### The Feeling Brain (amygdala and limbic system)

- Acts like an alarm system: fast, reactive, emotional
- Takes over when a child feels overwhelmed
- Cannot reason or listen until the child is calm



Children develop at their own pace, and for some children, such as those with autism or ADHD, this stage may take longer because their brains grow and organise information differently. Their feelings might show up in many ways: yelling, running off, lashing out, throwing objects, hiding, or trying to take control of situations. These actions are not random; they're a child's way of expressing something important. They may be feeling self-conscious about finding schoolwork hard, worried about what will happen at lunchtime, or overwhelmed by sensory experiences that can trigger distress or frustration.

## The Power of Connection



Strong, trusting relationships are central to supporting a child's behaviour. When children feel genuinely seen, heard, and valued, they are better able to manage their emotions and cope with challenges. A secure connection gives them someone to rely on when things feel confusing or overwhelming. Through calm, consistent, and respectful interactions, adults show children they're not alone with their big feelings. This sense of safety reduces anxiety, encourages communication, and helps children accept guidance and develop healthier ways of expressing themselves.

## What can we do to support our little ones?

Children cope best when they feel understood, supported, and connected to the adults around them. When parents respond with patience and curiosity rather than frustration, it helps children feel safe enough to calm down, communicate, and learn new ways of handling big emotions. Small, consistent actions at home can make a big difference to how children manage their behaviour day-to-day, and these supportive moments build the foundation for long-term emotional resilience. By showing children that their feelings matter and that challenges can be worked through together, parents help them develop confidence and stronger coping skills over time.

### Top Tips:

- **Stay calm and reassuring-** Take a breath, speak gently, and let them know you're there to help.
- **Look beneath the behaviour-** Notice triggers like tiredness, worry, or sensory overwhelm.
- **Keep routines predictable-** Clear structure and gentle warnings make transitions easier.
- **Offer simple choices-** This gives children a sense of control and reduces conflict.
- **Teach calming strategies-** Use quiet spaces, movement breaks, or sensory tools when needed.
- **Build positive moments-** Give specific praise and spend small pockets of time doing something they enjoy.

