Neurodiversity Early Years Service®

Thinking about behaviour

The tip of the iceberg

Most of us lead very busy lives – we have lots of responsibilities, things to do and places to be! Our children often lead busy lives too – whether it is going to childcare, school, play groups, hobbies and socialising with family and friends. Parents or adults working with children usually begin to recognise when children are getting too tired or overstimulated, because their behaviour starts to change.

They might react more sensitively to things that wouldn't normally bother them, struggle to follow instructions or play as they normally would with others. They start to struggle with their emotional regulation. Children use their behaviour to send us a signal that they need something (whether it is a quiet day on the couch, a nap or something else). What we can see – such as lashing out, struggling to listen or take turns (when the child normally can) is the tip of the iceberg!

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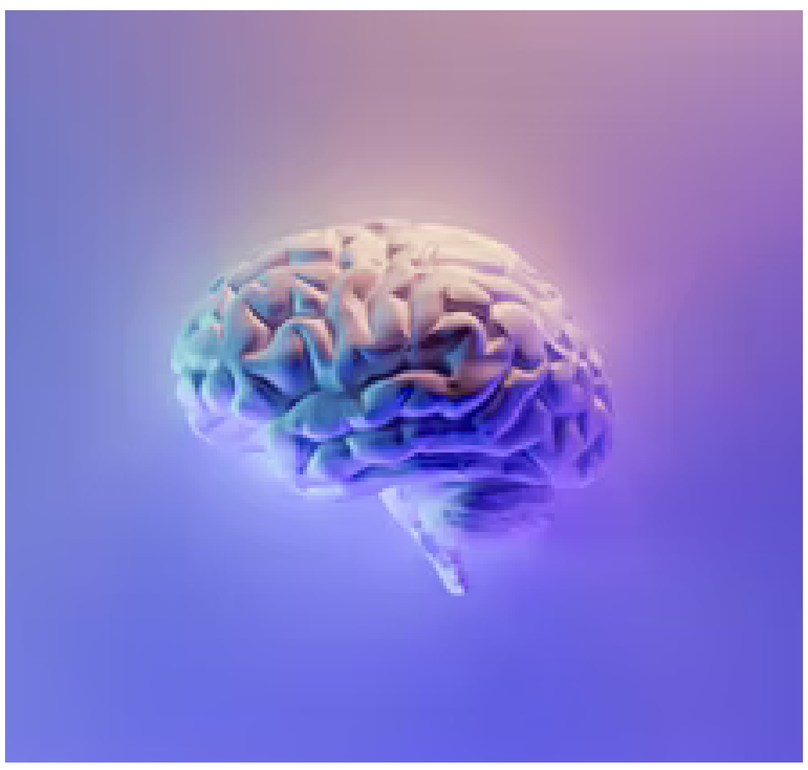
Below the surface



Children's behaviour is mainly driven by their 'downstairs' brain – this means their emotions and primitive responses like fight, flight or freeze can often take charge! We refer to this as their chimp brain. This is a developmental stage that all children go through. As they get a little bit older, and with effective co-regulation support from adults, children begin to use their 'upstairs' brain, where thinking and learning happens, to manage their reactions and responses when experiencing big feelings.

Some children, including autistic children and those with ADHD, can take a little longer to reach this stage due to differences in the way their brains develop. We might see a range of behaviours - children shouting, running away, hitting, throwing things, hiding, being 'defiant' or controlling. The child is telling us something – that behaviour is a form of communication. They might be feeling embarrassed that they are struggling with their work in school, anxious about lunchtime or struggling with sensory processing differences that can cause them to feel overwhelmed or even angry.

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How we can help

In a busy environment (like a classroom or childcare setting), we can often focus on trying to reduce or stop the behaviour – things like running indoors, climbing on tables, lashing out at others. We might tell them to stop it or explain what they have done wrong. In many cases, particularly for younger children or those with neurodevelopmental conditions, we might see the same or similar behaviour happening again or the situation might escalate. This is usually because children are reacting with their 'downstairs' (chimp) brain! Adults can help in this situation by thinking about what the child might need –

- Are they struggling to get started with their work?
- Are they bored?
- Are they distracted by someone behind them talking and the label in their new top rubbing their neck?
- Did they fall out with a friend at playtime?

We need to support their 'downstairs' brain first, otherwise they will remain dysregulated and more likely to have difficulty controlling their reactions. When children can 'chill their chimp', they are more likely to be able to use their 'upstairs' brain, which includes their executive functioning skills (these are helpful for impulse control and managing emotional responses).

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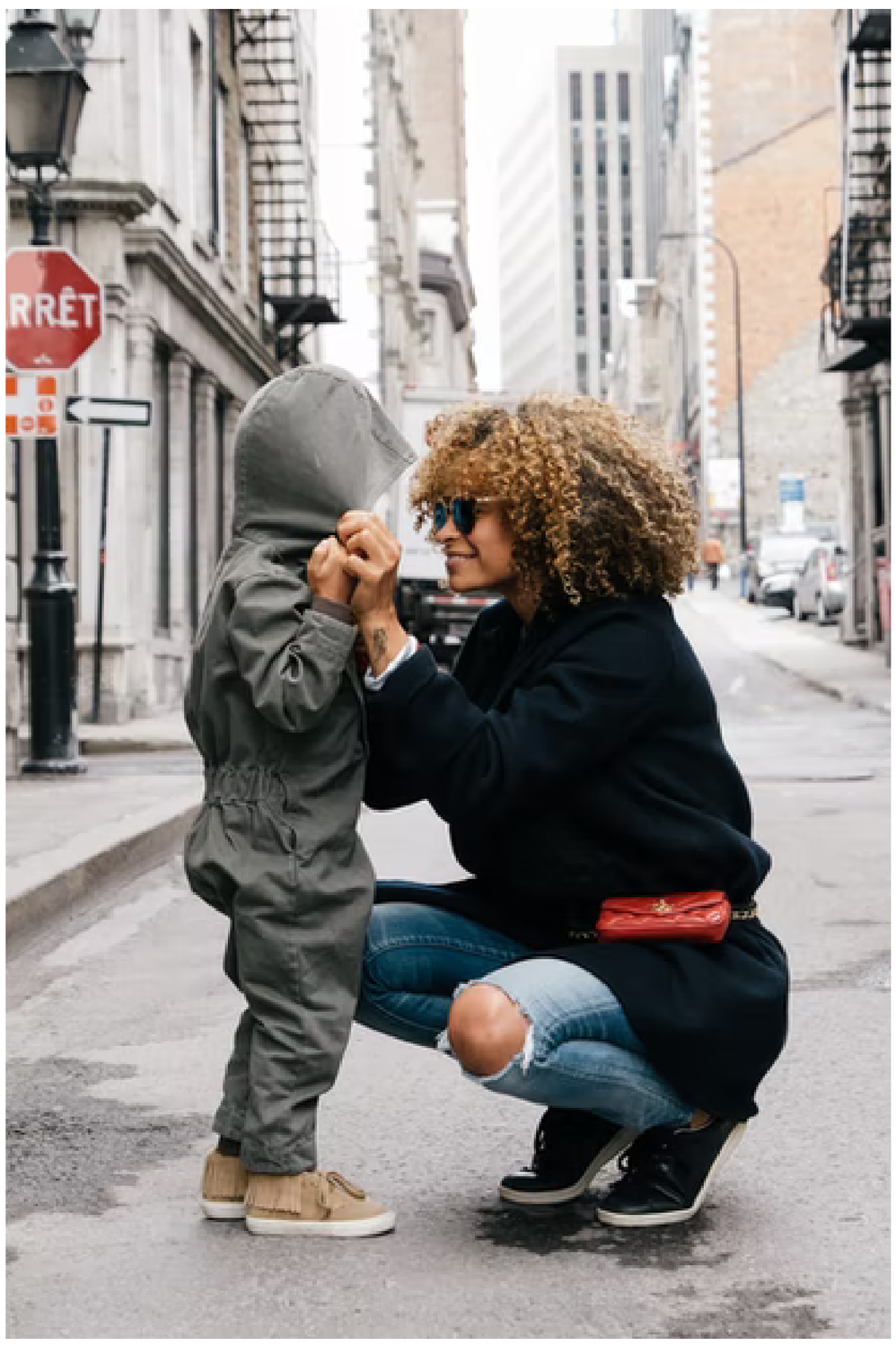
Relationships are key



When we get to know children well, we might be able to anticipate things that they find difficult. For example, when we meet a child who starts pushing and shoving when lining up, hiding before carpet time and repeatedly getting up from their seat at lunch time, we might realise that they feel anxious about transitions and unstructured times of the day, or they have a touch sensitivity that makes being in close proximity to others very tricky! After any incidents that do occur, children need time and space to calm down. When calm (and back in their upstairs brain) we can have a stage-appropriate discussion about what happened and alternatives for next time. Adults may also want to reflect on things like the environment and routines to see if these could be adapted or changed (eg, for the example above, could the child be at the start/end of the lunch line or go to lunch a couple of minutes ahead of the rest of the class? Might a visual timetable or access to a lunch club help)?

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Key points to take away:

- Relationships are key! Effective co-regulation leads to independent self-regulation. If we focusing on supporting the ‘downstairs’ brain and chilling the chimp, children can then get to and use their upstairs brain.

- Behaviour is the tip of the iceberg and a form of communication. Reflecting on things like the environment, sensory considerations, routines and transitions can be helpful in identifying what triggered the behaviour and how we can support the child.

- Like younger children, those with neurodevelopmental conditions can find it more difficult to control their impulses and manage their feelings. All children benefit from direct support to recognise and explore emotions, as well as developing executive functioning skills (for impulse control, self-monitoring and mental flexibility).

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