Big Behaviours

A quick guide for supporting children through difficult moments

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When behaviours get big, it can be easy to focus on immediately stopping what's happening. But these 'big behaviours' can also give us important information about what a child is actually finding difficult, what they may need, or what skills they are still developing. If we practise looking at behaviour with *curiosity,* it can help us respond in more supportive ways .

1. Look *beneath* the behaviour

Before focusing only on the behaviour itself, take a few seconds to consider what may be contributing to it. Is the child overwhelmed, frustrated, anxious, tired, confused, overstimulated, unable to communicate what they need or, are they just hungry?

Ask yourself: What was happening leading up to this? Was a task too difficult, a change of plans unexpected or a decision overwhelming? What else might my child have needed in that moment?

2. Supporting them in the moment - Regulation

When emotions are already high, children are usually less able to listen to you, reason, problem-solve or learn. Your priority is to help things feel safer and more manageable.
Try by keeping your tone calm and predictable, reducing direct demands, using fewer words, lowering stimulation (tv/music/lights) and offering space, comfort or reassurance where appropriate.

3. Reconnect and reflect afterwards

Once things have calmed, it's best to focus on reconnecting before trying to teach any 'lessons'. Gently acknowledge what happened, again keeping your tone calm. Help your child make sense of their experience, and talk about what may have helped. Keep it brief and supportive rather than turning it into a lecture.

4. Building skills before the next big moment

The best time to practise new skills is when your child is calm. Over time, help by preparing for changes, offering appropriate choices, teaching ways to ask for help or a break, building emotional language, practising coping strategies, and noticing common patterns.

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Behaviour Curiosity

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Explore what might be underneath the behaviour

Behaviour doesn't happen in isolation. Understanding what's underneath it helps us respond to the need, not just the behaviour.

Sensory Overload
Too much noise, movement, or touch

Anxiety or Uncertainty
Changes, waiting, or unfamiliar situations

Communication Difficulty
Not knowing how to explain a need or feeling

Demands that Feel Too Hard
Tasks that are tiring, confusing, or frustrating

Physical Needs
Hunger, tiredness, pain, or discomfort

Need for Connection or Control
Reassurance, choice, predictability or independence

In the moment, less can be more

When your child is highly distressed, try to avoid:

- Lots of questions
- Repeating instructions again and again
- Arguing or trying to prove a point
- Long explanations
- Demanding an apology immediately
- Introducing consequences while they are still overwhelmed

Remember: The goal is not for a child to *never* become upset. The goal is to help them feel safer, understood, and supported while **gradually** building skills they need to cope, communicate, and recover from difficult moments.

If behaviours are frequent, severe, unsafe, or significantly affecting daily life, consider seeking support from an appropriately qualified health or behaviour support practitioner.

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After a Big Moment

A simple reflection tool for parents and carers

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This page is not about finding fault. It is a way to look back with curiosity, notice patterns, and think about what may help next time. You do not need to have all the answers, looking back with curiosity can help you identify small changes that may make future moments easier.

1. **What was happening beforehand?**

   Were they tired, hungry, rushed, overwhelmed, disappointed, asked to stop something, facing a difficult task, or coping with a change?

2. **What did I notice?**

   What did the behaviour look like? Were there any earlier signs that your child was becoming overwhelmed?

3. **What might my child have been communicating?**

   For example: This is too hard. I need a break. I do not understand. I want more control. I am overwhelmed. I need connection.

4. **How did I respond?**

   What did I say or do? What seemed to help, and what may have made the situation harder?

5. **What could we try next time?**

   Could anything change earlier - more preparation, a choice, fewer demands, a break, clearer communication, or sensory support?

6. **What went well?**

   Did your child accept support, communicate a need, recover more quickly, or use a skill? Did you stay calmer or respond differently?

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