

Supporting your child's nervous system

Because a lot of what looks like bad behaviour is a body doing what it was built to do

Three states, and how to tell them apart

STATE	WHAT IT CAN LOOK LIKE
 Settled	Thinking clearly, meeting your eye, showing a range of feelings, able to say what's wrong. Learning and talking things through are only possible here.
 "Heightened"	Hyper-alert, defensive, anxious, irritable, shouting, running off, hiding, clenched fists — or manic silliness. The body has chosen fight or flight.
 Shut down	Flat, tired, numb, staring, forgetful, not listening — or quietly compliant, doing just enough not to be noticed. The body has chosen to disappear.

When your child is "heightened"

WHAT HELPS	WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE
 Bring your own volume down	Fewer words, slower voice. Your calm is the thing they borrow.
 Give the body something to do	Heavy work is the fastest route back — pushing, carrying, climbing, jumping, crashing into cushions.
 Match, then lower	Meet their energy briefly rather than demanding instant calm, then slow down together.
 Deep pressure and warmth	A firm hug if wanted, a heavy blanket, a warm bath, a hot drink, chewy or crunchy food.
 Somewhere to land	A safe spot to go to that isn't a punishment, and that they helped choose.
 Connect before anything else	Empathy first. Any conversation about what happened comes much later, if at all.

When your child has shut down

WHAT HELPS	WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE
 Stay, don't leave	This can look like sulking or rudeness. It isn't — and being left alone confirms the fear underneath.
 Say they're safe, out loud	Simple and repeated. "I'm here. You're safe. There's no rush."
 Gentle movement	Swinging, rocking, rolling down a hill, digging, hanging. Rhythmic rather than energetic.
 Small, easy, repetitive things	A familiar chore done together, Lego, playdough — something with a known ending.
 Warmth and comfort	A warm bath and towel, hot chocolate and toast, a soft blanket, a hot water bottle.
 Invite them back gently	Wonder aloud where they've gone. If they've forgotten what they were doing, remind them kindly.

Heavy work — the most reliable reset

TYPE	IDEAS
 Push and pull	Wall push-ups, pushing a laundry basket, tug of war, palms pressed hard together for ten seconds.
 Carry	Shopping bags, a heavy book to another room, a full watering can.
 Climb and hang	Monkey bars, climbing frames, hanging upside down off the sofa.
 Jump and crash	Trampoline, jumping onto cushions, star jumps, hopscotch.
 Squeeze	Stress balls, playdough, resistance bands, a big firm hug.
 Crunch and suck	Carrot sticks or a thick drink through a straw.

Breathing and grounding games

GAME	HOW TO PLAY
 Tummy breathing	Lie down with a soft toy on the tummy. Breathe in to lift it, out to lower it. Rock it to sleep.
 Take five	Spread one hand like a star. Trace up each finger breathing in, down each finger breathing out.
 Balloon breathing	Hands cupped at the mouth, spreading wide as you breathe out and the balloon grows.
 Bumblebee breathing	Fingertips gently over the ears. Breathe in through the nose, then hum all the way out.
 Bubbles	Real ones. Blowing them slowly is deep breathing without anyone being told to breathe.
5-4-3 Five, four, three, two, one	For older children: name five things you can see, four you can feel, three you can hear, two you can smell, one you can taste.

Two things that make all of this work

Practise when nobody is upset. A strategy first met in the middle of a meltdown gets refused. Play these on good days and they become available on hard ones.

Do them together. Children regulate alongside a calm adult long before they can do it alone. Your steadiness is the active ingredient, not the technique.

The hand model of the brain is Dan Siegel's (Siegel & Bryson, *The Whole-Brain Child*, 2012). The nervous system states draw on polyvagal theory and on the regulation work of Lisa Dion and the Synergetic Play Therapy Institute.