

# Behind the Behaviour

## What Your Child is Trying to Tell You

Every behaviour is a **form of communication**. When we look beyond the surface, we can better understand what our child needs, respond thoughtfully, and support them to build new skills. Understanding the **“why” behind behaviour** can help strengthen routines, build connection, and reduce frustration for both you and your child. As your child’s main teacher, you are already doing important work. This guide is here to support you in understanding what your child is trying to communicate.

### Why the behaviour?

Every behaviour is a way of meeting a need. Common reasons include:

Behaviour Functions	Examples	What it means?
<b>Seek sensory input</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fidgeting, spinning, rocking, biting</li> <li>- Chewing clothes or objects</li> <li>- Throwing objects</li> <li>- Crashing into furniture or people</li> <li>- Covering ears or seeking loud noises</li> <li>- Touching everything when entering a room</li> </ul>	 <p>Their body may need regulation, movement, pressure or extra sensory stimulation.</p>
<b>Gain attention</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Calling out or interrupting; repeating questions</li> <li>- Following the adult around</li> <li>- Throwing objects</li> <li>- Hitting or pushing</li> <li>- Making loud noises or ‘silly’ behaviour</li> <li>- Doing the opposite of what’s been asked while watching the adult’s reaction</li> </ul>	 <p>Sometimes children simply need to feel noticed, connected, or reassured.</p>
<b>Escape or avoid something</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Arguing or becoming silly when demands increase</li> <li>- Leaving the table or running away</li> <li>- Refusing tasks or saying “no”</li> <li>- Hiding or shutting down; ignoring instructions</li> <li>- Crying or melting down when a task is introduced</li> <li>- Delaying (e.g. asking for the toilet, water, or a toy)</li> </ul>	 <p>The task may feel too overwhelming, boring, confusing, or emotionally challenging.</p>
<b>Access a tangible reward</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reaching, grabbing, or snatching items</li> <li>- Crying or screaming for a preferred item</li> <li>- Repeating requests for toys, screens, or food</li> <li>- Becoming upset when access is denied</li> <li>- Taking items from others</li> <li>- Refusing to transition away from a preferred activity</li> </ul>	 <p>Children quickly learn that certain behaviours help them gain access to something they want.</p>

### A Helpful Mindset Shift

When you notice challenging behaviour, **instead of asking:** “Why are you doing this?” or “How do I stop this behaviour?”

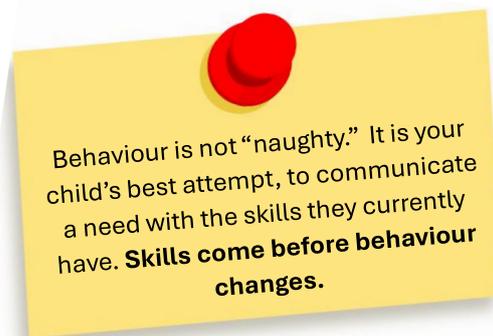
#### Try pausing and ask:

- “What is my child trying to tell me?” Behaviour often shows how your child is feeling. Naming emotions (e.g., frustrated, overwhelmed, excited, tired) helps your child feel understood.
- “What skill might they be missing?”
- “How can I help them succeed next time?”

**This shift helps you move from reacting in the moment to teaching skills over time.**

## Key Principles to Guide Your Response

- All behaviour has a purpose - your child is trying to meet a need. How a child meets that need may require guidance and support.
- Teaching an alternative behaviour works better than trying to stop a behaviour.
- New skills need practice, patience, and repetition.
- The **ABC framework** (Antecedent, Behaviour, Consequence) can help you understand patterns and respond intentionally.

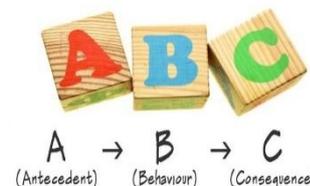


## Be a Behaviour Detective – Use the ABC Framework!



Using simple observations can help you understand *why* behaviours are happening. Over time, patterns often become clearer. Use the template below during everyday routines to notice:

- \* **Antecedent:** What happened just before?
- \* **Behaviour:** What did you see or hear?
- \* **Consequence:** What happened straight after?



You can also note how your child seems to be feeling—it can help you respond with empathy. This is not about getting it “right,” but about noticing patterns over time.

Date/ Time	Antecedent <i>What happened before?</i> <i>(Triggers/environment/ what was said?)</i>	Behaviour <i>What did your child do?</i>	Consequence <i>What happened after?</i> <i>(Your response; their response)</i>	Possible Purpose <i>sensory, escape, attention, tangible?</i>

### Example:

Date/ Time	Antecedent	Behaviour	Consequence	Possible Purpose
01/12 10am	Child watched sibling playing with iPad	Child approached sibling, hit her, and snatched the iPad	Sibling dropped iPad; child gained access to the iPad for a few minutes before parent intervened.	Tangible – behaviour reinforced because the child got the desired item
02/12 3.30pm	Child was asked to sit at the table to do a drawing activity	Child pushed chair away, flopped on the floor, and covered ears	Parent paused the activity and allowed child to stay on floor for 2 minutes before re-inviting them	Escape / Avoidance – child avoided the task temporarily

**Key point:** In both examples, the **child got something they wanted** (tangible reward or escape from task), so the behaviour was **strengthened**. The *consequence* is what *teaches the behaviour*. Even small changes in adult responses can make a big difference.

## Supporting Your Child in the Moment

When behaviour escalates, focus first on **safety and regulation**.

- **Stay calm** - a dysregulated adult cannot regulate a dysregulated child!

Your calm presence helps your child feel safe.

- **Connect before correcting** - empathy first, teaching later.

- **Name feelings/actions** to help them feel understood – “I see you really wanted that toy” or “it’s so frustrating that it isn’t working”

- **Support calming** - deep breaths, quiet space, movement, or comforting touch.



**Teaching happens best once your child is calm!**

## Strategies to Respond to Behaviour

Once you understand *why* the behaviour is happening, you can respond in ways that meet your child's needs and support calmer, more positive behaviour over time - often preventing challenges before they escalate.

### **If your child needs *sensory input*:**

- Offer safe alternatives such as movement breaks, fidget toys, chew necklaces or deep pressure.
- Build sensory activities into daily routines (stretching, dancing, outdoor play).



### **If your child is *seeking attention*:**

- Notice and acknowledge positive behaviours, not just challenging ones.
- Avoid giving extra attention (even scolding or long reactions) when your child seeks attention in negative ways—this can unintentionally reinforce the behaviour.
- Build in regular one-on-one connection time throughout the day, even for short moments.

### **If your child is *avoiding or escaping*:**

- Break tasks into smaller, achievable steps so they feel successful.
- Use visual supports, timers, and clear expectations.
- Offer choices to increase a sense of control.



### **If your child wants a *tangible item*:**

- Set clear, predictable boundaries.
- Teach asking, waiting, or turn-taking e.g. use a timer, visuals or token system to wait for turns
- Reinforce calm communication right away.

***The goal is not to remove the need - but to teach a better way to meet it.***

## Encouraging New Skills Over Time

- Model the behaviour you want to see.
- Practice in short, manageable moments.
- Praise effort and progress, not just outcomes.

## When to Seek Extra Support

- Behaviour is unsafe or very stressful
- Things don't seem to be improving
- You're unsure how to support routines, communication, or new skills

### **Where to start:**

Your child's early intervention team, school staff, or a family support professional.

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Approach behaviours with curiosity.  
Your relationship with your child matters  
more than getting it right every time.

**Small steps, repeated consistently,  
lead to lasting change!**