



⚡ Your Teen ⚡ Isn't Broken

Why Your Teen's
Behaviour Makes Sense

(even when it doesn't look like it)



A little guide to **understanding** what is happening
underneath behaviour, overwhelm, and shutdown.



It's not you.
It's their prefrontal cortex.



Your teen isn't ignoring you.



The overload underneath often isn't visible

When things escalate, your teen's nervous system is often under strain long before the behaviour appears. What looks like attitude, refusal, or shutting down can be a brain and body trying to cope with stress, overload, or too many demands at once.

As the nervous system becomes more overwhelmed, the thinking part of the brain becomes harder to access. Flexibility drops, emotions feel bigger, and reactions happen faster.

Behaviour is often the final output, not the starting point



Think of behaviour like a dashboard light

The light is not the problem, it is a signal that something underneath needs attention.



what you see



Pushback



Shutdown



Escalation



Refusal



their brain state



Overload



Stress



Reduced flexibility



Protective state



Instead of asking: *How do I stop this behaviour?*

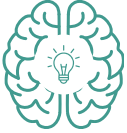
Try asking: *What is their brain struggling with right now?*





Your teen has two brain systems

Only one runs the show at a time ✨



The thinking system helps with thinking, planning, listening, and problem solving. This is the version of your teen you see when things are going smoothly.



The protective system is focused on safety. Its job is to react quickly and protect. It is fast, automatic, and not interested in discussion.



THINKING SYSTEM
thinks, plans,
solves problems.



These two systems do not work at full strength at the same time



PROTECTIVE SYSTEM
scans for danger,
reacts, protects



When the brain starts to read a situation as **stressful**, **overwhelming**, or **unfair**, the balance shifts. The **protective system** takes over and the **thinking system** steps back.

WHY THIS CAN BE SO CONFUSING *(and frustrating)* FOR WEARY PARENTS

The request may have been simple, but once the protective system takes over, even everyday demands can start to feel overwhelming or threatening to the brain.

When the brain feels overloaded, simple requests can start to feel like “too much” to the nervous system. The reaction is often bigger than the situation because the brain is responding as if there is a threat, not just a task.





WHAT PUSHES THE BRAIN INTO THIS STATE

These shifts build.
They don't come out of nowhere.

Some of the common drivers include:



Too many demands at once
When there is more to do than the brain can manage



Feeling rushed
Constant hurry keeps the brain in high alert.



Fatigue
When the brain and body has had enough.



Lack of control
When choices are limited or decisions are taken away.



Hunger
Low blood sugar makes regulation much harder.



Sensory overload
Too much noise, movement, light, or information to process.



Often it is not one big trigger, but a stack of smaller ones, like being told to 'hurry up', a noisy classroom, low phone battery, or a parent asking a second question too quickly. By the time you see the behaviour, the system is already under strain.





WHAT HELPS IN THE MOMENT

When the brain is overloaded, less is usually more.

WHAT USUALLY HAPPENS

(adds more stress)



Repeating instructions



Talking more



Raising the pressure



Adding consequences immediately



Trying to 'win' in the moment

VS

WHAT HELPS MORE

(lowers the load)



Fewer words



One clear step



Slower pace



Reducing pressure



Giving the brain time to come back online



When the nervous system is overloaded, the thinking part of the brain becomes harder to access. Lowering the intensity often works better than pushing harder at the behaviour.



Pushing harder in overloaded moments often builds more resistance. Feeling understood lowers the need to stay defensive.





Your teen isn't ignoring you.

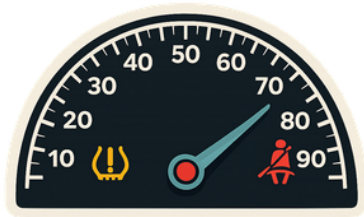


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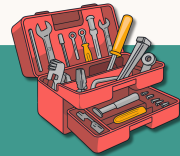




If this guide made something click

*your teen isn't broken
and neither are you!*

When you understand what is happening underneath the behaviour, the tricky moments at home can shift. You stop fighting the dashboard light and start asking what it is signalling.



Do you want more?

Free tools for your parenting toolkit, neuroscience insights without the jargon, and practical support for exhausted parents.

→ the-caffeinated-ot.com



About The Caffeinated OT

Hi, I'm Rebekah, an occupational therapist who works with teens and the parents and carers who love them. I aim to help families understand behaviour through a nervous-system and regulation lens, with practical strategies grounded in clinical practice and lived experience.



This guide offers general information for parents and carers. It is not a substitute for individualised assessment or therapy. If your teen's distress is escalating or you are worried about safety, please speak to a qualified health professional.

