



Dealing with Big Feelings

A Guide to Emotionally Challenging Behaviour in the Early Years

Emotionally challenging behaviour in the early years is one of the most common concerns practitioners raise - and one of the least straightforward to handle. A child who hits, hides, clings, or collapses into a full meltdown on the carpet isn't being naughty - they're communicating the only way they currently can. Understanding that difference changes everything about how you respond.

Children aged 0-5 are still building the brain architecture they need to manage strong emotions. The prefrontal cortex - the part responsible for impulse control, reasoning, and self-regulation - doesn't fully develop until a person's mid-twenties. So, when a 3-year-old throws a toy because their tower fell over, or a 2-year-old bites a friend in frustration, they're not making a choice. They're flooded.

This guide is for the practitioners on the floor managing these moments in real time, and for the managers building the culture and systems that support them. It covers 4 of the most common forms of emotionally challenging behaviour - tantrums and meltdowns, aggression, separation anxiety, and emotional withdrawal - and gives you practical, research-informed strategies you can use straight away.

Section 1: Understanding What's Really Going On

Behaviour is Communication

Before you can respond effectively to emotionally challenging behaviour in the early years, it helps to understand what the child is actually telling you. Every behaviour - even those that feel disruptive or distressing - is a message.

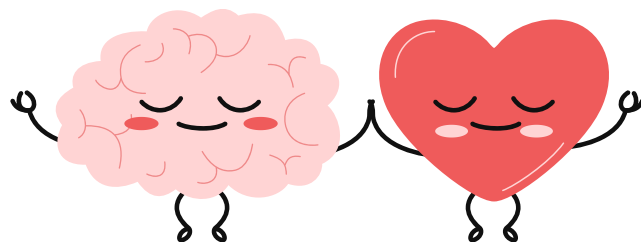
When you shift your frame from "how do I stop this?" to "what is this child telling me?", your whole approach changes. You move from managing behaviour to responding to a need - and that shift produces better outcomes for children, for practitioners, and for the setting as a whole.

KEY PRINCIPLE

Co-regulation before correction. A child who is flooded cannot learn, reason, or reflect. They need to feel safe first. Address the emotion before you address the behaviour.

The Role of Co-regulation

Children learn to regulate their emotions by borrowing the calm of the adults around them. This process is called co-regulation, and it's the foundation of every effective strategy in this guide. When a child is dysregulated, your first job isn't to correct them; it's to be a steady, regulated presence that their nervous system can anchor to.



This isn't soft parenting or permissiveness, it's neuroscience. A child in fight-or-flight cannot access the thinking part of their brain. Get them calm first. Reflect and learn together afterwards.

What Early Years Settings Need in Place

The most effective early years settings treat emotionally challenging behaviour as a whole-team responsibility - not something one keyperson manages alone. They invest in staff well-being alongside child well-being, because a practitioner who is stressed, unsupported, or burnt out cannot co-regulate effectively.

FOR MANAGERS

A setting's response to challenging behaviour is only as consistent as its staff training. CPD in emotional literacy, trauma-informed care, and behaviour management isn't a luxury - it's a safeguarding investment.

Section 2: Tantrums and Meltdowns - What's the Difference?

A tantrum is goal-directed. The child wants something and knows on some level that their behaviour might get them there. A meltdown is not goal-directed; the child has hit their sensory or emotional limit and lost access to rational thought entirely.

Responding to Tantrums

- **Stay calm** . Your energy is contagious.
- **Don't punish the emotion** . The behaviour might be unacceptable; the feeling underneath it isn't.
- **Name the feeling** . "You're really frustrated that you can't have the red cup."
- **Offer a limited choice** . "You can have the blue cup or the green cup - which one?"
- **Wait it out safely** . Stay nearby without engaging until they're ready to reconnect.

Responding to Meltdowns

- **Reduce stimulation** . Move the child away from noise, crowds, and bright light.
- **Don't try to reason or discipline** . The thinking brain is offline.
- **Use minimal language** . Short, quiet phrases. "I'm here. You're safe."
- **Match and then lead** . Slow your breathing visibly and let them follow.
- **Rebuild the connection afterwards** . Reconnect warmly before any reflection.

REMEMBER

Never try to process what happened during a meltdown while it's still happening. Reflection and learning come after connection - not before.

Prevention: Spotting Triggers

Keep a simple ABC observation log - Antecedent (what happened before), Behaviour (what the child did), Consequence (what happened after) - to spot patterns and adjust the environment before the child reaches their limit.

Section 3: Aggression and Hitting - Why It Happens

Aggression in young children is almost always a communication failure - not a character flaw. Biting is particularly common in children aged 1-3, peaking around 18-24 months - it's developmentally expected in that age group.

In the Moment

- Attend to the child who has been hurt first.
- Stay calm and brief with the aggressive child. "Biting hurts. We don't bite."
- Separate if needed - not as punishment, but to give both children space to regulate.
- Don't make the child apologise immediately.

KEY STRATEGY

Give children the words before they need them. Don't wait for an incident to start teaching emotional vocabulary - weave it into every part of the day.

Building Language as Prevention

Many instances of aggression reduce when children gain more language, so it's important to teach emotion words from the earliest age. Use visual emotion cards, feeling faces on mirrors, and stories with emotional content.



Section 4: Separation Anxiety - Supporting Transitions

Separation anxiety is a normal, healthy part of early development - it signals secure attachment. It peaks between 8 and 18 months and again around 2-3 years, but can occur at any age, particularly around starting a new setting, changing keyworker, or returning after illness.

TIP FOR FAMILIES

Brief and confident beats long and reassuring. Work with parents on the goodbye handover approach - it's one of the most impactful things they can do to support their child's settling.

Persistent Settling Difficulties

If a child is still struggling to settle after 6-8 weeks, or if their distress is escalating, it's worth having a deeper conversation with the family and considering when to involve the SENCO.

Section 5: Emotional Withdrawal - The Quiet Distress

The children who shout and hit tend to get the attention. The children who go quiet often don't - and withdrawal can signal just as much distress as aggression, sometimes more.

What Withdrawal Looks Like

- Becoming very still, flat, or blank-faced in situations that would usually engage them
- Repeatedly choosing solitary play and avoiding all social contact
- Appearing emotionally absent - present in body but not engaging
- Losing previously acquired language or social skills
- Not seeking adult comfort when hurt or upset
- Becoming very compliant - no resistance, no preferences, no protest

SAFEGUARDING NOTE

If a child's withdrawal is new or worsening, treat it as a safeguarding consideration until you understand the cause. Quiet distress is still distress.

Section 6: Building an Emotion-Friendly Setting

Your setting's physical environment either supports or undermines emotional regulation. Every setting should have a calm space - a cosy corner with cushions, low lighting, and sensory resources. Visual timetables help every child and are especially supportive for children with SEND.

FOR MANAGERS

Children learn emotional regulation by watching the adults around them. The most powerful 'emotion resource' in your setting is a regulated, caring, self-aware team.

Key Takeaways

- Emotionally challenging behaviour in the early years is communication, not naughtiness.
- Co-regulation comes before correction - get them calm first.
- Tantrums and meltdowns are different experiences and need different responses.
- Aggression is most often a language failure - build emotional vocabulary early and consistently.
- Brief, confident goodbyes support settling better than prolonged farewells.
- Emotional withdrawal is easy to overlook but just as important to respond to.
- Environment, staff culture, and family partnerships all shape how children experience emotion in your setting.

The strategies in this guide only work when your whole team is equipped to use them.

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