



NEURO NUGGET NEWS

Focusing on Learning About Your Brain to “Hack” Behavior

Thinking Brain vs. Survival Brain



In Month 1, we learned that the brain’s primary job is safety. When the brain senses stress or threat (real or perceived), it shifts priorities. This shift is often what changes behavior — sometimes quickly.

This month, we will focus on one of the most important brain-based concepts for caregivers and educators:

The brain operates in different states.

Understanding these states helps adults respond to behavior more effectively across home and school settings.



Two Brain States that Drive Behavior



Thinking Brain (Learning Mode)

This is when the brain is calm enough to learn, reflect, and make intentional choices.

When a child is in thinking brain mode, they are more likely to:

- Listen and follow directions
- Problem-solve and try again
- Use coping skills
- Accept correction
- Show empathy and flexibility

This is the state where teaching and skill-building are most effective.

Survival Brain (Protecting Mode)

This is when the brain senses stress, threat, or overwhelm and shifts into protection.

When a child is in survival brain mode, behavior may look like:

- Fight: arguing, yelling, defiance, aggression
- Flight: avoidance, refusal, leaving, distracting
- Freeze: shutdown, silence, “I don’t know,” stuck

In this state, the brain is not focused on learning. It is focused on safety.

Why the Brain Shifts into Survival Mode

Survival brain can be triggered by many things that are not “dangerous” in the traditional sense.

Common triggers include:

- Feeling embarrassed, corrected, or judged
- Sudden changes or transitions
- Sensory overload (noise, crowds, lighting)
- Hunger, fatigue, illness, or lack of sleep
- Social stress (peers, conflict, feeling left out)
- Academic frustration or feeling “not good enough”



When these stressors build up, the brain may react as if there is a threat — even when adults don’t see one.





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What Happens in the Brain

This is where the brain parts explained in our Month 1 newsletter connect.



When a child is in survival mode:

- The amygdala becomes more active (alarm system)
- The prefrontal cortex becomes less accessible (thinking/learning)
- The hippocampus becomes less effective (memory and learning)

This is why children may struggle to:

- Use words
- Remember expectations
- Think through consequences
- Access coping skills they “normally know”

Why This Matters for Caregivers and Educators

Caregivers and educators often respond to behavior by explaining expectations, correcting choices, or applying consequences. These strategies make sense — and they do work — when a child is in thinking brain mode. However, when a child is in survival brain mode, the brain is not available for learning. In these moments, the child may not be able to access reasoning, language, memory, or self-control in the way we expect. This is why lectures, consequences, or repeated reminders often feel like they “aren’t working” during big emotional moments.

Understanding brain state does not remove accountability or lower expectations. Children still need structure, boundaries, and opportunities to repair harm and learn better skills. What brain science teaches us is that the order matters:

1. Support the brain in returning to calm and safety
2. Reconnect and stabilize
3. Then teach, correct, problem-solve, and hold accountability



When adults respond in this sequence, children are more likely to learn from the moment, remember expectations, and build the skills needed for long-term behavior change.



Key Message to Carry Forward

Behavior is not only about choice. It is often about brain state. When caregivers and educators learn to recognize thinking brain vs. survival brain, they gain the ability to respond in ways that are calmer, clearer, and more effective.

