Neuro Nugget News

Focusing on learning about your brain to “hack” behavior



It’s Not Always Just One Thing

Have you ever noticed a child become upset over something that seems small, even though they handled a much bigger challenge earlier in the day? It can be tempting to focus only on what happened immediately before the behavior. However, behavior is often influenced by more than one moment.

Stress can build throughout the day. A difficult morning, a change in routine, a disagreement with a friend, a challenging assignment, or feeling overwhelmed by noise and activity can all add to a child’s stress. By the time one more thing happens, their ability to manage frustration may already be stretched thin.

Think of stress like a cup slowly filling with water. Each stressful experience adds a little more. When the cup is nearly full, even a small additional stressor can cause it to overflow. Children may not always have the words to explain what they are experiencing, so their stress may show up through behavior instead.



What Happens in the Brain?



Remember the **Survival Brain** and **Thinking Brain** we explored in earlier issues? When stress increases, the brain becomes more focused on responding to potential threats and less available for complex thinking, flexible problem-solving, and impulse control.

The amygdala helps detect potential threats and activate the body's stress response. Meanwhile, the prefrontal cortex, which supports decision-making and self-control, may become less effective when stress is intense. This can make it harder for children to pause, consider consequences, communicate their needs, or use skills they have successfully used before.

Stress affects everyone differently. Some children may become louder or more argumentative, while others may withdraw, avoid tasks, become unusually quiet, or have difficulty getting started. These behaviors do not automatically mean stress is the cause, but they can be clues worth exploring.

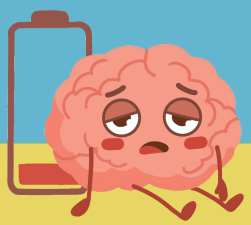
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Look Beyond the Behavior

When a child reacts strongly, our first instinct may be to focus on the immediate behavior: What happened? What rule was broken? What consequence is needed? Those questions matter, but it can also help to look at the bigger picture. Has the child had a difficult day? Have there been changes in routine? Are they tired, hungry, worried, or struggling with something they have not shared?

Recognizing accumulated stress does not excuse hurtful behavior or remove accountability. Instead, it helps us understand what may be contributing to the behavior so we can respond effectively. We can support a child in calming down, maintain appropriate boundaries, and return to teaching and accountability when they are ready to learn.



Your October Brain Hack: Check the Stress Cup

Try this simple activity with a child during a calm moment. Draw a cup on a piece of paper and explain that everyone has a stress cup. Ask the child what kinds of things fill theirs. Their answers might include homework, loud noises, friendship problems, changes in plans, or feeling rushed.

Next, talk about what helps their cup empty a little. They might say taking a break, moving their body, talking to a trusted adult, listening to music, or having some quiet time. Keep the drawing somewhere accessible and revisit it when needed. If a child becomes overwhelmed, you can gently ask, “How full is your stress cup right now?” This can help children recognize their stress before it becomes too much and communicate what support they need.

The Take Away

Behavior does not happen in isolation. Sometimes, what looks like an overreaction to one small event is the result of stress that has been building for hours or even days. Look beyond the moment. Recognize the stress. Support regulation. Maintain expectations. When caregivers and educators recognize the signs of accumulating stress, they can help children develop awareness of their own needs, build healthier coping skills, and learn more effective ways to respond.

Looking Ahead

In November, Neuro Nugget News will explore triggers—why certain situations, words, or experiences can activate a strong response and how caregivers and educators can recognize patterns and help prevent escalation.

