

July 13, 2025

Why Is My Child Acting Out?

The Brain Science Behind Big Behaviors—and What to Do About Them

Parenting is full of moments that catch us off guard. A child throws their shoes across the room because it's the "wrong" color. They shout, "You're not my friend" when it's time to leave the playground. Or they suddenly shut down and seem unreachable.

And we're left wondering: *What just happened?*

The good news? There's almost always a reason, and once we understand what's going on in the brain, those confusing moments start to make a lot more sense.

Here's a simple framework we use at DJP to help decode behavior and respond with confidence: [The Conscious Discipline Brain State Model](#).

Why use a brain state model?

Behavior is only the tip of the iceberg. Underneath every "why are they doing this?!" moment is a nervous system working hard to feel safe, seen, and in control. Brain state models give us a way to *understand* what's going on beneath the surface— so we can respond to the developmental need behind the behavior, not just the behavior itself.

Instead of reacting with frustration, we begin to respond with clarity and connection. It's not about letting kids "get away with it"—it's about recognizing what skills or support they're missing so we can teach instead of punish.

● Survival State: "Am I safe?"

This is the brain's emergency alarm system. When kids feel threatened (even by something we don't see as scary—like a sudden "no" or a big transition), their brain goes into fight, flight, freeze, or fawn mode. In this state, logic and language go out the window. They aren't trying to be difficult—they literally can't access the skills we're asking for.

You might see:

- Hitting, biting, yelling
- Running away or hiding
- Shutting down completely

What helps: Your calm body and voice. Gentle presence. A steady, assertive tone that says, *"You're safe. I'm here."*

● Emotional State: "Am I loved?"

Once kids begin to feel safer, they often move into the Emotional State. This is where big feelings show up—sadness, frustration, anxiety. Kids in this state want to feel seen, heard, and accepted... but they may not ask for it in the kindest way.

You might see:

- Whining, clinging, "overreacting"
- Defiance, perfectionism, or exclusion
- Very black and white thinking

What helps: Connection. Eye contact. Saying, *"You're upset, and I get it. I'm here to help."*

● Executive State: "What can I learn?"

This is the ideal state for problem-solving, learning, and collaboration. Kids can reflect on their choices, manage emotions, and show empathy—but *only if their brain feels safe and connected first.*

You might see:

- Trying again after a mistake (**great time to teach a new skill!**)
- Sharing, apologizing, helping
- Willingness to talk or listen

What helps: After the storm has passed, it's the perfect time to teach a new skill, invite collaboration, and guide your child in solving problems together—an approach that builds critical thinking, empathy, and real-world resilience.

What This Means for Us as Parents:

Each brain state comes with a different *developmental need*: safety, connection, or problem-solving. When we recognize what state our child is in, we can meet that need— *before* trying to manage the behavior.

- That might mean taking a breath instead of raising your voice.

- It might mean pausing the conversation until everyone's calm.
- It might mean saying, *"We'll figure this out together"* or *"How can I be helpful?"*

Young children don't learn from punishment or panic. They learn from safety, connection, and cooperation. You don't have to be perfect. Just aware, willing, and steady enough to convey, *"I'm here, even when it's hard."*

You've got this!

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