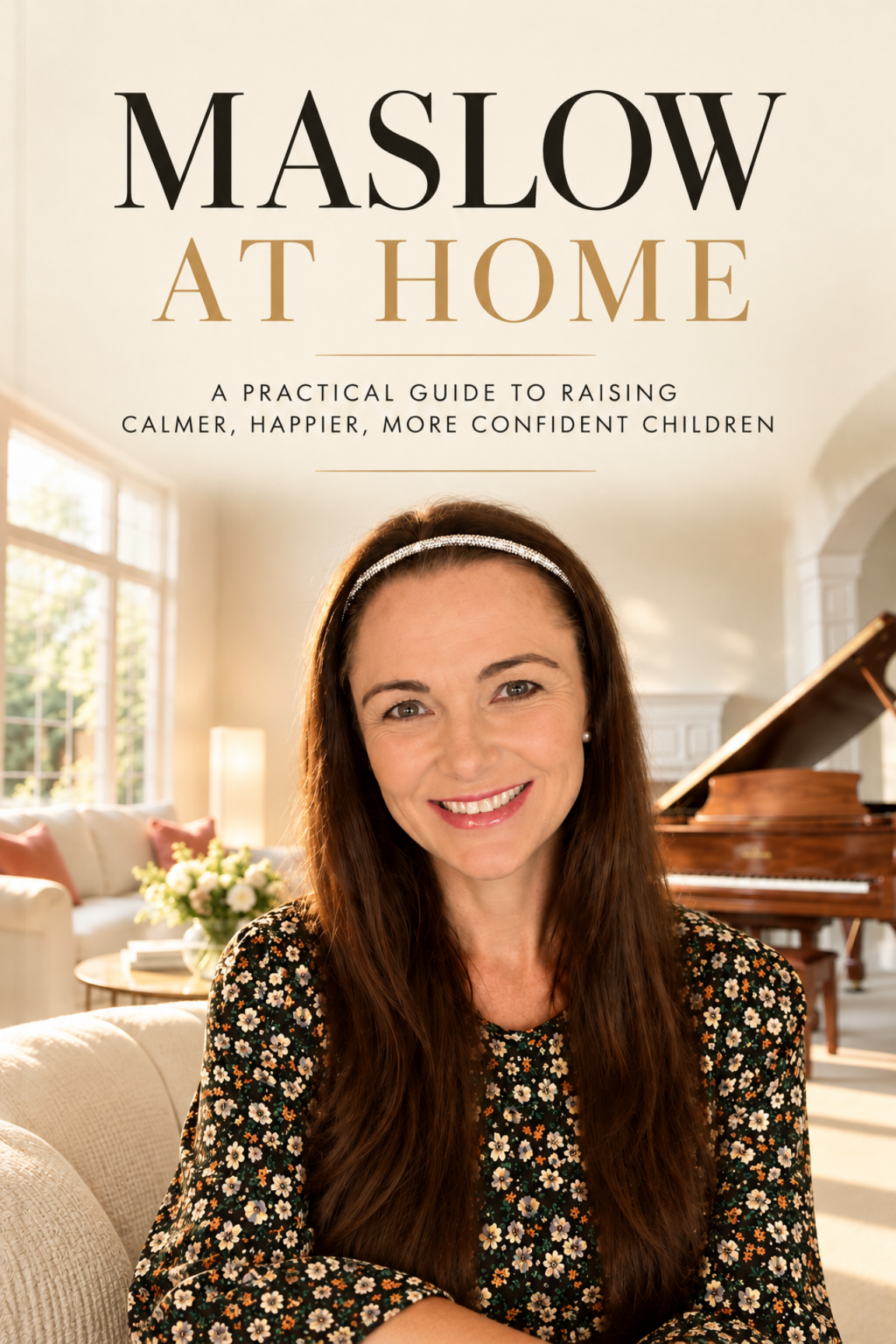
# MASLOW AT HOME

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO RAISING
CALMER, HAPPIER, MORE CONFIDENT CHILDREN



CHAPTER ONE

# Maslow Before Everything

*Understanding the needs behind your child's behaviour*

## 8:15 a.m. And Everything Is Falling Apart

It's 8:15 in the morning. You should have left the house fifteen minutes ago.

One shoe has disappeared. So has your eldest child's homework. Your phone pings. It's the school WhatsApp group, where the self-appointed Queen Bee has helpfully reminded everyone that today is the day children must bring a £1 donation, a tombola prize or some other mysteriously essential item for the latest non-uniform day. Damn it! Kids are in their uniforms already and there's no time to change. And there's no £1. I mean, who has cash nowadays?! Oh, and swimming has moved from Wednesday to Tuesday. Because apparently, Tuesdays needed another challenge.

One child has cried twice. There has been a full-scale refusal to wear their school jumper. Breakfast has become a hunger strike because your child no longer eats that cereal. You bought it yesterday. They loved it yesterday. Today, apparently, it is completely unacceptable.

Everything is frantic. You are frantic.

Eventually, you get everyone into the car and arrive at school late. You feel as though you have completed a military operation, only to

realise that the packed lunch is still sitting on the kitchen counter.

Again.

Cue more tears, because your child hates school dinners, and the thought of an unexpected change to their day is enough to push them over the edge.

I hear you. I really do. That was me during those first couple of years of school life.

If you recognise this scene, I want you to know something before we go any further. You are not necessarily doing anything wrong. Your child is not necessarily being deliberately difficult. And your morning does not have to be a daily battle simply because that is how it has always been.

Sometimes, the problem is not the child. Sometimes, we need to look at the demands we are placing on them, the environment around them and the needs they are bringing into the day.

After seven years working in schools, including a substantial amount of time in early years and infant settings, I began to look at children's behaviour differently. I saw how tiredness, hunger, worry, uncertainty and emotional overload could affect a child's ability to concentrate, cooperate and learn.

I also began to understand just how much the little things matter.

A missing jumper. A rushed breakfast. A night of poor sleep. An unexpected change to the timetable.

Individually, these things might seem insignificant. Together, they can make a child's day much harder before it has even begun.

That realisation changed the way I approached parenting. It also led me to a principle that sits at the heart of my approach: before we ask more of a child, we need to consider what they are already carrying.

# Meet Maslow

Abraham Maslow was an American psychologist who introduced his theory of human motivation in a 1943 paper called A *Theory of Human Motivation*. His hierarchy of needs is now commonly illustrated as a pyramid, although the familiar pyramid is a later visual representation of his ideas.

The five levels are physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation.

## Level One: Physiological Needs

At the bottom are the essentials.

Food. Water. Sleep. Warmth. Rest. Physical comfort.

These needs sound obvious, yet they are easy to overlook when family life gets busy.

Imagine expecting a child to concentrate after a poor night's sleep, or to be patient when they are hungry, too hot, too cold or physically uncomfortable.

We might see irritability, silliness, refusal or poor concentration and assume our child is deliberately pushing boundaries.

But what if their body is simply telling them that something is wrong?

When your child is struggling, the first question need not be, "How do I stop this behaviour?" Try asking: "What does my child need physically right now?"

Have they eaten? Have they had enough to drink? Are they tired? Do they need the toilet? Are they uncomfortable? Have they had any opportunity to rest?

Sometimes the answer will not resolve everything. Sometimes it will make a surprising difference.

## Level Two: Safety

Safety is about more than protecting a child from physical danger. It is also about predictability, stability, and knowing what to expect.

Children often cope better when they know what to expect. Familiar routines and clear expectations can reduce uncertainty. Knowing who is collecting them, what happens next or whether an activity has changed can make the day feel more manageable.

Consider the difference between two mornings.

In one household, a child wakes without knowing whether they are going to breakfast club or being driven to school. Their uniform is in a pile of washing, nobody can find the school bag and everyone is rushing. The stress builds with every new problem.

In another, the uniform is ready, the bag is packed and the child knows what the morning will look like. Difficult moments can still happen, but the day begins with fewer unknowns.

The second child has fewer things to worry about before they have even left the house.

Predictability can be particularly helpful for some neurodivergent children. An unexpected change to the school day may feel enormous to a child who finds changes difficult to process, even if it seems minor to an adult.

This is one reason I believe preparation matters so much.

It is not about creating a perfectly controlled household. It is about making the world a little easier for a child to navigate.

## Level Three: Love and Belonging

Children need to feel that they matter.

They need connection, affection, attention, and a sense of belonging within their family and the wider world.

This does not mean a parent must be endlessly available or solve every difficult moment with a cuddle. Children need enough warmth and connection to know they are loved, even when their behaviour is challenging.

Connection might mean listening to a story that seems unimportant, sharing a joke, offering a cuddle before bed or putting your phone down long enough to listen properly.

Sometimes it is simply making sure that, after a difficult day, your child knows the relationship is still secure.

Children need boundaries, but boundaries and connection are not opposites. A child can be told that a behaviour is unacceptable while still being reassured that they are loved.

When a child feels connected to the people around them, they have a stronger foundation from which to manage disappointment, recover from mistakes, and face challenges.

### Level Four: Esteem

Esteem is about feeling capable, valued, and respected.

Children need opportunities to experience success, develop competence, and build confidence in their own abilities.

Notice that this is not the same as telling a child they are brilliant at everything. Real confidence grows when children try something difficult, learn from mistakes and improve with practice. It is strengthened when their efforts are recognised and they are trusted with responsibilities suited to their age and ability.

A child who struggles academically may need help recognising strengths elsewhere. A child who fears mistakes may need reassurance that getting things wrong is part of learning. A child

who often hears what they cannot do needs opportunities to discover what they can.

The aim is not to protect children from every disappointment. It is to help them develop the confidence to meet challenges.

When children feel capable, they are more likely to approach new experiences with curiosity rather than immediately assuming they will fail.

### Level Five: Self-Actualisation

At the top of the pyramid is the opportunity to grow into your potential.

For a child, this might mean drawing, exploring science, writing stories, learning an instrument, solving difficult problems or becoming absorbed in an interest.

It is the joy of curiosity. The freedom to explore. The opportunity to discover who you are and what you might become.

This is the level we often focus on when we talk about education and achievement. We want children to learn, develop skills, become independent, and have opportunities to pursue their ambitions.

Those are worthwhile goals.

Maslow's pyramid reminds us that children are more than their achievements. Their physical, emotional and social needs shape the conditions in which they live and learn.

We cannot meet every need perfectly or remove every obstacle. We can pay attention to the foundations that make growth more possible.

Maslow's hierarchy is not a rigid staircase, and children do not need perfect conditions before they can learn. It is a reminder that children are whole people, and what is happening in their lives can

affect what they can manage in a given moment.

A hungry, exhausted, worried or overwhelmed child may need support with those needs before they can fully engage with a lesson. A child who feels secure, connected and capable may have more energy available for learning. Research also suggests that needs are associated with wellbeing without necessarily being fulfilled in a fixed sequence.

In education, this is sometimes summed up as “Maslow before Bloom”: learning does not happen separately from the person doing it.

And that brings me to one of the most useful ways I have found to understand it.

## The Empty Cup and the Full Cup

Imagine two children arriving at school on the same morning.

Child A wakes up in a cold house. The heating has not been on because the family is struggling with the cost. There is only one school jumper, and it has gone missing. Breakfast is skipped because everyone is running late. The child walks to school in the rain, tired after a night of poor sleep and still carrying the worry of hearing their parents argue the evening before.

By the time Child A walks through the school gates, their cup may already be running on empty.

Child B wakes in a warm home after a good night’s sleep. There are cuddles and affection before the day begins. Breakfast is a choice, their uniform is ready, their belongings are organised, and they arrive at school feeling prepared for the day ahead.

Child B arrives with a much fuller cup.

Neither child is more intelligent than the other. Neither has more potential simply because of the circumstances they were born into. But they are arriving at school with very different experiences behind them.

Now imagine that learning is being poured into those cups.

For Child B, the learning has somewhere to land. For Child A, the learning may sink to the bottom because so much energy is already being used to cope with everything else.

That is the thinking behind my empty-cup analogy.

> **Child A. Empty cup. Learning sinks.**
>
> **Child B. Full cup. Learning lands.**

When a child came in upset, I would gently ask a few simple questions, in a particular order. Had they slept okay last night? What had they had for breakfast? Had they brought everything they needed for the day?

If they had arrived without a coat on a cold day, or were missing their jumper or cardigan, I would go straight to the spare clothing box and find something to keep them warm. If they hadn't eaten breakfast, I would pop to the staff room and get them a snack. And if they had slept badly, I would ask whether they would like a hug, then make a point of giving them extra reassurance throughout the day.

These weren't complicated interventions. They were small, practical acts of care, but they could make a real difference to how a child felt and how well they managed the day ahead.

Before expecting a child to concentrate, learn, manage their emotions or cope with the demands of the classroom, I wanted to make sure we had first considered the basics. Sometimes, what

looked like a difficult day or challenging behaviour was a child trying to manage without something they needed.

That is why meeting a child's needs matters. It is not about making excuses for every behaviour or expecting every child to arrive at school perfectly happy. It is about recognising that children do not all start the day with the same reserves.

The cup analogy is a reminder, not a diagnosis. A full cup cannot guarantee that learning will be easy, and an empty cup does not mean a child cannot learn. It reminds us to consider what a child may need before deciding what their behaviour means.

And while we cannot control everything that happens in a child's life, we can often do more than we realise to reduce the avoidable stress they carry into the school day.

For me, that starts the evening before.

## Looking After Tomorrow's Morning Tonight

Every evening, I make sure everything is ready for the following day before I go to bed.

My boys' uniforms are hung on the outside of their wardrobes, ready to put on as soon as they wake up. Fresh socks and underwear are placed underneath. On PE days, the correct kit is laid out; on uniform days, the uniform is ready.

This is particularly helpful for younger children just starting school. It gives them a visual reminder of what kind of day is coming. For some children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), predictable visual cues are especially valuable.

Once a routine becomes familiar, the uniform itself can signal what happens next. It can help a child understand that tomorrow is a

school day, not a weekend, without you having to explain the whole morning before they have even got dressed.

I still pack both my boys' school bags. One is eleven and the other is fourteen. I know that might surprise some people, and I will explain why I take that approach shortly.

Water bottles are washed and left by the sink, ready to be filled. Lunches are prepared and placed in the fridge next to the milk, so they are one of the first things I see when I open the door. I take them out there and then and put them straight into the school bags.

Shoes are found before bedtime and placed by the front door. Coats and bags go in the same place.

Once a month, I print an A4 calendar for the family. Every Friday evening, I read the school newsletters and update it. That gives me the weekend to find anything we need for the following week, rather than discovering at 8:10 on Monday morning that someone needs a costume, a special book or an item of sports equipment.

Baths and showers happen the night before, too, leaving teeth brushing and washing faces for the morning. I choose my own clothes, put out my underwear and pack my bag as well.

You might be thinking that sounds very organised. It is. But I see it this way: the present version of me is looking after the future version of me.

The me who is tired tomorrow morning deserves a little help from the me who has more time tonight.

These routines are not about creating a perfect household. They are about removing as many avoidable decisions and last-minute problems as possible, so that the morning has a better chance of starting calmly.

And that brings me to a part of my approach that I know not everyone will agree with.

## My Children Have One Job

What part do my children play in all this organisation?

None. Absolutely none.

Before you shout at the page that children need to learn personal responsibility, please hear me out.

I understand the argument. Children need to develop independence. They need to learn how to manage their belongings, organise their time and take responsibility for themselves. I am not suggesting otherwise.

But I do not believe that every practical responsibility has to be handed to a child at the earliest possible opportunity, regardless of what else they are being asked to manage.

In my home, I deliberately take responsibility for the school-day logistics because I want my boys to have one main expectation: to work hard in their lessons and learn as well as they can.

I want them to leave the house clean, dressed appropriately, with their schoolwork, PE kit, water bottle and everything else they need. I want them to arrive ready to learn, rather than already stressed because they cannot find something or have forgotten an item they were expected to remember.

I have seen the difference this approach makes in my own children. I have also worked in schools and seen how differently children can arrive when they are tired, unsettled, hungry or overwhelmed.

This is an area where my approach may go against the mainstream parenting narrative. We often hear that children must do more for

themselves to become independent. But I think we sometimes need to ask a different question: what is the most useful thing for this child to be concentrating on right now?

A child's ability to remember every item on a school checklist is not a measure of their intelligence, their potential or their character. Planning, remembering, prioritising and managing competing demands are skills that develop over time. Children vary in how readily they manage them, and some need more support than others.

People sometimes ask why I pack the school bags, but there is a distinction worth making here. I only pack my eldest's sports kit. His schoolwork and everything else he needs for school are his responsibility.

Since Year 5, he has also managed his own homework timetable completely independently. I don't get involved at all. For me, that is where I am teaching him organisation, accountability and independence.

If he forgets to do something, he is the one who has to speak to his teacher and face the consequences. I don't step in to rescue him or make excuses on his behalf. He has to learn to manage his own responsibilities, and that includes understanding what happens when he doesn't.

And you know what? It works brilliantly.

For me, there is a difference between providing the foundations a child needs to succeed and taking away every opportunity for them to learn how to manage life for themselves. One is support. The other can prevent them from developing the very skills we want them to have.

You are not doing everything for your children. You are deciding carefully which responsibilities belong to you and which belong to

them. The important distinction I am making is that support and independence are not opposites.

If I can remove an unnecessary source of stress from the morning, I will. That does not mean my boys will never learn to organise themselves. It means I am choosing where to direct my expectations now.

I call this Master of One.

For my family, the one thing that matters most is that my boys learn well and do their best with their schoolwork. I have never put excessive pressure on them to achieve a particular grade or be the best in the class. Instead, I encourage progress: taking the next step from wherever they are now.

My eldest won an academic scholarship to study at a private boarding school. At the end of Year Eight, the school awarded him the Harden Award, a recognition he could not apply for himself. The school chose him for his leadership qualities.

As I write this, my youngest, who is due to start senior school next September, has been shortlisted to apply for the same academic scholarship.

I do not share those things because I believe my approach is the only reason for their achievements. Children are individuals, and their outcomes are influenced by many things. I share them because I have seen my boys flourish while I have deliberately taken responsibility for the practical details that help them get through the school day.

I make sure they have what they need. Their job is to make the most of the opportunity.

## Master of One, Not Master of Everything

Every family has different priorities. Every child has different talents, needs and interests. There is no single formula that works for everyone.

But think for a moment about how much we can expect a child to manage.

We want them to remember all their belongings, keep their bedroom tidy, do their chores, eat their vegetables, be kind and compassionate, work hard at school, excel at sport, learn a musical instrument and perhaps a second language. We may also expect them to attend several clubs, play matches at weekends, complete homework and keep up with extra practice.

Every one of those things can be worthwhile. The problem is not necessarily the activities themselves. It is the cumulative weight of the expectations.

A child can end up feeling that every part of their life is another test they must pass to keep the adults around them happy.

Some children respond with tears, arguments and meltdowns. Others become very quiet and compliant. They may appear to be coping, but they can become reluctant to speak up, take risks or try something they might get wrong.

During my years working in schools, particularly in early years and infant settings, I saw children who rarely volunteered an answer even when I knew they knew it. Sadly, I also saw children with extracurricular activities timetabled every night. When it came to the playground, they didn't know how to play. That does not tell us everything about their home lives, of course, and quietness alone is not evidence that a child is unhappy. But it did make me think about the space children need to explore, make mistakes and simply be children.

Amy Chua's book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* brought one particular style of intensive parenting into public discussion. I do not want to use one book to make generalisations about Chinese families or culture. Families within every culture are diverse, and parents have different reasons for the choices they make.

What interests me here is a broader question that applies to all of us: what happens when a child's timetable is so full of adult expectations that there is little room left for rest, unstructured play, curiosity or choosing something simply because they enjoy it?

Think about your own life for a moment. Are you managing a demanding career, regular exercise, harmonious relationships, a spotless home and community commitments, all while feeling healthy and well rested?

Most adults struggle to keep every part of life perfectly balanced. We have years of experience, and even we cannot manage everything all the time.

So why do we sometimes expect children, whose planning and self-management skills are still developing, to do exactly that?

Master of One is not about limiting a child's potential. It is about choosing where to place the greatest emphasis, rather than making every area of life equally important.

If your main priority is that your child works hard and makes progress at school, think carefully before turning bedroom chores, sporting performance and every other activity into additional tests of success. If your family's priority is a particular sport or creative talent, your main expectation might look different.

The important thing is to choose one meaningful expectation that your child can realistically work towards.

That does not mean your child is excused from every other responsibility. It means you decide where to apply the strongest

pressure and where to offer support, encouragement and room to develop naturally.

## Let Responsibility Grow

I have zero expectations of my boys to do chores!

And guess what? My eldest has chosen to take responsibility for the garden without being asked. He waters the plants, mows the lawn and prunes where needed. He has also started taking responsibility for washing the car and checking the tyre and oil pressures.

My youngest is a different character altogether. He is what I can only describe as a unicorn: he goes about the house making zero mess in the first place!

They are different children, and their strengths show up differently.

My eldest has chosen a wide range of commitments at school. Alongside his academic work, he plays rugby, plays the piano and organ, attends painting classes, contributes to the audiovisual production team for school concerts and performances, serves as head server in the school chapel and helps with gardening in the community.

He is often at school until ten o'clock at night, and during one term he also attended school every Saturday and Sunday by choice. That, by the way, is when you know the school you have chosen is excellent.

Those are substantial commitments. But they are not a list I handed him and told him to complete. They are things he has chosen to pursue himself.

That distinction matters to me.

I am not saying children will automatically discover every talent if we leave them alone. Children need opportunities, encouragement, guidance and boundaries. They sometimes need us to help them try something new before they know whether they will enjoy it.

But there is a difference between opening a door and pushing a child through it because we have decided they ought to excel at whatever lies on the other side.

When we decide what matters most in our family, we can make room for children to develop in their own way. We can support their interests without turning every interest into an obligation.

## Masking and the After-School Explosion

A child may be described by school as delightful and well behaved, only to fall apart as soon as they get into the car or walk through the front door. The trigger may appear tiny: the wrong colour cup, a question asked at the wrong moment or a request to hang up a coat. Parents can be left wondering why they seem to see a side of their child that no one else does.

One term used to describe a related pattern is after-school restraint collapse. Parenting educator Andrea Loewen Nair has written about the way the effort of managing behaviour, emotions and expectations throughout the day can leave a child with very little capacity to keep holding everything together by the time they return home.

Children spend much of the school day following rules, navigating friendships, sitting still, meeting expectations and managing feelings. Some children, particularly some neurodivergent children, may also work hard to hide or compensate for difficulties in order to fit in. This is often discussed as masking. Experiences vary from child to child, but the effort of getting through a demanding day can

be exhausting.

When a child finally reaches a place where they feel safe enough to let go, the feelings they have been containing may emerge all at once. An after-school outburst does not automatically mean that a parent has done something wrong. It may be a sign that the child has reached the limit of what they can manage at that moment.

It can be tempting to greet a child with a string of questions and instructions: How was your day? Hang up your coat. Have you got homework? Why is your jumper like that? But a child who is already depleted may experience these demands as one more thing to manage.

A calmer response is to allow some decompression time. Offer a familiar place to relax and let the child choose what helps them settle, whether that is spending time alone, watching something, gaming, chatting to a friend or simply doing very little. Avoid forcing a conversation immediately. Questions require attention and decisions, and the child may not yet have the capacity to answer them.

In our home, I have learned to pay attention to the patterns. My eldest often spends long days at school. He genuinely enjoys being there and sometimes chooses to go in at weekends, too. Even so, by Thursday he can be running on empty. When I collect him, I ask how he is once and then give him quiet space. Often, about an hour later, he is ready to talk and tells me about his day. Waiting until he is ready works better for us than demanding a conversation as soon as he gets into the car.

The practical lesson is to become a detective rather than a judge. Notice when your child finds things hardest. Consider what happened earlier in the day, whether anything changed at school or home, and whether your child might be tired, hungry, overstimulated or worried. Behaviour is information. It can help us

identify a need that has not been met.

> **Keep one sentence close: your child is not giving you a hard time; your child is having a hard time. Remembering that in a difficult moment can change the way you respond.**

## When the Parent Needs to Change First

When my children were three and seven, we were going through a difficult period at home. Their behaviour felt hard to manage, so I brought in a behaviourist to help. The advice I received was painful to hear: when there is upset, dysregulation and defiance in a household, it is often the parent who needs to change first, rather than the child.

My instinct was to become defensive. It is difficult to hear that something you are doing may be contributing to a situation you desperately want to improve. But I chose to sit with the advice rather than dismiss it, and that decision became one of the most important in my parenting.

The hopeful part is that adults have opportunities to change the conditions around a child. Children look to the adults around them for cues about how to respond to difficult moments. When an adult meets distress with more distress, the situation can escalate. When an adult can offer steadiness, it gives the child something calmer to respond to.

Saying that a parent may need to change first is not the same as saying everything is the parent's fault. It means recognising where we may have influence. We cannot control every feeling or reaction our children have, but we can work on our own responses and the

environment we create.

One resource that helped me was 1-2-3 *Magic* by Thomas Phelan, a parenting book aimed at families with children around toddler to primary-school age. Its approach encourages parents to avoid lengthy lectures and emotional arguments when addressing certain behaviours. Instead, parents use brief, calm warnings and a predictable consequence, while also making room for encouragement, routines and connection. Any discipline approach needs to be adapted to the individual child and used with warmth and good judgement. The goal is not to suppress a child's feelings but to respond consistently without adding unnecessary emotional intensity.

This connects with Maslow's idea of safety. When expectations and responses are predictable, children have a clearer sense of what will happen next. A calm adult can help make that predictability possible.

## Try It Tonight

Have every scrap of uniform ready to put on. Pack all the bags. Put the water bottles where you'll see them. Find the shoes and coats and put them by the door. Prepare the lunches and put them in the fridge, somewhere you'll easily spot them in the morning.

Remove as many of tomorrow morning's decisions as you can tonight.

If you're already doing all of this, great! Carry on reading.

In my opinion, around 60% of behaviour issues could be resolved, or significantly improved, by understanding and applying Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The answers to the other 40%? You'll find them further along in this book.

Maslow's hierarchy reminds us to look at the foundations. The empty-cup analogy reminds us that children arrive with different reserves. Master of One asks us to think carefully about what we expect of them once they get there.

You cannot control every difficulty your child will face. You cannot fill their cup perfectly every day. But you can look for ways to reduce avoidable stress, meet the needs you can meet and choose your expectations with care.

Sometimes, a calmer home does not begin with asking a child to do more.

Sometimes, it begins with deciding what they do not need to carry yet.

## Further Reading

Maslow, A. H. (1943). A Theory of Human Motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370-396. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346

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