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Before Behaviour Escalates

From Regulation to Resilience in SEND

A practical exploration of what can sit beneath visible behaviour, why regulation is the beginning rather than the end of resilience, and how shared language can help adults and young people intervene earlier.

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A young person refuses to start a piece of work. Another becomes silent during a transition. Someone else argues, walks out, begins controlling everyone around them or becomes increasingly aggressive.

We see the behaviour because behaviour is visible. But what we see is usually quite late in the process.

Something has already happened.

The young person has noticed, expected or interpreted something as a threat. They may fear getting something wrong, being embarrassed, losing control, being rejected, facing a consequence or simply not knowing what is going to happen next. Their options begin to narrow, and that narrowing shapes the response that follows.

After many years working with complex behaviour, I became increasingly interested in the machinery underneath it. The more clearly we can see that machinery, the less mysterious behaviour becomes. Better understanding does not remove every difficult situation, but it gives both young person and adult more confidence and more useful ways to respond.

Regulation is essential, but it is the beginning

There is already a great deal of good work happening in schools around emotional regulation and co-regulation. It provides an important foundation.

A young person who is overwhelmed, frightened or highly aroused may not be ready to reason through a problem or learn from what is happening. Sometimes the first job is simply to reduce pressure, provide safety, regulate alongside them and help enough capacity return.

But regulation is an essential first step. On its own, it does not complete the process of resilience.

Once the young person is sufficiently available again, another question appears: what happens next?

Can they recognise what happened, separate the fear from the whole reality of the situation, identify what choices remain, take an appropriate action and learn from the outcome?

That is where regulation begins to develop into capability.

Behaviour is a cycle

Most people working with children already look for reasons behind behaviour. We ask why something happened and what the young person may have been feeling.

The difficulty is that “why?” is a very large question.

Threat Perception → Pre-Cognitive Fear → Appraisal or Interpretation → Feeling → Action → Outcome → Feedback

The point is not to turn staff or pupils into amateur psychologists. It is to give us a shared map.

A refusal may begin with fear of failure. An argument may begin with a perceived loss of control. Withdrawal may follow uncertainty, overload or a threat to connection.

But today’s behaviour is not always about today’s event alone. Difficult cycles can remain poorly resolved and repeat. Another can begin before the pressure from the last one has settled. Over time, cycles can loop and stack, carrying frustration, uncertainty, stress and expectation forward.

That is how something that looks like an immediate reaction can sometimes be carrying much more than the immediate situation.

Fear can then organise familiar protective responses such as fighting, fleeing or freezing, alongside avoidance, appeasement or shutdown. Fear itself is not the problem. Fear is a signal that something has been perceived as threatening.

What matters next is how accurately the situation is understood, what response follows and what the young person learns from the outcome.

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Feedback travels forward. If avoidance removes an uncomfortable demand, avoidance may become more attractive next time. If aggression produces distance or control, aggression may acquire a short-term usefulness. If asking for help produces a manageable outcome, that becomes available learning too.

Repeated cycles leave traces. Outcomes and feedback shape what a young person expects from themselves, other people and similar situations, influencing confidence, behaviour and identity.

Behaviour teaches. The question is what it is teaching.

Human behaviour is overwhelmingly needs-driven

Much of everyday human behaviour makes more sense when we understand what the person is trying to fulfil, protect, restore or balance.

Within my own work, I use seven broad human needs as a practical way of understanding what may be driving or influencing behaviour: **Stability, Change, Connection, Significance, Development, Input and Autonomy.**

They are deliberately ordinary words. Stability covers safety and predictability; Change, novelty and stimulation; Connection, belonging; Significance, having a valued place; Development, learning and progress; Input, contribution; and Autonomy, agency, choice and meaningful influence.

These needs do not operate one at a time. They form a changing pattern.

A young person refusing a task may feel that their need for Development is under pressure because they expect another failure. Significance may matter because peers are watching, Autonomy may feel reduced if there is no meaningful choice, and Stability may be affected if they are unsure what happens next.

Another young person showing exactly the same refusal may have a completely different pattern.

That is why the 7 Needs are useful. They do not diagnose behaviour. They give us a practical framework for looking more closely.

Instead of simply asking, “What is wrong?”, we can ask what feels unstable, what the young person may be trying to protect, fulfil or regain, and how the perceived threat has interfered with that.

From there, more precise questions make sense. Has choice narrowed too far? Are they expecting failure? Is connection at risk?

That small amount of insight can immediately improve the quality of our response.

Autonomy matters particularly because it enables participation in the rest of the process. Growing up is, in part, the gradual development of greater agency, choice and action. That will look different for every child, especially in SEND, and it does not mean independence at all costs. Support should help people act for themselves when they can, and provide support when they cannot.

This is also where shared language begins to matter.

A teacher, parent and young person do not need identical professional knowledge if words such as stability, connection, significance, development and autonomy give them a reasonably shared way of talking about what is happening.

The Behaviour Cycle can do the same thing: something felt threatening, fear followed, the situation was interpreted in a particular way, and a response produced an outcome.

A complicated internal process becomes easier to talk about.

From regulation to resilience

Resilience is sometimes reduced to toughness, grit or the ability to keep going. That is too limited.

Resilience is better understood by looking at what actually happens when somebody meets difficulty.

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Regulation can restore enough capacity for the young person to engage with the situation. Resilience develops through what follows.

The young person begins to recognise the fear without simply being driven by it. They establish more clearly what is actually true. They identify what remains possible.

Opportunity is not always obvious. Sometimes it has to be found.

The young person may still fail the test, lose the friendship or face the same boundary. Some realities cannot simply be regulated away.

But there may still be something they can understand, attempt, repair, practise or approach differently.

The outcome does not have to be perfect. The important question is whether the young person has moved through the difficulty in a way that produces useful feedback and leaves them better able to respond next time.

Successful closure means more than the incident ending.

In education, we should hope for more than a U-shaped recovery back to where the young person started. We are looking for something closer to a J: difficulty is worked through and the young person comes out with greater understanding, a better skill, stronger communication or more confidence about what to do next.

They have not simply recovered. They are better equipped.

Where cycles repeatedly remain open or poorly resolved, the same fears, actions and consequences can return carrying additional pressure. Vulnerability increases.

Where the young person increasingly learns how to recognise the process, act more effectively and use the feedback, resilience develops.

The capability between calm and crisis

Schools already do a great deal of early intervention.

UK and international guidance increasingly emphasises prevention, resilience, participation, early support and skills for managing difficulty before problems escalate.

The issue is not that nothing exists between wellbeing and specialist or clinical care. A great deal exists.

The more interesting question is whether we always give young people a sufficiently clear and transferable method for using those skills while difficulty is actually happening.

There can be a **Capability Gap** between helping somebody become regulated and helping them know what to do next.

Capability means noticing that something is changing, understanding enough to interrupt the usual response, considering realistic alternatives and doing something different. It also means learning from the outcome and recognising when more support is needed.

That is Early Self-Intervention.

For many young people with SEND, it will also mean Supported Early Intervention. Support might come from a teacher, teaching assistant, parent, carer, specialist or another trusted adult.

Autonomy does not mean being left alone or being expected to manage something beyond your capability. It means being supported in a way that preserves as much meaningful participation, communication, choice and action as the individual can safely manage.

The child is not the only person in the cycle

This applies to adults too.

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A young person's refusal can create urgency in us. Challenge can feel like loss of authority. Escalation can trigger fear about safety, competence, the rest of the class or what might happen next.

And today's classroom carries plenty of additional pressure: curriculum, other pupils, safeguarding, time and accountability.

Sometimes decisive adult intervention is absolutely necessary, safety must come first.

But our own anxiety can also make us do too much or act too quickly. We can remove choice that was still available, solve a problem the young person might have helped solve or increase pressure to reduce our own uncertainty.

Understanding our own Behaviour Cycle gives us more options too. We become more confident about when to intervene, when to reduce pressure, when to hold a boundary, when to wait and when to leave enough space for the young person to act.

And this is not confined to school. The same needs and Behaviour Cycles operate in us, our families, colleagues, managers and other difficult relationships.

Once you start seeing the process, you tend to see it everywhere.

A practical way to bring it all together

Understanding is useful. But eventually we need something we can actually do.

I developed the **MetaSTOP Method®** as a simple way of interrupting fear-driven behaviour and creating enough space for a different response:

Stop. Think. Options. Prepare. GO.

Stop means recognising that a fear response is happening and interrupting it long enough to regain some choice.

Think means identifying the fear and separating what is feared from what is actually true.

Options means finding more than one realistic response.

Prepare means choosing a response and getting ready to carry it out.

GO means acting.

GO matters because thinking alone does not create new feedback. Action produces an outcome, and the outcome teaches us something.

I began using earlier versions of this approach in SEBD and psychiatric education many years ago. I put a simple STOP poster on the classroom wall and referred young people back to it when problems arose.

In most classrooms, "STOP it" sounds like a correction. In mine, it came to mean something very different.

If a young person came to me with a problem, I could point to the poster and say, "STOP it." They knew I was asking them to pause, think, consider their options and try a response.

Over time, some began doing that before coming to me. A young person might effectively say, "I've STOPped it and I still don't know what to do."

Perfect.

They had tried to intervene for themselves. Now they needed support.

That transfer matters. It is the movement towards Early Self-Intervention, with Supported Early Intervention still there when needed.

The aim is not for the adult to disappear. Some young people will always require substantial support. The aim is to build capability wherever possible, so that more recognition, language, decision-making and action can gradually belong to the young person.

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MetaSTOP can be used by the adult too. Sometimes the person who most needs to stop, think, consider the options and prepare a response is us.

That is where the framework becomes genuinely shared.

A language people can actually use

Good SEND practice already contains many of these pieces: regulation, relationships, communication, behaviour, problem-solving, resilience, participation, early intervention and autonomy.

The opportunity is to connect them.

The Behaviour Cycle helps us talk about what happens before the visible action. The 7 Needs show what may be under pressure. Regulation restores enough capacity to respond. Resilience concerns what happens when difficulty produces useful learning. Early Self-Intervention and Supported Early Intervention describe the capability we are trying to build. MetaSTOP gives that capability a route into action.

None of this requires a psychology manual.

It requires enough understanding to see what is happening, shared language to talk about it and practical capability to decide what to do next.

That can change the position of the adult too. Behaviour becomes less opaque, difficult situations easier to read, and we become more assured about when to step in, step back, explore or teach rather than simply correct.

And the young person gains something equally important: language for understanding themselves.

Earlier intervention is not simply about stopping behaviour from escalating. It is about helping a young person increasingly recognise difficulty, understand what is happening, use whatever support they genuinely need, act for themselves when they can, learn from what follows and carry greater capability into the next challenge.

That is how regulation begins to become resilience.

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