ZERO TO SIXTY

Why Small Moments Turn Into Big Explosions, and What Actually Works

The Behavioral Science of Meltdowns in Older Kids

For Parents of Kids 5 to 12

Emery Sol, BCBA, LMFT

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Published by Emery Sol

First edition, 2026

Disclaimer

This book is intended to provide general information about child behavior and is not a substitute for professional assessment, diagnosis, or treatment. Reading it does not create a clinical relationship of any kind between the reader and the author.

The children and families described are composites. They do not depict any actual person, and any resemblance to a real individual is coincidental.

If you are concerned about your child's behavior, development, or wellbeing, consult a qualified professional. Chapter Nine sets out specific circumstances in which doing so is recommended. If you believe your child or anyone in your household is at immediate risk of harm, contact your local emergency services.

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A Note Before You Start

Two points before you begin.

The chapters build on one another. Chapters One through Three establish the ideas used throughout the rest of the book, and Chapter Two is referred back to often. Reading those three in order will save time later; after that, you can move among the chapters as needed.

Chapter Nine covers aggression directly, including circumstances in which outside help is worth considering. If your child hits or breaks things, you do not need to read the rest of the book first.

The working pages at the back are referenced where they become useful, but nothing in the book requires you to use them.

Introduction

There is a particular quality to the silence in a house a minute or so after it happens.

You are standing in the kitchen. Something is on the floor that should not be on the floor. A door has closed hard enough that you felt it in the doorframe. Your ears are still ringing slightly, and there is a flatness to the air, and you are running the last few minutes back trying to work out what you missed.

You asked him to start his homework. That was all you did. You did not raise your voice or spring it on him; you gave him the hour he had asked for after school. You said the words in the same tone you would have used to ask what he wanted on his sandwich, and somewhere between the end of that sentence and now, a nine-year-old has torn a worksheet in half and thrown a binder across the room.

If you have picked up this book, some version of that scene is familiar to you, even if the details are different. It might be a phone at bedtime rather than a math sheet. It might be a twelve-year-old who does not throw anything but who said something so precisely aimed that you are still carrying it days later. It might be a six-year-old on the kitchen floor before dinner because her socks were wrong, on a morning when the socks have never been wrong before.

What tends to be the same is the suddenness. Parents describe it almost identically, and the phrase that comes up most often is some version of zero to sixty: she goes from fine to screaming in seconds; he was laughing at something on his tablet and then he was kicking the sofa. From the outside, there seems to be nothing in between.

That description captures how it feels, but not the whole sequence of what happened. The gap between those two things is where this book lives.

What this book says

Meltdowns in school-age children are not a character verdict, and they are not proof that you have been too soft, too hard, or too inconsistent. Temperament, learning history, sleep, anxiety, attention, sensory load,

learning difficulties, and neurodevelopmental differences may all contribute. The part we can observe is behavior: what happened, under what conditions, and what changed around it.

Two working ideas organize this book. They are not diagnoses, and they are not claims that every difficult moment has one simple cause.

The first is that the explosion rarely begins in the final few seconds. Conditions earlier in the day can make a later demand, transition, disappointment, or correction harder to carry.

Your daughter did not sleep well because the boiler was making a noise. Lunch at her school finishes not long after noon and it is now nearly five. There was a substitute in the afternoon and the whole class was slightly off. She has been asked four things since walking through the door, and the fourth one was to turn off the tablet and come to the table.

None of that causes a meltdown the way flipping a switch causes a light. It changes the context in which the fourth request arrives. The same sentence on a rested Saturday morning may be met with a sigh and some negotiation; after a difficult school day, hunger, and several demands in quick succession, it may land very differently.

The second is that what happens after an explosion can shape what happens the next time. A task may stop, attention may arrive, a removed item may come back, or a transition may be delayed. Those outcomes do not tell you what your child intended, but repeated patterns can give you a useful hypothesis about what the behavior has learned to accomplish.

Start somewhere that is not your house.

A fifteen-month-old points at a cup on the counter. Nobody needs a theory of manipulation to explain that moment. Pointing has produced the cup before, so pointing is one sensible thing for him to do again.

Now change one part of the example. Suppose crying, rather than pointing, had been the response that most reliably produced the cup. Crying would become more likely in that situation, without requiring a plan to upset anybody.

None of that is controversial at fifteen months. It becomes controversial at nine, because a nine-year-old can talk, and because what he does instead of pointing is tear a worksheet in half and throw a binder across the kitchen, and nobody looks at that and thinks: communication.

The useful question is not whether a child planned the behavior. It is whether certain responses have repeatedly been followed by certain outcomes, and whether that pattern helps explain what happens next time.

This is how the word function is used in this book. It does not mean purpose, motive, or conscious intent; it is a working description of the outcome a behavior may be producing. At home, you cannot establish function with the certainty of a formal assessment. You can notice a pattern, form a hypothesis, and see whether changing the pattern changes what happens.

A child in the middle of a meltdown may have very little access to deliberate choice, and the distress you are seeing is real. That does not mean every action is involuntary or that intent never matters. It means that trying to read motive in the hottest part of the moment is usually less useful than looking at the conditions and consequences you can actually observe.

The behavioral claim is narrower: responses that reliably produce useful outcomes can become more likely over time. That is not a fact about children specifically. You take the supermarket line that has moved faster before. You check your phone in a lull because it has sometimes produced something worth reading. Much of learning happens without a person narrating the learning to themselves.

Consider what that looks like in a house. Two years ago, your son argued about turning the console off. You were tired, the argument was not worth having, and you gave him ten more minutes. That was a reasonable decision and probably the right one that evening. Some weeks later the same thing happened; you held the line, he escalated, and eventually you gave him the ten minutes because the alternative was another forty minutes of this with a baby asleep upstairs. That was reasonable too.

Repeat that, in various forms, across two years and several hundred evenings, with the ten minutes arriving some of the time and not others.

You are not living with the consequences of having been weak on a Tuesday two years ago. You may be living with a pattern that strengthened, little by little, on evenings when arguing happened to buy more time. No single evening created it; the history accumulated.

Patterns can also change. If what follows behavior has helped maintain part of the pattern, changing what follows it while teaching something more workable in its place can change the pattern too. The process is not quick, and it is not the only factor that may matter, but it gives you something concrete to work with.

It also means the thing to look at is not your child's character. It is the pattern, and the pattern is visible once you know what you are looking for.

Three families

You will meet three children in these pages, and you will keep meeting them. They are composites, drawn from patterns that recur across many households rather than from any one family. Their details are invented; the situations are not.

Reuben is nine. He is in fourth grade and his teachers describe him as a pleasure to have in class. He holds himself together for six and a half hours and then walks in the front door and comes apart, and his parents have spent a long time wondering why they get a version of him that nobody else appears to get.

He builds things. There is a shelf in his room with a half-finished model on it that has been half-finished for months, and he will not work on it if anyone is watching. He is good with his little sister Nell, who is four, up until the point where he is very much not. His flashpoints are homework and being asked to stop something on a screen, and what it looks like when it goes wrong is physical: the shove into furniture, whatever is in his hand going across the room, a bedroom door closed hard enough to move the pictures in the hallway.

His mother is usually the one who is there when it happens. His father comes in at the end of it, and they do not always agree about what should have been done.

Lucy is twelve. She started middle school in the fall and it has been harder than she expected, and she has told nobody this, including her mother.

Lucy does not throw things. She says things instead: not random insults, which would be easier to absorb, but sentences aimed with real precision at the place where they will do the most damage. Then she goes upstairs and does not come down. Her mother has been told that she is the reason Lucy's father left and that she ruins everything, in a tone suggesting these were simply facts both of them had known for some time.

Afterward, Lucy is mortified. She does not know how to say so. What she does instead is nothing, sometimes for a day and a half, and then something small and oblique that is not an apology and is meant as one. Her mother has learned to recognize these and has not yet learned how to respond to them without getting it wrong.

Lucy draws, mostly people, mostly in the margins of things. She is funny when she is not in the middle of it, dryly and unexpectedly funny, in a way that catches her mother off guard and then makes the bad evenings harder by comparison. She lives with her mother and stepfather. Her stepfather takes a firmer line on phones than her mother does, and this is not settled between them.

Hattie is six. She is in first grade, and this is the first year of her life in which anything she has made has come back with a correction on it.

That turns out to matter a great deal. She has started correcting her own letters at the kitchen table, unprompted, and getting furious when they come out wrong. Her meltdowns are loud, physical, and short. She is on the floor almost immediately and she is finished a few minutes later, and then she is cheerful again in a way her father finds disorienting. What sets her off is being stopped in the middle of something, or discovering that something she did was wrong.

She lives with her father and her grandmother, who does the school run. She is deeply interested in insects.

These three are different from one another on purpose. The thing that most often stops a parent recognizing their own child in a book like this is a set of examples that all behave the same way. Reuben throws things and Lucy does not. Hattie recovers in minutes and Lucy takes days. None of them is the standard case, because there is no standard case.

What this book does—and does not—explain

This book does not ask you to choose between behavior and the rest of your child. Brain development, anxiety, attention, sensory differences, learning disorders, autism, ADHD, trauma, sleep, mood, family stress, and ordinary temperament can all affect what a child is able to carry on a given day. A behavioral lens does not cancel those explanations; it asks an additional practical question: what is happening around the behavior that you can observe and change?

You may already have been told to stay calm and stay connected, and both can matter. The gap this book is trying to fill is what comes next: how to change a homework pattern, a transition, a repeated argument, or a response that has become more effective at ending demands than anything else the child can do.

The approach therefore stays close to what came before, what followed, what skills were available, and what changed when the family tried something different. Those observations can guide a useful experiment at home. They are not a diagnosis and they do not replace assessment when the picture is broader, newer, or more severe than an ordinary household pattern.

How it is organized

The book is arranged around situations rather than techniques, because that is how you encounter the problem. You do not wake up needing an intervention. You wake up knowing that homework is at four and that it is probably going to go badly.

The early chapters build the foundation: what sets a meltdown up, how to replace the behavior with something that does the same job, and what happens after you change your approach. The later chapters apply that foundation to the situations that generate much of the trouble in ordinary households: stopping something enjoyable, doing something difficult, managing either in front of other people, handling setbacks, and responding to aggression.

Each chapter ends with a short section on what commonly goes wrong and what to do about it, because the gap between a method working in principle and working in your kitchen is usually filled with specific, ordinary obstacles.

Aggression and property damage

If your child hits, or breaks things, this book is addressing that directly.

Chapter Nine covers what to do in the moment, how repair works afterward, and why those two parts need to stay separate. Aggression can arise within the same broad patterns discussed elsewhere in the book, but the response has additional safety considerations that need their own space.

Chapter Nine also sets out situations in which home experimentation should give way to professional assessment. The thresholds are deliberately practical, and the referral section now treats the process as variable rather than pretending every health or school system works the same way.

Nothing here is a substitute for that. If you are already concerned enough to have looked up what to search for, take that seriously.

Who this is for

Parents of children roughly between five and twelve whose child melts down in a way that seems disproportionate, sudden, and resistant to everything reasonable that has been tried.

The age range is deliberate. There is an enormous amount of material about tantrums in two- and three-year-olds, much of it good, and very little of it transfers. A nine-year-old who screams is a different situation from a

toddler who screams, partly because of what he is capable of and partly because of what everyone around him assumes he should have grown out of. Parents of school-age children in this situation carry a specific kind of isolation. Other people's children appear to have stopped, and nobody says anything at pickup, and the result is a widespread private conviction that this is happening only to you.

The book also assumes you have tried things: reward charts, consequences, removing screens, ignoring, calm conversations after the fact. At least some may have helped briefly or not at all, and those were reasonable attempts. When they fail, the useful question is not what that says about you; it is what part of the pattern the strategy never changed, or what skill it never taught.

Who this is not for

If your child is under five, the material here will not fit well.

If what you are dealing with is primarily anxiety or low mood, if the behavior is new and accompanied by a change you cannot account for, or if you are seeing broad difficulties with attention, learning, sleep, sensory tolerance, eating, friendships, or functioning across settings, this book may be only one part of what you need.

Pay particular attention to sustained changes rather than a single difficult week: a child who withdraws from friends, drops an activity that mattered to them, stops eating in a way you repeatedly notice, talks about hopelessness or self-harm, or seems markedly different across several weeks deserves a conversation with a qualified professional. The same is true when school skills appear to be part of the problem. Earlier assessment is usually more useful than spending a term trying to make a household strategy fit a problem it cannot reach.

And if something is happening in your household that is larger than the behavior, this book will not reach it, and you should not spend months trying to make it fit.

One thing about you

There is a part of this that books in this area tend to handle briefly and then move past.

Living with a child who explodes changes you. It puts you in a state of low, constant readiness that does not switch off, so that you are already braced when you say the thing you know will start it. It makes you dread parts of the day. It produces, in almost everybody, a brief and unwelcome flash of something like hatred in the middle of a bad one, and then a considerably longer stretch of feeling terrible about having felt it.

It also does something to how you see yourself. Parents in this situation tend to have concluded somewhere along the way that a competent person would have sorted this out by now.

None of that is a side issue here. Some of what this book asks you to do is difficult in a way that has nothing to do with technique. Holding steady through a stretch of things getting worse is not hard because the instructions are complicated. It is hard because your child is screaming and every part of you wants it to stop and you have a completely reasonable option available that would stop it immediately. That problem is addressed throughout, and most of Chapter Seven is given to it.

Living this way can change how you respond. You may become braced before the request is even made, quicker to hear threat in a tone, or desperate for the evening to stop. Those are understandable effects of repetition. The work in this book includes the parent because a plan that requires you to be endlessly calm will fail in an ordinary house.

Starting

You do not have to change anything yet. A reasonable first step is to read Chapter One and spend a few days noticing the pattern before trying to alter it.

The house you are living in now is not the only version available. Once the pattern becomes more visible, there is usually more room to work with it than the final seconds suggest.

Chapter One
Why It Starts Long Before You See It

Go back six hours.

It is quarter past eight in the morning and Reuben cannot find the reading log. It is eventually found, in the wrong bag, and he gets to school on time, and by the time he sits down he has already had the kind of morning that leaves a residue.

In the second lesson he is called on for an answer he does not have, and then it happens again. He is nine and in a room with twenty-five other nine-year-olds; being visibly wrong in front of them costs him something difficult to quantify, but not nothing.

At lunch there is a substitute who does not know that Reuben's class lines up on the far side of the hall, so the routine runs differently. It is not a disaster, only fifteen minutes of something familiar being slightly unfamiliar.

The afternoon is fine. He is quiet in the afternoon, which his teacher notes and does not think much about, because a quiet Reuben is an easy Reuben.

He gets home at half past three, eats a snack, and sits on the couch with the tablet. For the next hour there is nothing whatsoever wrong with him. He laughs at something and shows his mother a video of a man building a wall, which she does not find interesting and watches anyway.

At half past four she says the math sheet needs to come out before dinner.

You know what happens next. He screams, tears the sheet down the middle, and throws his binder across the kitchen hard enough to take a magnet off the fridge on the way down.

His mother's account afterward, to her husband, her sister, and herself at two in the morning, is that it came out of nowhere. He had been completely fine, and then she asked him to do his homework and he detonated.

Every word of that is true as a description of what she saw. She was not in the classroom for the two questions. She does not know about the substitute

or the reading log. What she saw was an hour of a cheerful boy on a couch followed by four seconds of destruction, and from where she was standing there is genuinely nothing in between.

She has also, by the time she says this out loud, already begun the other conversation. The one where she works out what she did to cause it. Whether the tone was wrong, whether she should have given him longer, whether the hour on the tablet was the mistake and she has spent two years making it. That conversation runs for most of the evening and it does not arrive anywhere, because it is being held about the wrong four seconds.

You may not have missed an obvious warning sign, and the wording of one ordinary request is unlikely to explain the whole event. Reuben's mother was simply absent for much of the day that shaped how that request landed.

The day is the thing

Nothing on that list explains the meltdown on its own. Being called on twice does not make a child throw a binder. Plenty of children lose their reading log and have a substitute at lunch and then do their homework without incident. If you went looking for the cause of this afternoon among the events of the day, you would not find anything that qualifies.

What those events did was different. They changed what the math sheet was worth asking about.

A request is not a fixed quantity. The same eight words, said in the same tone by the same person, land differently depending on what has already happened. On a Saturday morning, rested, fed, with nothing else demanded of him, that sentence gets a sigh and maybe some negotiation about when. At half past four on that particular Thursday, after that particular day, the same sentence arrives in a house where a great deal has already been asked and very little has gone smoothly, and the answer to it is a binder against a wall.

This is not a claim about a hidden reservoir filling up. There is no gauge inside your child, and nobody can tell you what number he was at when he

walked in the door. That kind of explanation is comforting because it can account for almost anything after the fact, which also makes it less useful.

The useful version is more concrete. Certain observable conditions make certain behavior more likely: poor sleep, a skipped meal, a day with more demands than usual, a routine that ran differently, several requests arriving close together, or something enjoyable ending just as something difficult begins.

None of those is invisible. Most of them you already know, in pieces. What you do not yet have is a reason to line them up next to the binder on the floor.

The behavioral principle

Behavior analysts use the term *setting events* for background conditions that change how a child responds to something later on. A setting event does not trigger anything by itself. It alters the value of what comes next.

The most familiar example is not a child at all. If you have not eaten since breakfast, food is worth more to you at four in the afternoon than it was at ten. Nothing about the sandwich changed. What changed was the condition you brought to it.

The same principle runs in the other direction. If a child has spent the day meeting demands, another demand is worth more to escape from than it would have been that morning. If a task has gone badly at a particular table on most of the recent occasions it was attempted, then sitting down at that table carries the history of those occasions with it.

Setting events are one of the older, well-established ideas in behavior analysis. More importantly for a parent, they are often among the parts of the picture you can actually change.

What this changes

Consider what Reuben's mother can actually do on Friday, under each version of what happened on Thursday.

If the meltdown is simply how Reuben is, her options are the ones she has been using for two years. Brace before she asks. Get through it. Sweep up. Decide whether to mention the binder at dinner or let it go. She can get better at all of those, and she has, and none of them makes Thursday happen less often.

If the meltdown is what happens when that request meets those conditions, Thursday contained several things she could have moved. The sheet could have come out later rather than twenty minutes after he walked in, or somewhere other than the kitchen table where recent attempts had gone badly. She could have asked for part of the sheet rather than the whole thing, or avoided making homework the first request after an hour of something he was enjoying.

None of those is a technique and none of them requires her to be calmer than she is. They are ordinary logistical decisions about when and where and how much, and every one of them was available to her on Thursday afternoon. She did not know they mattered, so she did not make them.

Most of the rest of this book stays with those two questions: which conditions you can change, and what happens after the behavior when you cannot.

Parents are often advised to identify triggers, so they watch the moment of the explosion closely. That can help, but immediate triggers are often small and variable: the wrong cup on Monday, the math sheet on Thursday, shoes on another day. A trigger list by itself can make the behavior look more random than it is.

The background conditions are often more stable than the immediate triggers, which makes them especially useful to notice.

Why triggers are not enough

The advice to identify triggers is not wrong. Knowing that word problems are a flashpoint and single-step arithmetic is not is genuinely worth having, and it will matter a great deal in Chapter Six.

What it misses is timing. By the time the trigger arrives, most of the useful work has already gone by. If the only thing you are watching is the moment

of ignition, then the only tools available to you are the ones that work during a meltdown, and those are the weakest tools in the book.

Watching the conditions instead moves you earlier in the day, where there is more room and more time and considerably less shouting.

Lucy, in the car

The same pattern, in a twelve-year-old, looks different enough to be worth walking through.

Lucy's mother picks her up. She asks how the day was and Lucy says fine, which is what she says. Four minutes later her mother mentions that she has said yes on Lucy's behalf to helping at her stepfather's work event on Saturday.

Lucy says she is not going. Her mother says it is already arranged. Lucy says that her mother does not get to run her entire life, and then, in the same flat voice, that she is the reason Lucy never wants to be at home. Then she puts her headphones in and does not speak again for the rest of the drive.

What her mother knows: a small piece of information about Saturday produced a disproportionate response.

What her mother does not know is that Lucy has spent lunch on the low wall outside the gym for most of this week, because the group she has been sitting with has eight people in it and seven chairs. Lucy has told nobody. For now, she is not offering that information at home, and a direct question about lunch would probably still get 'fine.'

There is a second condition, which is more ordinary and just as relevant. Arrangements have been made on Lucy's behalf before, and they have stood. Objecting has not, in the past, altered a plan. What has altered plans, occasionally, is a large enough response.

So Saturday is not what happened in that car. What happened is that a request landed at the end of a difficult week, on a subject where being overridden has a history, and it produced the response that has occasionally worked on that subject in the past.

Her mother will not learn about the wall for some time. That is not evidence that she has failed to know her daughter; older children often carry important parts of the day privately. With children this age, parents may have to work with an incomplete picture without turning the missing information into an interrogation.

Hattie, and the worksheet

Hattie's father goes through the school folder at the counter and finds a phonics worksheet with three items circled in red. He says, mildly, that they can look at these ones together.

She takes the worksheet, throws it, and is on the floor within seconds, screaming and kicking the leg of the chair.

The conditions, in her case, are almost entirely about this specific year of her life. Hattie is six and in first grade, and this is the first year in which anything she has made has come back with a correction on it. Before this year, things she made were simply things she made. Now some of them are wrong, visibly and in a different color.

She has been responding to this in ways her father has noticed without connecting: correcting her own letters at the kitchen table without being asked, and getting furious when they do not come out right. She lost recess earlier in the week for talking during reading, and she has told her grandmother about it several separate times, which is what a six-year-old does with something she has not finished processing.

So the three circled items are not three circled items. They are the third or fourth encounter this week with being wrong, in a year in which being wrong is new.

Her father leaves the worksheet for that evening. The page is still unfinished, so the problem has not disappeared, but neither does this chapter need to grade his decision. It is the kind of call people make at half past five when everyone is depleted; Chapter Four returns to how the task itself can be changed earlier.

Where to start

You do not need a chart, spreadsheet, or formal record. Start with one question about the last few times it happened: what else was going on that day?

It is best done in retrospect, sitting down at a point when nothing is happening, and it is surprisingly difficult at first. The explosion is so vivid that it crowds out the six hours in front of it. Most parents find that the first two or three attempts produce nothing but the trigger, and then the day starts to come back.

If that is the case for you, it is not a sign that you were not paying attention. You have spent a long time in a house where the loudest thing that happened was also the thing you had to deal with, and there was no reason to be filing the rest of the afternoon. You are not unobservant, and you have not been failing to notice something obvious; you have been looking at the part that demanded to be looked at.

There are five or six things worth asking, and each of them is more specific than it first appears.

Whether he slept, which in most houses means whether last night was the night the little one was ill, or the night he was still awake at ten because of something on a screen, or the night before a swimming gala. Whether he has eaten, given that lunch at most schools finishes not long after midday and the explosion happened at half past four, which is a long stretch for a nine-year-old on half a sandwich and a cereal bar.

Whether the day had more in it than usual. A trip, an assembly, a test, a substitute, a friend who was off school, a birthday party after pickup. Any of these is fine on its own. Two of them stacked on a Wednesday that already has swimming is a different afternoon.

Whether several things were asked of him close together. Shoes off, bag on the hook, hands washed, what do you want for dinner, and now the math sheet. Each one is small. Five of them inside four minutes is not.

Also note whether something enjoyable had to end so that something difficult could start. That pattern can sit underneath a meltdown that

appears to be about homework, and separating the transition from the homework matters because they respond to different changes.

And what happened the last several times this exact request was made in this exact place. That one carries more weight than the others, and it is the one most often missed.

Look at what the math sheet was like in September and what it is like in November.

In September it was a page of problems. Reuben complained about it, took longer than it needed, and did it. By November there have been eight or nine sessions at that table that ended with shouting, and two that ended with his mother leaving the room.

The math has not changed. Fourth-grade multiplication in November is not harder than it was in September in any way that accounts for this. What has changed is that both of them now know exactly how this goes. She is braced before she says the words, because she has been through eight of these. He can hear that she is braced, because nine-year-olds are extremely good at hearing that. And the sheet itself is no longer a page of problems; it is the thing that ruins Thursday.

So when she puts it on the table in November, the conversation does not start where it started in September. It starts several steps in, with both of them already partway to the argument, and neither of them intended that and neither of them can help it.

Knowing this helps explain something that can otherwise look alarming: a task getting steadily worse over a couple of months while nothing else in your child's life has obviously changed. Nothing dramatic has to happen for that pattern to develop. Several bad sessions can be enough to change what the task now means to both of you.

When you sit down to do this, take the last three incidents you can remember clearly. For each one, write down what the day contained before the explosion rather than only what set it off. You already know the immediate trigger; the earlier conditions are the part you are trying to recover.

A real finding is less interesting than you expect and much more useful. It looks like noticing that all three were between four and five in the afternoon. Or that all three happened at the kitchen table and none of them happened at the desk in his room. Or that in all three, a screen had been switched off within the previous ten minutes. That is what you are looking for: not a cause, but something that turned up more than once.

For most families, something repeats, and it is usually unglamorous: Wednesdays because swimming pushes dinner late; the twenty minutes after school before anything has been eaten; requests that arrive while a screen is still on; a particular table.

You are not trying to fix anything this week. The first change is smaller: the next incident may become readable while it is happening, even if it is not yet preventable. That may sound modest, but a meltdown you can partly account for is easier to stand inside without coming apart yourself.

A word about what this is not. You are not building a case that your child cannot help it, and you are not looking for reasons to excuse what happened. Reuben threw a binder and the binder should not have been thrown, and none of that is dissolved by understanding the day that preceded it. Explanation and accountability sit alongside each other perfectly comfortably. What understanding the day changes is what you do about it on Friday, not whether Thursday was acceptable.

What this looks like at different ages

Five to seven. Physical needs and routine often deserve an early look at this age: hunger, tiredness, transitions, and the new demands of school can all change how much a child has available. The hour after school and the period before dinner are useful places to start, without assuming they will explain every child.

Eight to ten. Task history often becomes easier to see because children have accumulated experiences with particular subjects, places, and times of day. School can also require sustained effort for many hours. Look for repeated trouble around specific tasks and for patterns in the first hour at home.

Eleven to twelve. Social conditions may matter more and may be less visible to parents. Something important can happen at lunch and never be reported at dinner. The practical shift is to allow for incomplete information rather than treating every missing detail as something you must extract.

When it does not go smoothly

You look back at the last three incidents and find nothing in common.

Widen the window. Go back to when your child woke up, not to the hour before.

If that produces nothing, add a fourth and fifth incident. Three is often not enough to see a repeat.

If that produces nothing, write down what was happening for you on each of those days. Your own state is a condition. A request made by someone already braced for a fight sounds different from the same request made by someone who is not, and your child can hear the difference.

Everything looks like a condition.

If your list has more than five items, cross out every one that appeared in only a single incident.

Then cross out every one you cannot change without your child's cooperation or somebody else's agreement.

Work with what remains, which is often only one or two conditions.

You find a condition and you cannot change it.

Write it down anyway and keep it.

Use it for one thing this week: on the days that condition is present, do not add anything optional. No extra request, no conversation about something that can wait, no task that was not already scheduled.

Chapter Four covers what to do when the condition itself is fixed.

Your partner does not accept the account.

There is little value in arguing about whether this explanation excuses the behavior; that argument has no useful end.

Ask one question instead, about one specific incident: can you think of anything else that was going on that day? No conclusion attached, no theory offered.

The goal is not to win the explanation. A specific question about a specific day often gets you further than a debate about the theory.

You want to explain the conditions to your child.

You may want to explain the conditions to your child immediately. Usually there is no need to do that yet.

A parent's working hypothesis can be useful without becoming the child's explanation of themselves. Keep it tentative until you have seen whether the pattern actually holds.

The understanding is for you at this stage. There is a point at which some of it can be shared, and it is after the replacement in Chapter Two is working, not before.

Three evenings

The Thursday of the binder ends with the sheet being done at twenty to nine, badly, by two people who are far past their best. His mother does not raise the day at all, because she has not yet had the thought that would let her, and they both go to bed tired and slightly ashamed.

Two weeks later there is another one, on a Tuesday, over a spelling list. This time she has been paying attention, and she knows before she opens her mouth that he has had swimming, that dinner is going to be late, and that spelling has gone badly at that table for a month. She asks anyway, because the list has to be learned. It goes exactly as badly as the binder.

What is different is the eleven minutes afterward. She does not spend them running the conversation back trying to find the moment she got it wrong. She sits at the counter and thinks that she should not have asked at half past

four on a swimming night, which is not self-blame but a piece of information about Tuesdays.

She has not fixed anything. Nothing about the Tuesday is better than the Thursday from Reuben's point of view, and if you asked him he would tell you that his mother still made him do the spellings and it was still awful.

What she has instead is a Tuesday she can see the shape of. Swimming, late dinner, a month of bad spellings at that table, and a request made at the worst available moment. Next Tuesday she will ask before swimming, or she will ask at the desk upstairs, or she will ask for half the list. One of those will help a little and she does not yet know which.

Main Takeaways

The explosion is the last part of the event rather than the whole event; much of what mattered may have been assembling for hours.

Conditions are not the same as triggers. Triggers vary enormously and tell you very little. Conditions repeat, and they are the part you can work with.

The conditions worth looking for are ordinary and observable: sleep, food, how much the day has already asked, whether the routine ran normally, how many requests arrived close together, and what has happened the last several times this exact thing was asked in this exact place.

Task history does more work than parents expect. A task that has gone badly repeatedly arrives carrying all of it.

Start by looking back at the last three or four incidents and asking what else was going on. You are looking for something that shows up more than once, and you are not trying to fix anything yet.

Understanding the day does not excuse the behavior. It changes what you do next time, not whether last time was acceptable.

Chapter Two
Stopping It Isn't the Same as Replacing It

The word problem has three steps in it. Reuben has done the first one, and the first one is wrong. He does not know that yet, but he can feel that something is not adding up.

His mother is at the counter with her back to him, which is deliberate, because she has learned that watching makes it worse.

He reads it again. He puts the pencil down. He picks it up. Somewhere in there the thing shifts, and he says that this is stupid, and then he says it louder, and then the sheet is in two pieces and he is out of the chair and the chair is over and his mother is standing in the middle of the kitchen saying his name.

His mother picks up the two halves of the sheet and puts them on the counter, under the fruit bowl, where they stay. She tells him they will do it after dinner.

They do not do it after dinner. Dinner runs late because of the chair and because Nell needs a bath, and by the time the kitchen is clear it is quarter to eight and Reuben is on the sofa and the sheet is still under the fruit bowl. His mother looks at it twice. At nine she signs the reading log, writes the date, and leaves the math for his teacher to find in the morning.

The word problem is gone, and it is gone because he tore it.

What "stop it" is asking for

Somewhere around here, most parents have tried some version of telling their child to stop.

Stop screaming. Don't throw things. We do not slam doors in this house. Those are understandable things to say, especially when the behavior is alarming. The difficulty is that naming what must stop does not necessarily give a child an available response to use instead.

There is a simpler reason, and it has nothing to do with whether he was listening.

An instruction to stop tells a child what not to do. It does not, by itself, supply the action that can take the old behavior's place. That is why 'stop' can be a necessary boundary and still be an incomplete teaching strategy.

The tearing was also changing the situation around Reuben. If that route disappears while the task and the difficulty remain, he still needs some workable way to respond. Without one, another form of protest may take its place.

So the question is not how to make it stop. The question is what your child would have to be able to do instead, such that the meltdown became unnecessary.

What is it accomplishing

Before you build a replacement, you need a working hypothesis about what the behavior is accomplishing.

You do not need to know what your child was thinking. Start with what can be observed: across several similar incidents, what tended to change immediately afterward? Treat the answer as a hypothesis to test rather than a fact you have discovered about your child.

When Reuben tears the sheet, the homework ends. It has ended that way most times for several months. Sometimes his mother comes back to it after dinner and sometimes she does not, but the immediate and reliable result is that the word problem stops being in front of him.

When Lucy says the thing that lands, the conversation ends. Her mother goes quiet, or leaves, or occasionally cries, and either way the subject is dropped and does not come back that evening. Sometimes it does not come back at all.

When Hattie is on the floor about the marked worksheet, the worksheet is not attempted again that night.

All three examples point toward the same hypothesis: escape from something difficult. Escape is a common function in demand-related problem behavior, but it is not the only one and it should not be assumed from the appearance of the meltdown alone.

Other patterns point elsewhere. If a parent's phone call repeatedly ends when a child escalates, attention may be part of what maintains the behavior. If a console repeatedly comes back on after escalation, access may be part of it. Some behavior may also be influenced by sensory consequences or by variables that are not obvious at home. The label matters less than whether the hypothesis predicts what happens when you change the arrangement.

Take several incidents of one specific kind and write down what changed in the couple of minutes afterward. Focus on what actually changed rather than what you meant to do: did something stop, come back, or bring someone into the room? Then compare that pattern with occasions when the same request did not end in a meltdown.

If the same outcome appears repeatedly, you have a useful working hypothesis. You do not have proof. The next step is to build a low-risk change around that hypothesis and see whether the pattern changes in the predicted direction.

Lucy's example shows why the distinction matters: a parent's first explanation can be plausible and still incomplete.

Lucy's mother, asked what the explosions were about, said attention. She had good reasons. Lucy is twelve, the middle school year has been hard, she has a stepfather who arrived three years ago and a mother who works late twice a week, and the sentences she chooses are aimed with such precision that they seem designed to produce a reaction. All of that is a reasonable case.

Then she wrote down what happened after the last four.

After the first, she went quiet and the conversation about the dishwasher did not resume. After the second, she followed Lucy upstairs, had a long and painful conversation through a closed door, and the original subject, which was a form that needed signing, was never mentioned again. After the third,

she cried, and her husband took over, and nothing further was said about the phone. After the fourth, she said fine, do what you want, and left the room.

Four different responses from her. One consistent outcome. In every case the thing being asked of Lucy stopped being asked.

The precision of Lucy's sentences made attention seem like the obvious explanation. The record suggested something different: regardless of how her mother reacted emotionally, the original demand repeatedly disappeared. That does not prove Lucy's words had a single function or that she was unaware of their effect. It gives her mother a better hypothesis to test.

The two-minute record did not diagnose Lucy in ten minutes. It changed the question. Instead of building an attention-based plan, her mother could test whether a safer, lower-cost way to pause a demand reduced the need for the old exchange.

What happens when you close the door and nothing else opens

The Marsh family shows one common way a sensible plan can go wrong.

Their son is eight. Homework is at five, at the dining table, every weekday. For about a year, the way homework ended was that he screamed until it ended.

They became much firmer about the screaming. They did not argue back, and for several weeks they kept the homework expectation in place through some very difficult evenings. The screaming reduced, which understandably looked like progress.

What arrived a few weeks later was throwing. Pencils first, then the book, then a chair went over. Nobody in the house connected this to the screaming, because it did not look connected. It looked like a new problem.

So they got firm about the throwing, using the same approach, because the same approach had worked. After some more difficult weeks, the throwing reduced too.

What arrived after that was going for his little sister, who is five and who sits at the same table doing coloring while he does homework.

By this point his parents had concluded that something was wrong with their son and getting worse. They had done everything they were supposed to do, they had done it consistently, and their eight-year-old had gone from shouting to hurting a five-year-old in the space of five months.

The three behaviors look different, but each produced the same basic result: homework stopped.

Screaming had sometimes ended homework. When it stopped doing so, the work remained. Throwing then sometimes ended it, and later going for his sister ended the session immediately because safety took priority. The progression matters, but it should be read as a pattern to investigate rather than as proof of a single mechanism.

Each response had, at least on some occasions, ended the homework. That history could plausibly help explain why more intense responses appeared when less intense ones stopped producing the same outcome. It is not the only possible explanation, and the progression should never be used as a reason to ignore a new safety problem or a task the child genuinely cannot do.

Nothing was put in their place. That is the piece that was missing, and it is the piece the rest of this chapter is about.

The behavioral principle

Problem behavior rarely disappears into an empty space. When one response is made less effective, it helps to teach another response that can meet the same need more safely and efficiently.

The formal name for choosing it deliberately is *differential reinforcement of alternative behavior*, which is a long phrase for a short idea. You stop the old behavior from working, and at the same time you make an alternative work, and the alternative has to do the same job.

Both halves are required and the second one does most of the work. Removing the payoff from the meltdown, on its own, is just a boundary, and boundaries applied to behavior with no replacement available tend to

produce more intense versions of the same behavior. Adding an alternative while the old one still works produces a child who has two options and uses the one with the better track record.

Differential reinforcement of alternative behavior is one of the most heavily replicated ideas in applied behavior analysis and has been used with problems far more severe than homework. The principle is straightforward; the difficulty lies in carrying it out consistently in real life.

What the replacement has to be

Three features make a replacement much more likely to compete successfully with the old behavior.

It has to do the same job. If tearing the sheet produced escape from the word problem, the replacement has to produce escape from the word problem. A hug, a conversation about feelings, or a sticker may all be useful for other reasons, but none delivers the outcome the tearing was producing.

Many attempts fail at this point. Reuben's parents first considered having him earn screen time for finishing homework without an incident, which sounds reasonable but asks him to give up his only reliable way out of a task he cannot do in exchange for access to a console later. That trade was unlikely to compete.

It has to be easier than the meltdown. Easier physically, easier under pressure, and easier when he is already partway to the explosion and not thinking clearly.

Reuben's replacement is an index card that lives on the desk. Touching it means he is done with this problem for now. No sentence, explanation, or eye contact is required. For him, a physical signal is easier to use when speech is becoming difficult; another child may need a different form.

At the beginning, make the replacement unusually reliable: immediate, low-effort, and free of extra negotiation. The child needs to learn that using it is a dependable route to the outcome it represents.

This requirement is easy to break because the card will eventually feel as though it is letting him off, especially the fourth time he uses it on a problem you know he can do.

Right now, tearing has a strong history. If the card is noticeably less reliable than the old behavior, the child has little reason to switch. Early teaching therefore favors the card heavily. That does not require perfection in a mathematical sense; it requires enough reliability that the new response can compete with what has worked before.

Honoring the card is not the same as spoiling him or surrendering the homework. At this stage, you are making the alternative easier and more reliable than the behavior it needs to replace. Chapter Eight deals with how that arrangement changes later.

Why 'use your words' is not enough

You will have been told to teach your child to use his words.

It is not bad advice and it is aimed at the right thing. Where it falls short is that it is usually offered as an instruction rather than as something to be built, and it assumes the words will be available at the moment they are needed.

The words are often available in the abstract and unavailable when they are needed most. Lucy is twelve and articulate enough to explain all of this in writing, but what she can produce at the moment her mother mentions Saturday is considerably less. That gap is the problem.

The workable version of 'use your words' is much smaller: one specific, agreed, low-effort signal, taught when nothing is happening, that produces a known result. It is a signal rather than a conversation.

Building it

Four steps, and the order matters.

Teach it cold. Not during, not immediately after, and not on a day when something has already gone wrong.

Reuben's mother introduced the card on a Sunday afternoon, with no homework anywhere in the house, in a conversation that took under two minutes. This was deliberate. Anything introduced in the hour after a bad session arrives attached to the bad session, and a nine-year-old who has just torn a sheet in half and been shouted at will hear a new arrangement as a consequence of what he did, however carefully it is phrased.

Explain it once, plainly, and do not oversell it. Reuben's mother told him that the card was there and that touching it meant he was finished with that problem, and that she would not ask him about it. She did not add that this was going to help him manage his feelings, because that framing invites a nine-year-old to argue about whether he has a problem managing his feelings.

Prompt it early. Earlier than feels necessary. The point at which a replacement can be used is well before the point at which you would normally intervene, and if you wait until the crisis is visible you have waited too long. In practice this means Reuben's mother watching for the pencil going down and the second reading of the question, and saying, without drama, that the card is there if he wants it.

She got this wrong for the first week by prompting at the point where he said the problem was stupid, which is already most of the way in. Moving the prompt back to the pencil going down was the single change that made the most difference.

Honor it as reliably as you reasonably can while it is being learned. When Reuben touches the card, the problem stops; his mother does not add 'just finish this line first,' ask for an explanation, or turn the moment into a performance. If a full stop is sometimes impossible, decide in advance what the signal will produce instead, such as a brief pause.

The same four steps, two other houses

The same steps look different in the other houses.

Lucy

Her mother did not choose the signal. Lucy did, which at twelve is close to a requirement, and she chose it in a conversation on a Sunday that her mother had planned to be much longer than it turned out to be.

What they agreed is that Lucy can text one word, and the word is "later," and it can be sent from anywhere in the house including the room her mother is standing in. When it arrives, the conversation stops for twenty minutes. Her mother does not reply to it, does not acknowledge it out loud, and does not come upstairs. She stops talking and goes and does something else.

Three features of that arrangement matter: it is private, it requires little of Lucy afterward, and it works faster than the alternative.

It is invisible. Nobody else in the room knows it happened, which matters enormously at twelve and matters most when her stepfather is present. A signal that publicly announces that Lucy is struggling is a signal Lucy will not use.

It requires nothing of her afterward. There is no conversation attached, no check-in, no expectation that she will explain herself in twenty minutes. Her mother's strong instinct was to build in a talk at the end of the twenty minutes, and dropping that was the hardest concession she made, and it is the reason the thing works.

And it is faster than the alternative. Saying the sentence about her father also ends the conversation, but it ends it at a cost Lucy pays for a day and a half afterward in a silence she does not know how to break. The text ends it in four seconds with nothing to repair.

Her mother's difficulty is not the twenty minutes. It is that "later" is a word with no feeling in it, sent by a child who has just been asked to do something ordinary, and receiving it feels like being dismissed by someone you gave birth to. She has learned to take it as the alternative to what used to happen rather than as a communication in its own right.

Hattie

At six the replacement has to be short enough to survive being upset, and it has to be practiced far more than seems necessary.

Hers is four words. I need to stop. Her father chose the words rather than asking her to, which is right at this age, and he picked something she could say with her face already going.

The teaching was the part that took the time. He practiced it on a Saturday on a puzzle she was enjoying, and asked her to say it, and then stopped the puzzle immediately, and she found this hilarious and asked to do it again. They did it perhaps a dozen times across that weekend on things that did not matter. Coloring. Getting dressed. Halfway through a story.

A dozen repetitions can look excessive for four words a six-year-old already knows how to say, but the words are not the point. What is being practiced is the sequence: saying them produces an immediate stop, often enough in comfortable conditions that the sequence is still available in uncomfortable ones.

The first real use came about ten days later on a reading book. She said the words while already crying, later than ideal but still usefully. Her father closed the book at once, without finishing the sentence they were on or turning the moment into praise.

The phrase had not transferred to school, which did not make the home learning meaningless. A skill can be stable in one setting and absent in another, so the family decided to establish it at home before trying to coordinate a second setting.

When it is not escape

Everything above uses escape, because that is what you will most often find. The structure is identical for the others and only the payoff changes.

If what reliably follows the meltdown is that you arrive, then the replacement has to produce access to you. Not a reward, not a chart, not a conversation about why he should not need attention. A specific, agreed, low-effort signal can work if it is honored promptly and predictably while it is being learned.

If escalation has repeatedly been followed by the console returning, the replacement needs to offer some reliable, acceptable route to access as well.

That can feel counterintuitive to parents, but the aim is to shift the useful outcome toward a safer response rather than pretend access has no role in the pattern.

The part nobody warns you about

For the first stretch, your child will use the replacement in ways that make you want to withdraw it.

For roughly the first week and a half, Reuben used the card on problems he could easily have done, especially single-step multiplication he could do in his head. He was not saving it for the word problems; the card was new and it worked.

His father found this genuinely maddening and said so, in the kitchen, on the Thursday of the first week. His position was that Reuben was playing them, that he had been handed a way out of anything he did not feel like doing, and that if this continued he would not do a piece of homework again all year. That is not an unreasonable position and most parents arrive at it.

What is happening is narrower than it looks. A new behavior that produces a strong result gets used a great deal at first, in more situations than it is needed, before it settles into the situations where it is actually useful. This is what learning a thing that works looks like from the outside. If you tighten the rule at this point, which is exactly when you will want to, you teach that the card is unreliable, and the tearing is still sitting there with a two-year track record of never having failed.

Reuben's early overuse of the card faded as the novelty wore off. That can happen, but do not treat it as a guaranteed stage or tighten the rule simply because use is high at first.

There is a second version of the same difficulty, which arrives later and is quieter.

Somewhere around the fifth or sixth week, once things are noticeably better, honoring the card can start to slip without anyone deciding to change the plan. You are on the phone when it gets touched, someone is coming at

six and there are two questions left, or the improvement has lasted long enough that finishing one line first seems harmless.

As things improve, reliability often drifts in small ways: finishing one line first, waiting until a call ends, asking a follow-up question. If the replacement becomes less dependable and the old behavior begins returning, go back to the earlier, clearer arrangement before concluding that the skill has stopped working.

You have not undone the progress and you have not been inconsistent in the way you are about to accuse yourself of being; you have simply relaxed a rule at the point where it stopped feeling necessary. Going back to honoring it exactly, for a stretch, generally recovers it.

What this looks like at different ages

Five to seven. A brief word, phrase, gesture, or physical signal is often easier than a long explanation. Practice it in low-stakes situations and judge home and school separately rather than expecting immediate transfer.

Eight to ten. A physical object can be useful because it removes the need to speak at the hardest moment. Some children in this range will overuse a new signal for a while; treat that as information rather than a timetable every child should follow.

Eleven to twelve. Privacy and dignity often matter more. Involve the child in choosing a signal that can be used without publicly announcing difficulty. Lucy's one-word text works for her family; another twelve-year-old may prefer something entirely different.

When it does not go smoothly

Your child refuses to use it at all.

Answer one question first: in the recent occasions when the old behavior appeared, did it still produce the old outcome at least some of the time? Include the evenings you would rather not count—the headache, the phone call, the grandparent visit.

If the old behavior is still producing the old outcome on some occasions, start there. The replacement may simply not be competing with a longer and more reliable history yet.

If the answer is genuinely no, make the replacement smaller. A phrase becomes a word. A word becomes a gesture. Keep halving it until it is something they could do while crying.

Your child uses it and then melts down anyway.

If the signal is used, honor the version you have taught, including on an occasion when the old behavior follows anyway. Do not turn the missed opportunity into a lecture about having had another choice.

Say nothing about the fact that they had an option and did not take it. That observation is accurate, it is satisfying to make, and saying it converts the signal into something they can be judged for.

Expect some occasions when the signal is used and the old behavior still follows. Lucy sent her word and then said the thing anyway, twice. That is information about learning, not proof that the signal failed.

You cannot honor it this time.

Decide in advance which of two arrangements applies, and tell your child before they need to ask.

Reuben's mother's two versions: this one we can stop if you need to, or this one we have to finish and then we are done. She says it at the start of the session, not when the card is touched.

Try not to let the signal become meaningless. If a full stop is sometimes unavailable, agree in advance on another reliable outcome, such as a pause, rather than having the signal occasionally produce nothing.

Your partner will not do it.

You do not need your partner to agree with the reasoning immediately. Ask for one concrete thing: when the signal is used in front of them, they honor it.

Keep the request that narrow rather than turning it into a larger conversation about the approach.

Then leave it. Agreement tends to follow from watching it work, and it does not follow from the conversation in the kitchen.

It works and then stops working after a few weeks.

Go through the last five occasions it was used and ask, for each one, whether you honored it the way you would have in the first week.

You are looking for one where you said to finish the line first, or asked what was hard about it, or waited until you were off the phone. These do not feel like lapses at the time and you will only find them by going occasion by occasion.

If you find that honoring has drifted, return to the more reliable version long enough for the replacement to become ordinary again before you make it harder.

If you find none, the demands have probably grown faster than the replacement can carry. Chapter Eight covers what to do about that.

Three evenings

The first Tuesday goes badly. Reuben's mother prompts the card at the point where he says the problem is stupid, which is too late, and he tears the sheet anyway, and afterward she sits on the stairs feeling that she has now added an index card to the list of things that do not work in this house.

Three weeks later he uses the card on a two-step problem, the first time he has used it on something genuinely hard rather than on something easy out of novelty. His mother says nothing. The problem stops, and twenty minutes later they do the remaining four questions. Only while loading the dishwasher does she realize the entire session took under half an hour and nothing was thrown.

In November there is a Thursday where he tears the sheet in half without going near the card. He has had a bad day, he is hungry, and the sheet has eleven word problems on it, which is more than the arrangement was ever built to carry. His mother picks the pieces up.

She is disappointed and she is also not back at the start, which she can tell because of what happens on Friday, when he uses the card on the second question and the evening is fine.

Main Takeaways

Telling a child only to stop is often insufficient because it names the prohibited behavior without teaching the response that can replace it.

Look at what reliably changes after the behavior and form a working hypothesis about function. In demand-related situations, escape is one common possibility, but the pattern has to be tested rather than assumed.

The replacement has to do the same job, be easier than the meltdown, and be substantially more reliable than the old behavior while it is being learned. All three matter.

Teach it when nothing is happening, explain it plainly once, prompt it earlier than feels necessary, and honor it exactly.

Some children overuse a new replacement at first, including on tasks they could manage. Do not tighten the rule simply because use is high; watch whether the pattern settles as the response becomes familiar.

If it is not being used, the usual reason is that the old behavior still works some of the time.

One check before you change the payoff

Before deliberately holding a demand through escalation, make sure you are not asking consistency to solve a skill problem. Can your child do the task, transition, or expectation under low-pressure conditions, with enough time and support? If you do not know, test that before you run Chapter Three.

A child who can clear the table on a calm Saturday and resists doing it when a game is interrupted presents a different problem from a child who cannot read the passage, solve the word problem, tolerate the sensory demand, or organize the assignment even when nothing is at stake. The first may need a replacement and a steadier contingency. The second needs the demand

adjusted and the missing skill understood. Chapter Six develops this distinction in full.

If the behavior is new, suddenly more intense, spreading across settings, or accompanied by significant anxiety, low mood, self-harm, aggression, or a broader change in functioning, do not use 'it gets worse before it gets better' as a reason to push through. Reassess and involve a qualified professional when appropriate.

END OF SAMPLE

You have seen the pattern.

The rest of the book shows you what to do about it.

STILL AHEAD

Chapter 3: Why It Gets Worse Before It Gets Better
Chapter 4: Why the Real Work Happens Earlier in the Day
Chapter 5: Why Taking Something Away Sets Them Off
Chapter 6: When the Work Itself Is the Problem
Chapter 7: Why It's Worse When Other People Are Watching
Chapter 8: What Setbacks Actually Mean
Chapter 9: Why Some Meltdowns Turn Physical

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