WHY A CHILD CAN'T "CALM DOWN" ON COMMAND

When a child is overwhelmed, calming down may not be something they can do straight away.

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1 THEIR STRESS RESPONSE SWITCHES ON



When a child feels frightened, threatened or overwhelmed, their body gets ready to protect them.

Their heart may beat faster, breathing may change and muscles may tense – even when there is no immediate danger.

2 THINKING BECOMES HARDER



When stress is high, it can be harder to think clearly, listen, remember instructions, control impulses and make decisions.

So telling an overwhelmed child to "Calm down!" or "Just listen!" may not work in that moment.

3 OVERWHELM CAN SHOW UP IN DIFFERENT WAYS



A child might:

- cry • shout • argue • run away
- hide • freeze • hit • kick
- refuse • go quiet

What looks like difficult behaviour may sometimes be a sign that a child is struggling to cope.

4 CALM FIRST, TALK LATER



When a child is overwhelmed:

- Keep your voice calm.
- Use fewer words.
- Keep demands simple where you can.
- Give them time and space if they need it.
- Stay nearby if your presence helps.

A calm, supportive adult can help a child begin to settle. This is often called co-regulation.

5 YOUR CALM CAN HELP



Children respond to the people and environment around them. A steady voice, calm body and predictable response can help a child feel safer and begin to settle.

"You're safe. I'm here. We'll get through this."

Being calm does not mean allowing unsafe behaviour. You can still keep clear and consistent boundaries.

6 TEACHING COMES LATER



Once the child is calmer, it is easier to listen, think, talk and learn.

That is a better time to talk about what happened, set boundaries, solve problems and help them think about what they could do next time.

REMEMBER | CALM FIRST. CONNECT. TALK AND TEACH LATER.

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Child Calm Down Co-Regulation Poster

A child calm down co-regulation poster that explains why overwhelmed children may be unable to listen, think clearly or regulate their behaviour in the moment. It gives a child-friendly overview of stress responses, common signs of overwhelm and the role of a calm, supportive adult.

Parents, foster carers, teachers, teaching assistants and child support practitioners can use it in homes, classrooms, nurture spaces or counselling rooms. Display it near a calm corner, use it to prompt adults during a meltdown, or revisit it with a child afterwards to support emotional regulation, connection and calmer problem-solving.