

BIG BAFFLING BEHAVIOURS

Introducing the work of Robyn Gobbel

Big, baffling behaviours are often viewed as defiance, manipulation or poor choices, however neuroscience helps us to re-frame these behaviours as an expression of nervous system dysregulation.

WHAT SCIENCE TELLS US

When children feel safe and regulated, they're able to think clearly, learn, problem-solve, and cooperate. But when they feel overwhelmed or unsafe, their survival brain steps in and takes over.

It's important to remember that children aren't deliberately being "naughty." Their nervous system genuinely believes something isn't safe.

When we understand behaviour through this lens, it shifts our focus. Instead of reacting to the behaviour itself, we begin to ask: What is this child's nervous system (and behaviour) trying to communicate right now?

**REGULATED,
CONNECTED
KIDS WHO FEEL SAFE,
BEHAVE WELL**



UNDERSTANDING THE THREE BRAINS

When your child is calm and connected, their **Owl Brain** is in charge. This is the thinking, learning, problem-solving part of the brain.

When something feels unsafe, too hard, or overwhelming the **Watchdog Brain** (think Fight / Flight, alarm, yelling, running, arguing) or the **Possum Brain** (think Shutdown / Freeze, withdrawal, refusal, hiding, zoning out) take charge to protect us.



THE WISE OWL BRAIN

The wise Owl Brain is in charge when the brain and nervous system is feeling safe and open for connection.



THE OWL BRAIN

The kind of behaviour that you're hoping to see from your child (and yourself) comes from the Owl Brain. When a person feels safe, their owl brain will take charge and lead the way. Typically, the owl brain wants to be connected - to themselves and to you!

The owl brain lives in the cortex. Our cortex is responsible for our high-level processing, including conscious thought, language, memory, emotion, impulsivity, and sensory perception.

FUN FACT

This is the only brain state where logic, reasoning and learning can take place

CLUES THE OWL BRAIN IS IN CONTROL

When the Owl Brain is in charge, you will see a person acting with:

- Logic and flexible thinking
- Cooperation
- Curiosity
- Empathy
- Self-Reflection
- The ability to pause before reacting
- Learning from, and caring about their behaviour
- Taking responsibility for their own actions
- Asking permission

You may also notice:

- Relaxed eyes and muscles around the mouth
- Relaxed, not collapsed, shoulders, neck and head
- Even and paced breathing
- "Mum, may I...", instead of demanding
- "I'm sorry I..." instead of denying blame or responsibility
- "I need help" instead of throwing something across the room or yelling

HOW CAN WE KEEP THE OWL BRAIN IN CONTROL?

We can keep the owl brain in control through:

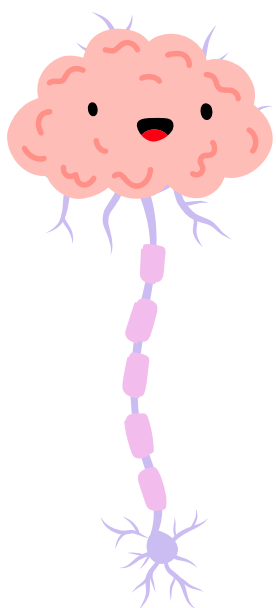
- Predictability in routines and actions
- Having warm connection with others

- Feeling understood
- Reasonable expectations that are scaffolded
- Co-regulation



CUES OF SAFETY AND DANGER

Our nervous system is constantly scanning for cues of safety and danger, gathering clues from all of our senses



Everyone of us has **unique cues of danger and safety** – what might feel safe for one person's nervous system, might feel dangerous for someone else's nervous system.

Our nervous system scans three different pathways – **inside our body** (interoception), **outside our body** (what's happening around us), and **between people and animals**.

CUES INSIDE OUR BODY



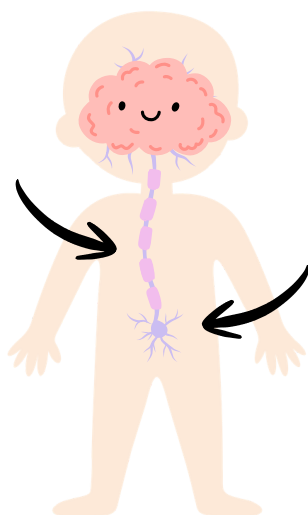
Cues of **DANGER**

- hunger
- fullness (over-full)
- thirsty
- tiredness
- needing to wee
- needing to poo
- constipated
- sick
- in pain
- too hot
- too cold



Cues of **SAFETY**

- Rested
- comfortably full
- no pain
- healthy
- hydrated
- empty bladder and bowel
- appropriate temperature
- feeling comfortable in your body





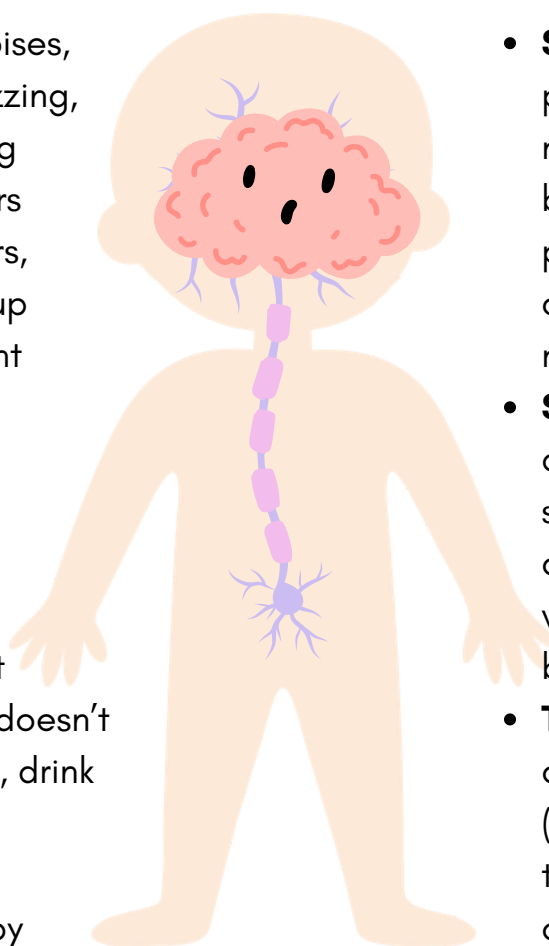
CUES OF SAFETY AND DANGER

CUES OUTSIDE OUR BODY (IN OUR ENVIRONMENT)



Cues of **DANGER**

- **Sounds** – sudden loud noises, quiet noise, like lights buzzing, fridge noises, clock ticking
- **Sight** – unpleasant colours or combinations of colours, mess, books or not lined up properly, things not in right spot, too bright or dark),
- **Touch** – too cold or hot (cold tiles in bathroom, hot bed), uncomfortable clothes, uncomfortable seat, wet things, different textures, the wrong cup (doesn't feel right in hand, on lips, drink doesn't pour into mouth comfortably)
- **Taste** – foods prepared by other people, different brands of same food, textures of food
- **Smell** – unpleasant smells, strong or overpowering smells



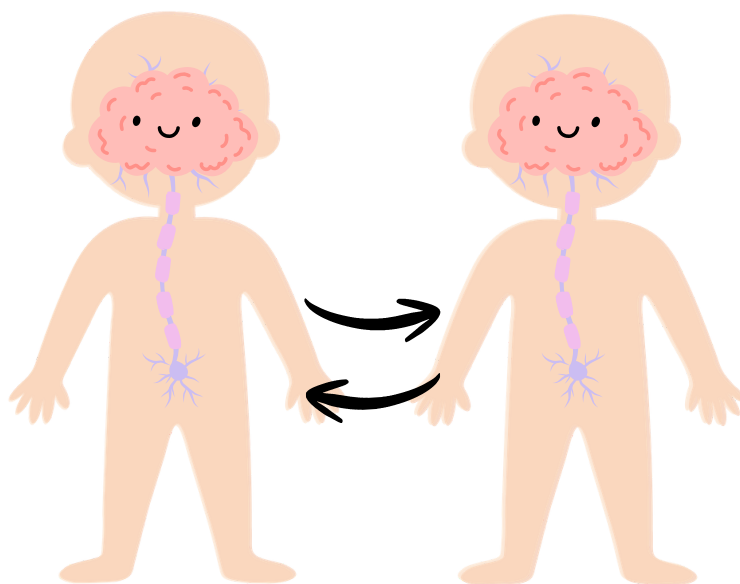
Cues of **SAFETY**

- **Sounds** – Predictable sounds, pleasant music, sounds of nature, quiet or moderate background noise, TV at pleasant volume, silence or comfortable background noise that supports focus
- **Sights** – preferred colours and patterns, organised spaces, familiar items, comfortable lighting, things where they are supposed to be, familiar places
- **Touch** – comfortable clothes, comfortable seating (material, firmness, preferred textures, the right cup or cutlery,
- **Taste** – foods prepared by safe person, preferred brands of food, textures of food
- **Smell** – pleasant smells



CUES OF SAFETY AND DANGER

CUES BETWEEN PEOPLE (AND ANIMALS)



Cues of
DANGER



Cues of
SAFETY

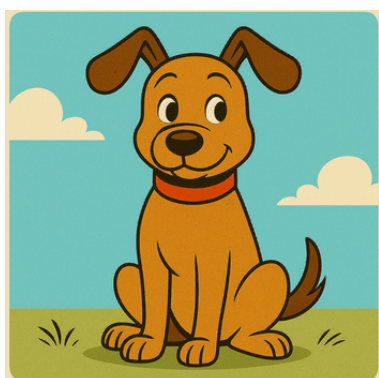
- Is the person known, or a stranger?
- Is the person friendly or unfriendly?
- What are their facial expressions saying?
- What is their body language telling us?
- How are they moving?
- How close are they getting?
- Are they touching me?
- What does their tone of voice suggest?
- How are they engaging with me?
- How has this person behaved towards me in the past?
- How does this person treat other people?
- What do they look, smell, sound like?

Also consider - neurodivergent communication styles and social communication differences



THE WATCHDOG BRAIN

When our nervous system detects possible danger, it flips into protection mode and the Watchdog Brain wakes up and takes over.



THE WATCHDOG BRAIN

The Watchdog brain acts as an alarm system. It has four different responses based on how intensely your watchdog believes they need to come to the rescue!

The Watchdog Brain lives in the limbic system as part of our parasympathetic nervous system. Our limbic system is responsible for managing emotions, memory, motivation, and behaviours essential for survival, such as feeding, reproduction, and fight-or-flight responses.

CLUES THE WATCHDOG BRAIN IS IN CONTROL

When the Watchdog Brain takes over, a person may:

- Argue or yell
- Become aggressive
- Refuse or resist
- Try to control situations and other people
- Seem defiant

HOT TIP
Resist the urge to use logic, reasoning, or lots of words if the Watchdog is around

OUR FOUR WATCHDOGS

THE WHATS UP? WATCHDOG



- Is trying to work out if it is safe.
- Can still communicate with the owl brain, while it gathers information about threats or danger

THE BACK OFF WATCHDOG



- Is not feeling safe
- Uses scary behaviours to protect itself
- May shut you out, ignore you, refuse to answer, or leave

THE READY FOR ACTION WATCHDOG



- Has decided it is not safe
- Is getting ready to fight or flee
- May look like defiance

THE ATTACK WATCHDOG



- Believes it is in immediate life-threatening danger
- May look like hitting, pushing, kicking and spitting



THE POSSUM BRAIN

When our nervous system detects not just danger but potential life threat, your Possum Brain takes over.

THE POSSUM BRAIN

The Possum Brain is part of our survival system – it's what shows up when our nervous system feels so overwhelmed that shutting down feels safest. Our Possum Brain also has four different responses based on how intensely they believe they need to come to the rescue! The Watchdog pathway boosts energy, while the Possum pathway slows it down. When the Possum Brain feels increasingly scared, it shuts down more and more.

The Possum Brain is linked to our parasympathetic nervous system. It represents the shutdown/freeze response within the limbic survival system, which involves multiple brain regions.

HOT TIP

Make the Possum Brain feel safe and connected, rather than helpless, so it is less likely to shut down



CLUES THE POSSUM BRAIN IS IN CONTROL

When the Possum Brain takes over, a person may:

- Withdraw
- Become non-responsive
- Avoid you
- Become tearful or have a flat affect

OUR FOUR POSSUMS

THE LA-LA LAND POSSUM



- Is disconnected
- May stare out into space or look bored
- Avoidant behaviours
- Is distracted, unfocused and off task

THE SHUT-DOWN POSSUM



- Has significant lack of eye contact/looking down
- Body collapses into a 'c'-shape
- Arms may protect head/torso
- Extremely slow/sluggish
- Stops speaking

THE TRICKSTER POSSUM



- Puts on a disguise
- May have a robotic voice/inflection
- Is overly compliant and people pleases
- Has slow body movements
- Unable to concentrate

THE PLAY-DEAD POSSUM



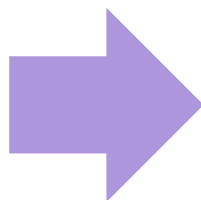
- Completely non-responsive
- Fainting or suddenly fall asleep (not narcolepsy)
- Dissociate to disconnect from reality



WHEN WE ARE EMOTIONALLY HEIGHTENED

When your brain notices that something feels too hard, scary, or uncomfortable, your **“What’s Up?” Watchdog** and **“La La Land” Possum** step in to protect you — switching on and keeping you on alert.

When things start to feel more unsafe or uncomfortable, your Owl Brain flies off, and your **“Ready for Action” Watchdog** and **“Trickster” Possum** jump in to take charge — sounding the alarm and doing their best to keep you safe.



WHAT THIS MIGHT LOOK LIKE

- Whining
- Overly silly
- Less cooperative and flexible
- Increased fears and anxiety
- Slow, feeling BLAH
- Making silly jokes
- Feeling frustrated or irritable
- Feeling extra wiggly
- Interrupting or blurting out
- Clinging
- Tired and slower energy
- Increased stimming
- Rolling eyes or using ‘tone’
- Trying to walk away
- Crying
- Difficulties transitioning
- Big feelings
- People pleasing
- Hiding, withdrawing
- Avoiding activities
- Seeming rude or sassy

WHAT MIGHT HELP

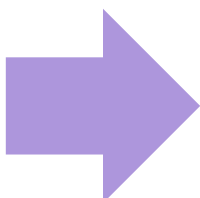
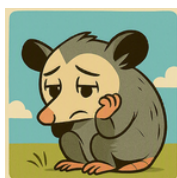
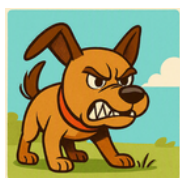
- Providing time and space
- Recognising distress
- Offering a break
- Keeping the environment safe
- Listening - not trying to solve problems at this time
- Extra movement breaks
- Offering sensory tools
- Slowing down and matching energy level
- Reducing talking
- Moving others away
- Staying close, but not too close
- Sitting nearby, not standing over
- Reducing eye contact



WHEN WE ARE VERY DYSREGULATED

When your brain notices that something feels too hard, scary, or unsafe your **“Back Off” Watchdog** and **“Shut Down” Possum** move in to protect you — doing everything they can to keep you safe.

When things feel extremely unsafe or life-threatening, your **“Attack” Watchdog** and **“Play Dead” Possum** jump in to take charge — sounding the alarm and doing their best to keep you safe.



WHAT THIS MIGHT LOOK LIKE

- Threatening words
- Aggressive body, face and words
- Reactive
- Uncontrollable crying
- Screaming
- Defiance
- Swearing, yelling and shouting
- Intense stimming
- Growling or making loud noises
- Sensory avoiding (e.g. covering ears)
- Faster breathing
- Hitting or punching
- Biting, pinching, spitting
- Dangerous behaviour
- Running away
- Stomping
- Aggressive language
- Hiding or retreating
- Not responding to others
- Shutting down
- Seeming 'stuck' and unable to move

WHAT MIGHT HELP

- Recognising distress
- Lowering demands
- Talking less, lowering voice
- Offering safe sensory tools and spaces
- Offering bumping and crashing, running, jumping and swinging
- Focusing on connection, not problem solving or reasoning
- Offering music or audiobook
- Engaging in special interests
- Slowing down, waiting, listening
- Offering a bath, shower, cold drink or ice cubes
- Offering deep pressure or weighted items
- Reducing cognitive load e.g. offering 2 choices, using visuals instead of speaking, single step instructions
- Focusing on staying regulated yourself, to help coregulate



REPAIR & CONNECT

Sometimes, when our Owl Brain flies away, our Watchdog or Possum protectors can take over so strongly that **unsafe behaviours** happen — even though the goal was protection, not harm.

When your Owl Brain comes back online, that's the time to repair — to **take responsibility, reconnect, and make things right.**



REFLECTION CAN HAPPEN WHEN FULLY REGULATED

"What did your body need?"

"What helped?"

"What can we try next time?"

WHEN I NEED TO MAKE A REPAIR YOU CAN HELP ME TO...

- Express my feelings or say sorry
- Write a note or text
- Do an act of kindness
- Draw a picture
- Share kind words
- Practice re-doing the moment differently
- Play and reconnect
- Say thank you for being patient or understanding



REFERENCES

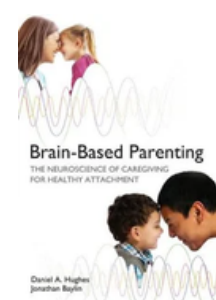
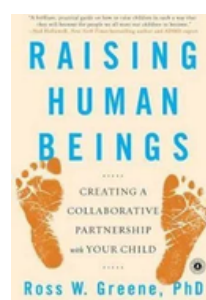
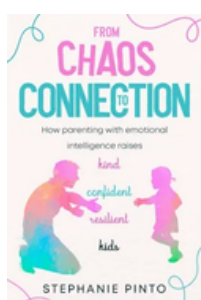
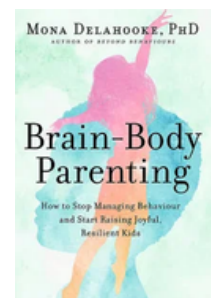
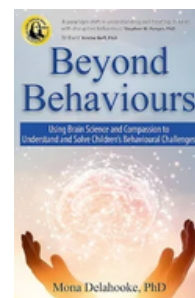
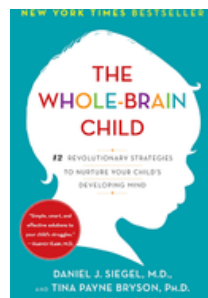
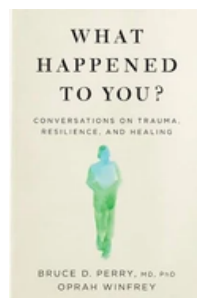
The information on the Owl, Watchdog and Possum Brains came exclusively from the book by Robyn Gobbel on 'Raising Kids with Big Baffling Behaviours'.

The other information provided in this resource is based on the works of Dr Bruce Perry, Dr Steven Porges, Dr Mona Delahooke, Dr Ross Greene and includes the frameworks of felt safety, neuroception, co-regulation, trauma informed care, sensory modulation, polyvagal and attachment theory.

SUGGESTED READING

If you, or your kids, have big behaviours, you might want to consider the following books for more information, understanding, and practical strategies:

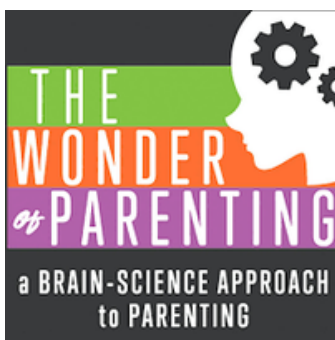
- 'Raising Kids with Big Baffling Behaviours', by Robyn Gobbel
- 'What Happened to You?', by Dr Bruce Perry and Oprah Winfrey
- 'The Whole Brain Child', by Dr Dan Siegel
- 'Beyond Behaviours', and 'Brain-Body Parenting' by Dr Mona Delahooke
- 'From Chaos to Connection' by Stephanie Pinto
- 'The Explosive Child', and 'Raising Human Beings' by Dr Ross Greene
- 'Brain-Based Parenting', by Daniel Hughes and Jonathan Baylin





SUGGESTED LISTENING

Consider exploring the following podcasts for more information and practical tips on managing baffling behaviours.



Believe and Become, through the REACH UP initiative, is proudly delivering projects for the Peer Support and Capacity Building (PSCB) grant for the NDIS, including this free resource developed in partnership with Enable Me.

www.believeandbecome.com.au