



Surviving (and sometimes enjoying!) the Summer Holidays

Beacon House
Therapeutic Services and Trauma Team

A gentle trauma-responsive guide for parents and carers supporting children, themselves and family life through the summer break.

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For many families, the summer holidays are something to look forward to. But if your child (or you!) is neurodivergent, finds emotional regulation difficult at times, experiences anxiety, or is living with the effects of trauma, six weeks without the familiar routines of school can feel overwhelming.

If you find yourself counting down the days until September, you are certainly not alone.



Children and adults who are easily dysregulated often rely on the predictability that school provides. The holidays often bring changes in routine, increased sensory demands, different expectations, disrupted sleep, more social interaction and less opportunity for quiet recovery. Even enjoyable activities may become stressful when they involve too much uncertainty or stimulation. Each of these demands can seem small on their own, but together these demands can exceed what a child's nervous system can comfortably manage.

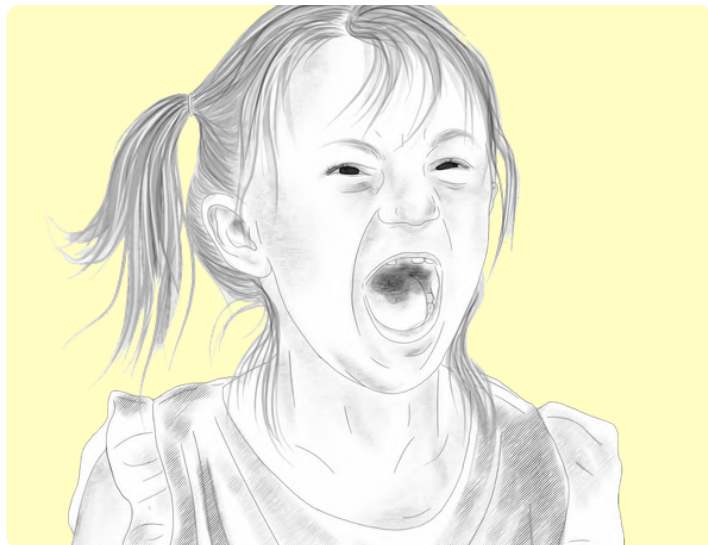
Understanding why this happens can help us respond with compassion.



Remember: Behaviour is Communication

When children become dysregulated, they are not choosing to make life difficult. Their nervous system is signalling that it no longer feels able to cope.

This might look like:



- frequent meltdowns
- explosive anger
- constant arguing
- becoming controlling or rigid
- refusing activities

- becoming clingy
- increased anxiety
- needing constant reassurance
- seeming "lazy" or unmotivated
- shutting down or withdrawing

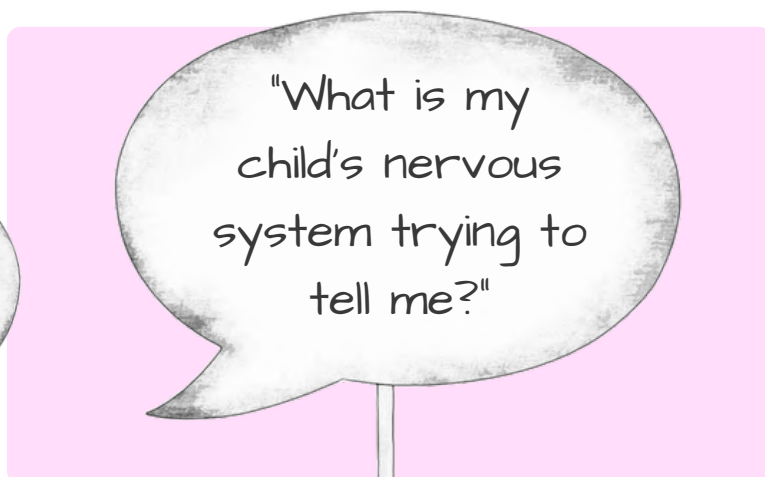
The same is true for adults. When we notice ourselves becoming irritable, tearful, withdrawn, controlling, or overwhelmed, it is often a sign that our own nervous system is struggling too.



It's normal to worry...

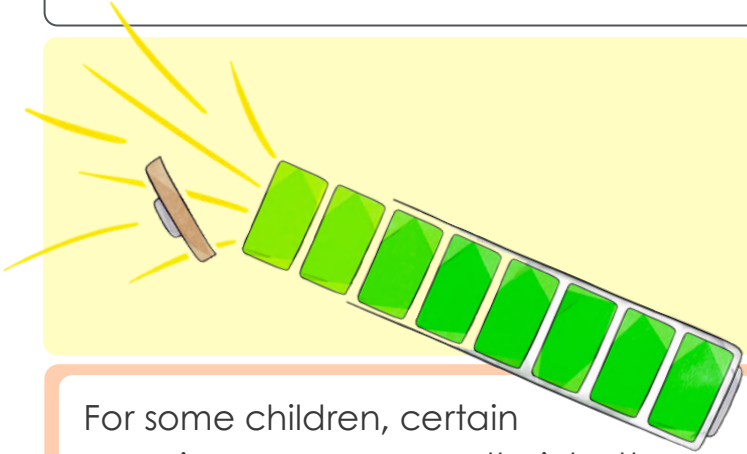


So it can also be helpful to wonder...



Our Sensory Batteries

We all have different sensory thresholds. It can be helpful to think of this as a sensory battery.



For some children, certain experiences can cause their battery to charge up very quickly, leaving them feeling overwhelmed, over-stimulated or overloaded.



For others, their battery may run low more quickly, leaving them feeling under-stimulated, restless, disconnected or seeking more sensory input.

Many children experience both at different times and in different situations.

Things that can affect a sensory battery include:

- noise
- busy attractions
- strong smells
- crowds
- unfamiliar foods
- changes to routine; unexpected plans
- heat
- lots of conversation
- waiting and queueing
- travel
- different clothes
- hunger, thirst or tiredness

Just as children have different sensory batteries, parents do too. The noise, demands, interruptions and constant decision-making of the holidays can leave adults feeling overwhelmed, overstimulated, depleted, or in need of time to recharge.



When planning activities, it may be helpful to hold in mind:

What might push our sensory systems outside our comfortable zones today?

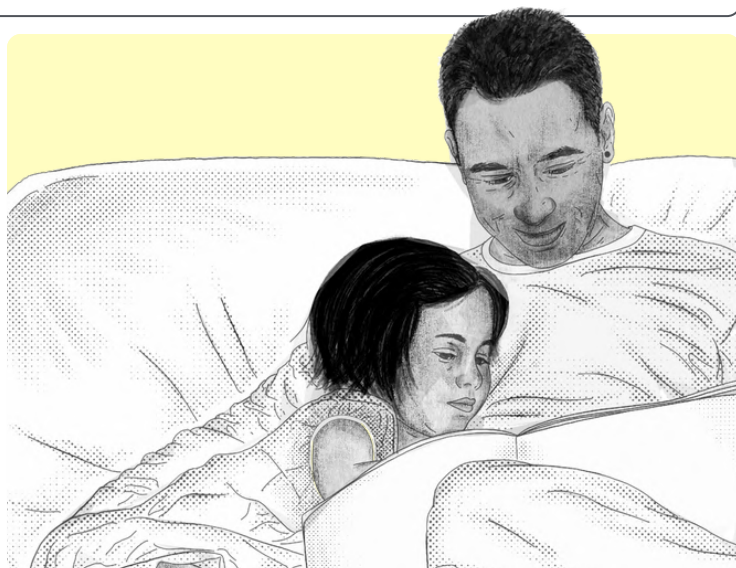
What helps each of us feel regulated, settled and comfortable again?

How can we build opportunities into the day for everyone to recover and recharge?

You Don't Need to Fill Every Day

Many parents and carers feel pressure to create magical summer memories whilst also managing work commitments, household responsibilities, finances and the everyday demands of family life. Yet some of the most regulating, connecting and memorable experiences are often surprisingly ordinary...

- eating lunch together
- reading on the sofa
- baking
- drawing
- walking in nature
- playing with water
- gardening
- cuddling while watching a film
- building Lego
- spending unhurried time together



Children are not the only ones who benefit from slower days. Parents and carers also need opportunities to rest, recover and simply be.

The most important memories are often not of where we went or what we did, but of how we felt. Feeling safe, loved, connected and accepted can stay with us long after the details of a particular day have faded.

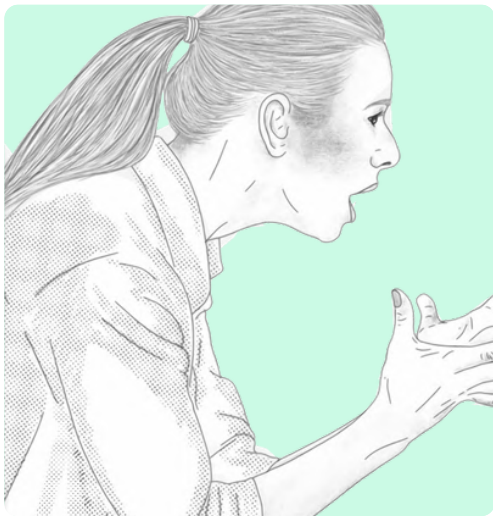
Some days may not look particularly trauma-responsive, creative or Instagram-worthy. You may rely on screens more than you would like, simplify meals, postpone outings or lower your expectations. This is not failure. It is often what families need to do to move through a demanding season.



Children do not need perfect holidays. They need safe relationships. When time, energy and resources are limited, small moments of connection can matter far more than elaborate plans. A shared laugh, an un-rushed conversation, sitting side by side, or just knowing that someone is there can be enough.

Connection Matters More Than Perfection

During the holidays there can be lots of opportunities for conflict.



There will be difficult days.

There will be shouting.

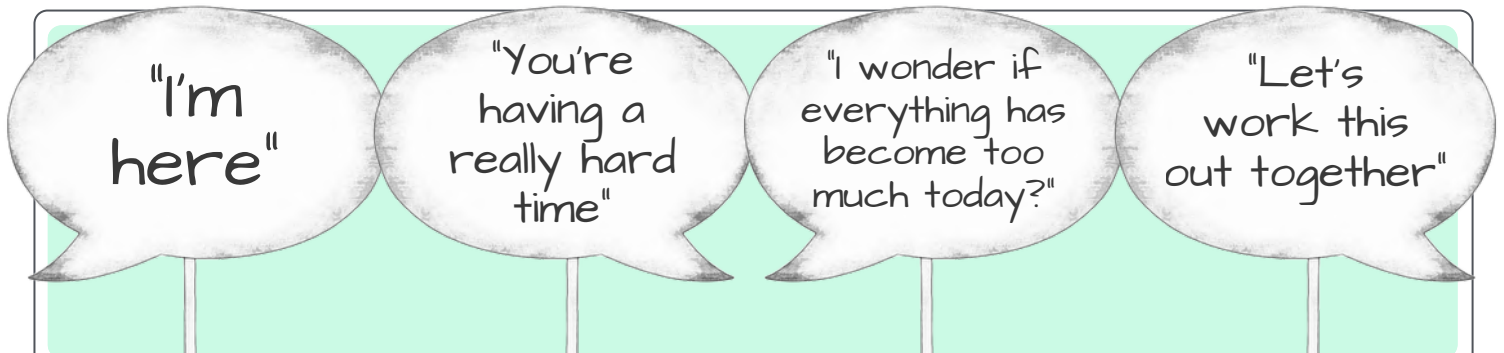
There will be tears.

There will be moments
when everyone feels
overwhelmed.



When our child is overwhelmed or dysregulated, we might find ourselves moving into explaining, blaming, reasoning or correcting which can make things worse.

When you feel able to, begin with connection. Try...



Feeling seen and understood helps children return to regulation more quickly.

Children do not need perfect parents. They need relationships that can recover. Repair teaches children that relationships can survive difficult moments. After things have calmed, you might say...



Many parents carry an invisible pressure to get the holidays 'right'. Yet relationships are strengthened not through perfection, but through moments of reconnection after things have gone wrong.

What if the Holiday Feels Easier?

During the holidays there can be lots of opportunities for conflict.

Whilst the summer holidays can be challenging for many children, some experience them very differently.

For children who find school exhausting, overwhelming or stressful, the holidays can bring a sense of relief. Without the pressures of the school day, some children may appear calmer, more relaxed, more playful or more like themselves.

This does not automatically mean that school is 'bad' or that something has gone wrong. It may reflect the significant effort some children invest each day to meet the demands of environments that do not always fit their needs.



You may notice that your child experiences fewer emotional outbursts, sleeps better, or seems more connected during the holidays. These observations can offer valuable clues about what helps them feel safe, understood and able to thrive.



For some families, September cannot come quickly enough. For others, the return to school brings a mixture of relief and apprehension. Whatever your experience, your observations of your child during the summer may offer valuable insights into what helps them feel safe, connected and able to flourish.

Remember to Look After Your Own Nervous System Too

Children's nervous systems are influenced by the regulation of the adults around them.

This doesn't mean parents need to stay calm all the time. That simply isn't realistic.

It does mean that when we can notice our own stress and care for ourselves, we are better able to offer the calm presence our children need.



You might ask yourself...

- Have I eaten?
- Have I had a drink?
- Am I expecting too much of myself today?
- Do I need a few minutes to reset?
- Can someone else step in for a while?

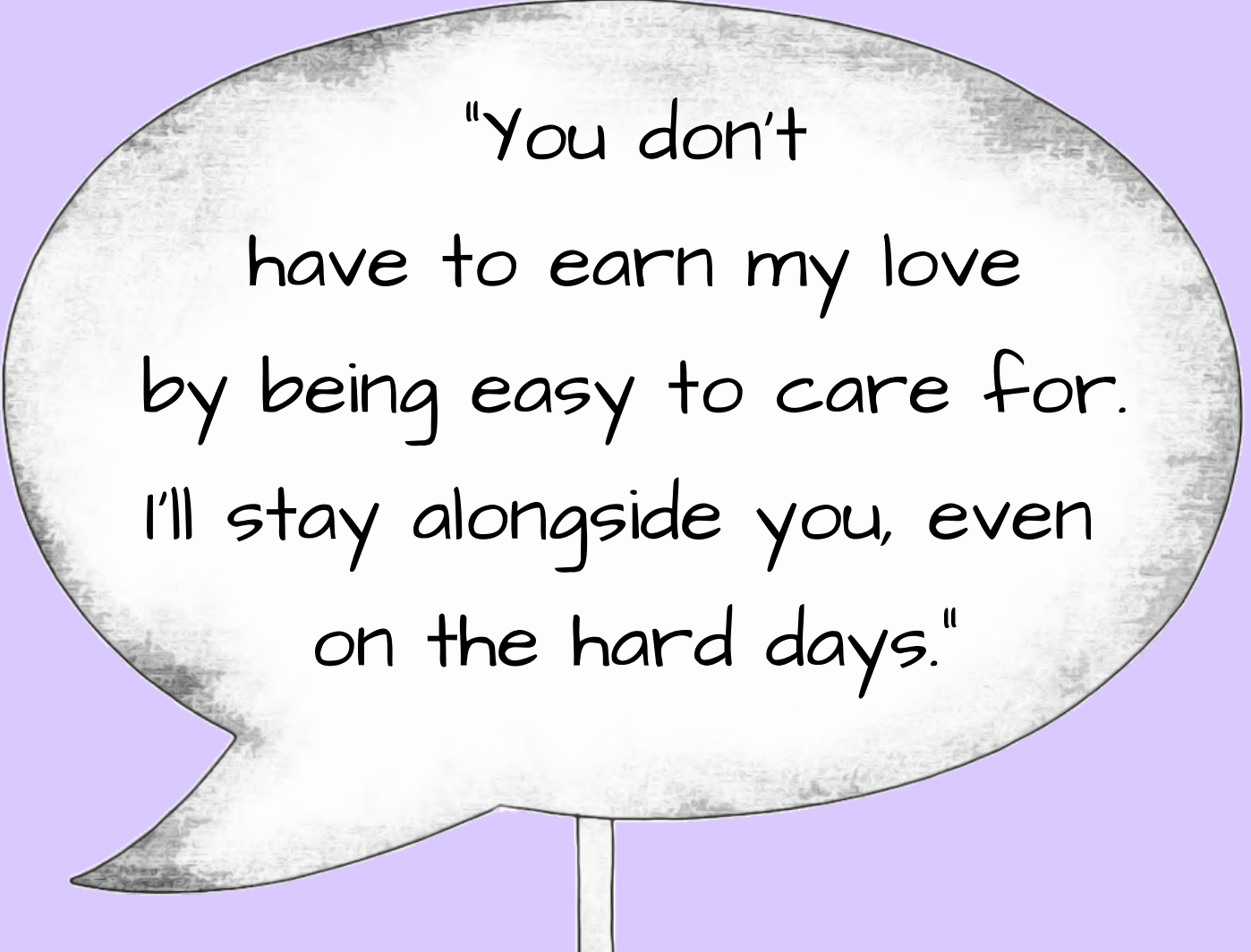


Some parents finish the school term exhausted and begin the summer carrying the additional demands of childcare, work and family life. If you are finding it hard, that does not mean you are doing anything wrong. It may simply mean you are carrying a lot. Looking after yourself is not selfish. Your needs matter too.

A Final Thought...

It is okay if your goal this summer is not thriving. Sometimes getting through it with your relationships mostly intact is enough. Summer does not have to be perfect.

There will be good days, difficult days and everything in between. What matters most is not getting everything right, but returning to connection, with ourselves and with each other, in ways that communicate...



"You don't
have to earn my love
by being easy to care for.
I'll stay alongside you, even
on the hard days."

Sometimes that might look like having a picnic in a local park. On other days, it might mean saying "no", changing your plans, or stepping away for a moment so you can find your own calm again.

There is no single right way for a family to connect. Every family will find their own rhythms, needs and ways of being together. What matters is not how the summer looks from the outside, but whether the people within it feel safe, accepted and loved.