

Dysregulation, Overwhelm or Anxiety?

We often hear words like *dysregulation*, *overwhelm*, and *anxiety* used almost interchangeably. But they're not quite the same—and understanding the difference can help us respond more effectively when our children are struggling.

1. Dysregulation: The nervous system in overdrive.

Dysregulation is when a child's nervous system becomes unbalanced and they can't stay in a calm, regulated state. Think of regulation as the body's ability to stay steady—emotionally, physically, and mentally. When a child is regulated, they can manage their emotions, follow instructions, play, and learn. When dysregulated, they might:

- Cry, scream, or shut down
- Become hyperactive or withdrawn
- Seem “out of control” or unreachable

Dysregulation isn't a choice—it's a state. It's what happens *after* the brain or body is overwhelmed or under threat. And it's often the visible sign that something deeper is going on (like sensory overload or anxiety).

2. Overwhelm: Too much input at once, too fast.

Overwhelm is when the brain receives more input than it can process—especially sensory input. This can lead to sensory overload, where the brain can't filter or prioritise what's important.

Signs of overwhelm might include:

- Covering ears or eyes
- Freezing or refusing to move
- Meltdowns that seem “sudden”
- Avoiding places or people

Overwhelm is often a trigger for dysregulation. When a child feels overloaded, their body moves into fight, flight, or freeze mode, which is when these behaviours show up.

3. Anxiety: A Fear Response

Anxiety is a *fear-based response* to real or perceived threats. It often lives in the future—worrying about what *might* happen.



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An anxious child may:

- Ask repetitive questions
- Seek reassurance
- Refuse to go to school or participate
- Show physical symptoms (tummy aches, headaches)

While anxiety can cause dysregulation, it's rooted in *thinking*. The child is anticipating danger or uncertainty and feeling unsafe, which leads to heightened stress.

Anxiety can be invisible until it spills out into dysregulated behaviour.

How should we respond?

When we understand what we're seeing, we can support it in the right way:

- Overwhelm = too much input. You need to reduce stimuli, offer quiet, use calming sensory tools.
- Anxiety = fear. You need to validate feelings, build predictability, use co-regulation.
- Dysregulation = nervous system out of balance. You need to stay calm, reduce demands, offer safety and connection.

No matter the root cause, our role isn't to fix or stop the behaviour—it's to co-regulate with our child and help them feel safe enough to return to calm.

You might try:

- Using a soft voice and open body language.
- Saying: "You're safe. I'm here. Let's breathe."
- Offering pressure (a firm hug, weighted blanket) if your child finds that soothing.
- Removing sensory triggers if you notice overwhelm.
- Avoiding questions or instructions when your child is in meltdown.

Final Thought

Our children aren't "too sensitive" or "too much"—they are navigating a world that often doesn't accommodate their needs. When we understand the difference between overwhelm, anxiety, and dysregulation, we can be more attuned to their needs.