



The Window of Tolerance

The *Window of Tolerance* is the zone where children and young people can manage emotions, stay engaged, and learn effectively. When they are within this window, they feel safe, regulated, and able to cope with everyday challenges.

There are three zones of regulation:

1. **Optimal Zone (Inside the Window)**
 - When calm but alert
 - Able to think, learn, and connect
 - Emotions are manageable
 - Behaviour is flexible and appropriate
2. **Hyperarousal (Above the Window)**
 - Fight-or-flight response is present
 - Showing signs of anxiety, anger, restlessness, impulsivity
 - Child may appear “out of control” or overly reactive
3. **Hypoarousal (Below the Window)**
 - Exhibiting a freeze or shutdown response
 - Showing signs of withdrawal, flat affect, fatigue, disconnection
 - Child may seem “switched off” or unresponsive

The reason this matters in schools and homes: Children who have experienced trauma, neurodivergence, or chronic stress may have a narrower window, making it harder to stay regulated. Understanding this helps adults respond with empathy and support, rather than punishment.

How to help children stay within their window of tolerance:

Predictability and Safety

- Use routines and visual schedules
- Give advance notice of changes
- Create calm, structured environments

Co-Regulation

- Stay calm and connected
- Use a soothing tone and body language
- Offer reassurance: “You’re safe. I’m here.”

Regulation Tools

- Breathing exercises, movement breaks, sensory supports
- Quiet spaces or calm corners
- Emotion coaching and naming feelings

When a child is dysregulated, they are not being “naughty”—they are struggling to cope. Adults can help by noticing the signs, responding with compassion, and supporting regulation.