Child & Adolescent Psychotherapy

Helping Your Child Process Information

This guide is for parents of children who find it hard to process information. It walks you through three things that can make a real difference: how you think about what's happening, the words you use, and how you stay calm together.

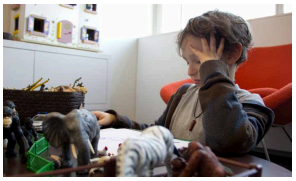
What is processing?

Processing information comes in several stages. It starts with hearing the information, and often for children with neurodiversity or processing disorders, they stumble right at the first step. For example, when we ask them to "go upstairs and brush your teeth", the words simply might not make it into their orbit. They might be thinking about something else, nodding and not taking it in.

Once they have heard, they have to convert the information into building blocks that they can make sense of. For "go upstairs and brush your teeth", which is pretty simple in structure, they need to picture themselves actually going up the stairs, going into the bathroom, getting the toothbrush, putting on toothpaste, and brushing.

They then need to act on it. If it isn't done immediately, they can lose the information between hearing it and acting on it. So if you say, "When you've finished your toast, don't forget to go upstairs and brush your teeth", you might have lost them after the toast.

And then there are distractions



Even if they have ventured up the stairs, there are many distractions. A parent is in the bathroom. A sibling is using their stuff and they get caught up in it.

I know it seems like "finish your toast and go upstairs to brush your teeth" is a pretty simple request, but for a child with a processing disorder, it's actually a pretty mammoth task.

And it's not unusual for us as parents to ask several things of a child at once, like "finish your toast and then go upstairs and brush your teeth, and don't forget to put your PE kit in your bag". That's actually two and a half requests. They're already eating the toast so they'll probably manage that bit, but then they have to picture quite a lot of forward planning, and the likelihood of getting to the end of brushing their teeth feeling really proud of themselves but forgetting the PE kit is pretty high.

How can we help?

The key to helping your child process information in their own way is to think about three things: your own mindset, the language you use, and how you can support them through co-regulation.

1. Be generous when deciding if they are being purposefully difficult or have lost the instruction.
2. Use declarative language.
3. Focus on co-regulation.

1. Shift your mindset

FROM
"My child won't…"

→

TO
"Something is getting in the way of my child being able to…"

Try rethinking it like this:

Old thought	New thought
"My child can't, doesn't or won't do this."	*"I think my child has the skills to do this task, but something is getting in the way. I wonder what it is."*
"My child has a fixed mindset."	*"My child needs more time to process and integrate new information."*

Meet your child where they are today

Lots of things can get in the way of a child engaging with what you're asking. Anxiety, stress, tiredness, hunger, not being aware of what their body is telling them, or the memory of a time it all went wrong before. Any of these can stop a child from being able to respond in the way you might expect.

So try to offer support that matches how they're feeling and what they need in that moment, not the version of them you were expecting today.

Key terms (in plain English)

Declarative language	Talking in a way that shares what you're noticing or feeling, instead of giving instructions or asking questions. (More on this on page 6.)
Episodic memory	The memory of things that actually happened to you. The "what, where and when" of your own experiences.
Scaffold learning	Giving just enough support to help your child manage something they couldn't quite do on their own yet, and slowly pulling the support back as they grow.
Co-regulation	Helping your child calm down by staying calm yourself. Using your steady presence, warmth and tone to bring their stress levels down. (More on this on page 8.)
Interoceptive awareness	Noticing what's going on inside your body. Whether you're hungry, thirsty, needing the loo, getting hot, or feeling your heart race when you're cross.

A framework for sharing information

Taking a moment to think about how you'll share information with your child makes a huge difference. Here's a seven-step rhythm that works well.

1 **PREPARE**	Work out what you need to say first, just one piece of information, not the whole list. Then check in with yourself: are you in the right frame of mind to have this conversation calmly?
2 **CONNECT**	Come closer. Get down to their level, or even a bit lower. Don't loom over them.
3 **OBSERVE**	Watch their body language. What might they be feeling or thinking right now? (There's a guide to reading cues on page 4.)
4 **INVITE**	Speak slowly and calmly. Try something like "I've got an idea I'd like to share with you." Keep your shoulders soft, your face open, your voice warm.
5 **PAUSE**	Count to 20 in your head. Yes, really, 20. It feels like forever, but they need that time to let it land.
6 **CHECK**	Look at their body language again. Are they ready to hear what's next?
7 **SHARE**	Now, and only now, share that one piece of information.

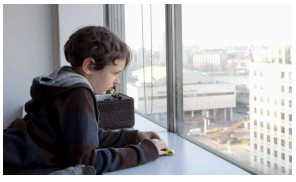
Reading your child's body language

Your child's body will tell you whether they're ready to listen, often more clearly than their words.

Signs they're ready to take something in

- Turning their body towards you
- Making eye contact
- Moving a bit closer
- Responding to you, with words, a nod, a gesture
- Starting a conversation themselves ("Look at this!")
- Reaching out and touching your arm or shoulder

Signs they're not ready, so back off, don't push



- Eyes looking away, or shut
- Turning their body away, or moving away from you
- Silence when you speak to them
- Hiding their face
- "No!" or "Stop talking!"
- Tears

> *If you see the second list, that's not defiance. That's a child who can't take anything else in right now. Pause, reset, and come back to it.*

How much support does my child need today?

The amount of help your child needs isn't fixed. A child might manage brilliantly on Monday and need full hand-holding on Wednesday. A brand new routine needs more support than one they've been doing for months. Part of being ready to help is working out where they are today, with this particular task.

Using language that helps your child look back ("remember when we…") and look forward ("I wonder what will happen when…") builds their own sense of story over time. That matters. It helps them grow self-awareness, problem-solving skills, and the ability to see things from someone else's point of view.

Where they are	What to do
We're starting something brand new. My child needs me the most right now.	Only start the conversation when you're both calm. Use language that offers connection and partnership, "let's do this together."
My child still needs help, but not as much.	Keep the warmth and partnership, but you can guide them more directly now.
My child is starting to take this on themselves.	Refer back to things you've done together before, "remember when we…", to jog their memory and let them take the lead.
My child can do this on their own, but still forgets sometimes.	Use statements that nudge them into their own problem-solving, "I wonder what comes next?"
I don't know why, but today they're needing more support than usual.	Don't push. Come back to regulation. Notice what's going on for them, stay calm, watch, wait.

Meeting your child where they are today, not where you wish they were.

2. Use declarative language

What is declarative language?

Declarative language is simply a way of talking that shares what you're noticing, thinking or feeling, without asking a question or giving an order.

Think of the difference between:

- **"Put your coat on."** (an instruction)
- **"Have you got your coat?"** (a question)
- **"It looks pretty cold out there today."** (a declarative statement)

That third one is declarative language. It invites your child to think for themselves, "oh yes, I should grab my coat", rather than feeling ordered around or interrogated.

This matters because instructions and questions both demand an immediate response. For a child whose brain needs more time to process, that pressure can tip them straight into stress or shutdown. Declarative language takes the pressure off, gives them time to think, and hands them the chance to work it out themselves.

The ingredients of declarative language

A slow pace	Don't rush. Don't fill every silence; silence is part of it.
A simple observation *Words like: notice, see, hear, smell, feel.*	*"I can see you're getting upset."* *"I can hear a lot of different sounds right now. I wonder if that's making it hard to focus."*
"We" language *I, me, my, we, let's, us, ours. It puts you on the same team.*	*"The teacher is waiting for us."* *"We could have a go at this together when you're ready."*
Soft, open words *Maybe, might, perhaps, possibly, sometimes, not sure, almost.*	*"Maybe you're not quite ready to go outside yet?"*
Thinking-out-loud words *Think, hope, remember, wonder, imagine, don't know, decide.*	*"I remember we tried this before, shall we have another go?"* *"It's cold outside. I wonder if we need our coats?"*

Different ways to say it

Declarative language isn't one thing; it runs on a scale from more direct to less direct.

More direct statements spell things out clearly and take less work for your child to understand. Less direct statements ask your child to fill in the gaps themselves, which builds their thinking, but only if they've got the headspace for it that day.

Here's what that looks like using the same everyday example: making a packed lunch.

More direct (lower processing load)	
Name what needs to happen	*"It's time for us to make the lunches for today."*
Talk through what you're about to do	*"I know we need our lunches today, so I'm going to make them now."*
Invite partnership	*"Let's make your lunch together today."*
Leave the door open for them to ask for help	*"If it feels too hard to make your own lunch today, I could help you."*

Less direct (higher processing load, more thinking required)	
Share how you're feeling about it	*"I'm a bit worried you won't have anything for lunch today."*
Describe what you can see	*"I can see your lunchbox, but there's nothing in it yet."*
Point to what's coming up	*"You've got a busy day ahead. You definitely need a good lunch."*
Tap into their memory	*"I remember you made your lunch yesterday so well. Was it tasty?"*
Model thinking ahead	*"Let's see what we've got in the fridge for your lunch today."*

What if they still don't respond?

Don't panic, and don't give up. Getting used to declarative language takes time, for you and for them. Your child might still be struggling to understand what you mean, thinking about something else entirely, or simply needing more time for it to land.

Give them the space. Try again later. And notice what a difference even a 20-second pause can make.

3. Focus on co-regulation

When your child is upset, overwhelmed or spiralling, co-regulation is how you help them find their way back. You use your own calm, your voice, your body, your steady presence, to bring their stress levels down.

But here's the catch: you can't co-regulate your child if you're not regulated yourself. A frazzled parent can't calm a frazzled child. So the work starts with you.

Before you even speak to your child, do this

- **Check in with yourself.** What are you actually feeling right now? (Cross? Worried? Embarrassed? Exhausted?) Noticing it is half the battle.
- **Slow your breathing on purpose.** Breathe in for four, out for six. Your body will start telling your child's body "we're safe" before a single word comes out of your mouth.
- **Reset yourself.** Move rooms, take a sip of water, shake your hands out, whatever it takes.
- **Get down to their level.** Don't tower. Sit, crouch, kneel.
- **Soften your voice.** Keep your words short and simple.
- **Name what you're seeing** before you try to fix anything.
- **Offer a regulating option first.** "Shall we have a hug?" "Would you like to squeeze this cushion?"

What to say when big feelings are rising

Mirror what they're telling you	*"You really want to do that. You don't think it's fair. I know it's really hard."*
Validate the feeling	*"I can see you're upset."*
Use silence	Sometimes saying nothing at all is the most regulating thing you can do. It gives your child the space they need to find themselves again.
Set a kind, firm limit if you need to	Knowing where the edges are actually helps a child feel safer, not more restricted. A clear limit, delivered warmly, is a gift.

A final thought

None of this is about being a perfect parent.

You will get it wrong. You will snap. You will give five instructions at once on a Tuesday morning when you're running late. That's okay.

What matters is that, bit by bit, you start noticing. You start slowing down. You start meeting your child where they actually are, not where you wish they were today. That's the whole of it.

Quick recap of the three keys

1. Shift your mindset. Something is getting in the way.
2. Use declarative language. Notice. Observe. Wonder out loud.
3. Focus on co-regulation. Calm yourself first.

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