

Behaviour or Symptom?



“How can I tell if this is a symptom or a behaviour?” Why underlying brain domains are the key to answering this common question!

Brain domains, skills and abilities underlie everything we do and say and understanding strengths and weaknesses in these areas is the easiest way to quickly tell whether something is more likely a symptom or a behaviour.

As a general rule, the more brain-based weaknesses you have, the more likely you are to have symptoms that look like behaviours. Significant weaknesses limit our options and meaningful choices in a range of situations and make it much more likely that we will default to our bodies' built-in default coping and problem-solving strategy of fight-or-flight!

Brain-based strengths and skills increase our problem-solving skills and provide multiple alternatives to “fight or flight” which most people will use if they have them available.

Common Behavioural Symptoms	Skills, Abilities & Strengths Needed to Avoid these Behavioural Symptoms	Brain Domains Needed to Avoid the Behavioural Symptoms
Swearing Yelling	Impulse control - inhibition, the ability to communicate clearly about what you need or want, the ability to manage strong feelings of frustration, anger, surprise etc, noticing, remembering and understanding that there are appropriate times and places to swear, the ability to understand the consequences for yourself and other	Executive functioning, language and communication, emotional regulation, attention, memory, adaptive functioning - social skills
Defiance Answering back	Impulse control - inhibition, the ability to process information quickly, the ability to manage and regulate strong emotions, e.g., overwhelm, frustration, embarrassment, surprise, problem-solving skills to generate a different response, the ability to predict the consequences of these actions, memory of what has happened previously	Executive functioning, cognition, emotional regulation, memory
Pushing Hitting	Impulse control - inhibition, the ability to recognise and then manage strong emotions, e.g., anger, frustration, problem-solving skills to generate other ways of responding, language skills to express your feelings and needs, social skills, the ability to predict the consequences of our actions	Executive functioning, emotional regulation, cognition, language and communication, adaptive functioning - social skills
Breaking stuff	Impulse control - inhibition, the ability to manage strong emotions, problem-solving skills to generate other options, the ability to predict the consequences of our actions, the ability to know our own strength	Executive functioning, emotional regulation, cognition, sensory - interoception, motor skills
Lying	Memory, knowing and/or understanding what truth is, impulse control - inhibition and stopping oneself from providing just any answer, the ability to manage strong emotions such as fear, excitement, resisting the desire to be helpful, problem-solving skills to generate other options, the ability to predict the consequences of our actions, social skills and understanding when and what type of lying is particularly problematic	Memory, adaptive functioning - conceptual & social skills, executive functioning, emotional regulation, cognition
Stealing	Extensive understanding of the abstract concept of ownership, memory of the spoken and unspoken rules about ownership, impulse control - inhibition, the ability to manage strong emotions such as excitement, desire, problem-solving skills to generate alternative ways of getting the things we want, the ability to predict the consequences of our actions, the ability to delay gratification associated with sensory needs	Adaptive functioning - conceptual & social skills, memory, executive functioning, emotional regulation, cognition, sensory
Fixating Obsessing	Mental flexibility and the ability to think about things from different perspectives, insight into our thinking patterns and habits and the usefulness of changing these, impulse control - inhibition, the ability to delay gratification, skills in managing hyperfocus and sensory seeking, the ability to manage strong emotions such as excitement, desire, etc the ability to predict the consequences of our actions, and problem-solving skills	Executive functioning, attention, emotional regulation, cognition, sensory
Dominating others	Mental flexibility - being able to see things from multiple perspectives, social skills - understanding how others feel, insight and understanding of our behaviours and how these impact others, impulse control - inhibition, the ability to manage strong emotions such as excitement, desire, the ability to predict the consequences of our actions, problem-solving skills and the ability to get our needs met other ways, ability to delay gratification. ability to communicate our needs and desires to others	Executive functioning, adaptive functioning - social skills, emotional regulation, cognition, language and communication
Possessiveness	As for dominating others + fixating + ability to manage input and process information from multiple sources simultaneously	Executive functioning, adaptive functioning - social skills, emotional regulation, cognition, language and communication
Sexualised Behaviours	Understanding of the abstract concept of consent, social skills - understanding of spoken and unspoken rules of interactions, impulse control - inhibition, the ability to manage strong emotions such as excitement, desire, frustration, ability to notice changes in others, understanding and predicting how others feel, memory of rules, the ability to predict the consequences of our actions, problem-solving skills and the ability to get our needs met other ways, ability to delay gratification, language and communication skills, managing sensory seeking	Adaptive functioning - social & conceptual skills, executive functioning, attention, emotional regulation, memory, cognition, language and communication, sensory