The Calm Home Handbook

Scripts, routines and fixes for real family days





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How to use this book

Don't read this book. Grab it.

It's built for the moment itself — the shoe that vanished at 8.42, the plate pushed away, the door slammed so hard the pictures jumped. You're not meant to study it on the sofa first (though you can). You're meant to reach for it mid-flashpoint, one-handed, while the noise is still happening.

The contents page is the index. There is no methodology to learn, no order to follow, no chapter that assumes you read the one before it. Find your moment — mornings, screens, the homework table, the teenage door — and go straight there.

Every chapter is built the same way, so a stressed brain always knows where to look:

- **What's actually happening** — the two-paragraph why, so the behaviour stops feeling personal.
- **Say this** — word-for-word scripts. Say them badly, in your own accent, through gritted teeth. They still work.
- **Do this** — small changes to the room or the routine that stop the rerun.
- **If your child is wired differently** — the same flashpoint, adapted for autistic children and ADHDers. If that's your child, read this section first; it may replace the rest.
- **When to let it go** — permission, in writing, to drop the battle when calm matters more than compliance. Some days it's the wisest page in the chapter.

Two promises before you start. First: nothing in here requires you to be calmer, softer, firmer or more consistent than you actually are today. Gentle parents and no-nonsense parents will both find their own words in every chapter — there's always a firmer script, and it's not the naughty option. Second: you will get it wrong sometimes, because you're a person. Chapter 12 is for that, and it might be the most important one in the book.

Find your moment. Go.

1 · Mornings that don't start with shouting

It's 8.19. One child is dressed except for socks, which have become a human rights issue. The other has been holding a shoe for eleven minutes without putting it on, and is now lying across the bottom stair narrating a story about a fox. You have said "we're leaving" four times, and nobody, including you, believes it.

What's actually happening

A morning asks a child to do the hardest kind of task there is: a long chain of boring steps, to someone else's deadline, at the exact hour their brain is slowest. The skills involved — starting an unappealing job, holding a sequence in mind, ignoring the far more interesting fox story — live in the front part of the brain, and that part is the last to mature. It's still under construction at seven, still being wired at seventeen. So when your child stalls halfway through getting dressed, you're not watching defiance. You're watching a system that genuinely cannot yet hold "socks, shoes, bag, door" in a row without scaffolding. Adults use lists, alarms and habits for exactly the same reason. We've just forgotten we needed them.

There's a second thing underneath, and it explains the daily mystery of why a child who can dress themselves suddenly can't. Mornings are goodbyes. Whatever the destination — nursery, school, the childminder — leaving means separating, and a child who is a bit wobbly about the day ahead will slow down, cling, invent problems, pick a fight about a jumper. It isn't sabotage; it's a small person trying to make the leaving not happen. Knowing this doesn't get the shoes on. But it changes the tone of your voice, and the tone of your voice changes the morning.

Say this

When they've stalled mid-task and the clock is winning:

> "Shoes on, then out the door. I'll race you to the mat."

One instruction, not four. A dawdling brain can hold one. Making the next step faintly fun isn't spoiling them — it's grease on the wheels, and it's cheaper than shouting.

When getting dressed has stopped dead:

> "Do you want to put your jumper on yourself, or shall I do the arms and you do the head?"

Two choices, both of which end in a jumper. Small children will fight a command and accept a choice, because a choice leaves their dignity intact.

When the clothes themselves are the war:

> "You're the boss of your body, so you pick — these trousers or those ones. Picking nothing means I pick, and I have terrible taste."

The firmer version — no negotiation left, still respectful:

> "I'm not discussing it. Shoes on now, and I'll wait right here while you do it."

Said low and level, not loud. Firm parents, notice what this script doesn't do: it doesn't mock, threaten or bring up yesterday. It states the thing, then stands calmly in the certainty that it will happen. That calm certainty is the whole trick — children can hear the difference between a parent who's decided and a parent who's about to blow.

When they're wobbly about the goodbye, not the socks:

> "I think leaving is the hard bit, not the shoes. I'll see you at pick-up,
>
> straight after lunch — and I always come back."

Name the real thing and the fake battles often evaporate on their own. A goodbye ritual helps too — same squeeze, same daft handshake, same "see you at the gate" every day. Rituals make the leaving predictable, and predictable goodbyes are survivable ones.

Do this

The deepest truth about mornings is that they are won the night before and lost in the design of the routine, not in the moment. Some rewiring that costs little and pays daily:

- **Move every decision to the evening.** Clothes chosen and laid out (by the child, so the trouser war happens at 6pm when nobody has a bus to catch), bag packed by the door, shoes in the same spot every single day. A morning with no decisions in it is a morning with far fewer fights in it.
- **Make the routine visual, not verbal.** Four pictures on the wall at child height — dressed, breakfast, teeth, shoes — and your job changes from town crier to gentle pointer: "What's next on your chart?" The chart becomes the nag, and children argue far less with a chart than with a parent. (Photos of your actual child doing each step work even better than drawings.)
- **Feed them before you need them.** A hungry child is a flammable child. Breakfast early in the sequence, jobs after, buys you a more reasonable human for the hard part.
- **Build in a buffer you never admit to.** If leaving takes twenty minutes, allow thirty and keep the difference secret. The ten spare minutes aren't slack — they're what stops your voice tightening at 8.10, and your voice is the thermostat for the whole house.
- **Give the dawdler a job with status.** The child who moves at glacier speed for "get your shoes" will often sprint for "you're in charge of opening the door for everyone" or "can you carry the keys? They're important." Purpose moves small legs faster than pressure does.

- **Put the fun after the friction.** Screens, if they're part of your morning at all, come after shoes-and-bag, never before. It's not a punishment; it's physics. Nothing on earth transitions a child away from a screen and into a coat gracefully.
- **Have a lost-shoe protocol before you need one.** One basket by the door, shoes live there and nowhere else, checked at bedtime. The "I lost my shoe" spiral is almost never solved at 8.42; it is solved at 7.30 the night before, forever.
- **Rehearse on a day that doesn't matter.** New routine, new school year, new chart on the wall? Run it once on a Saturday, as a game — "let's see how fast Team Us can get to the door, no rushing allowed" — and you'll find the broken steps (the coat peg nobody can reach, the toothpaste nobody can open) while nobody has anywhere to be. A sequence a child has done for fun once is a sequence they recognise under pressure.
- **Fix your own launch first.** An honest audit: how much of the 8.15 shouting starts with your keys, your bag, your phone on four per cent? Children read your scramble as the morning's weather and match it. Lay out your own things the night before too — same rules, same spot by the door — partly for the minutes, mostly for the calm it puts in your voice.

None of this makes mornings lovely. It makes them boring, which is the actual goal.

If your child is wired differently

For an autistic child or an ADHDer, a morning isn't a routine — it's an obstacle course of the exact things their brain finds hardest: transitions, sequencing, scratchy waistbands, time pressure and other people's urgency. The dawdling isn't attitude and the sock outrage isn't drama. Seams, labels and tightness can genuinely hurt; if socks are a daily war, believe the feet. Buy multiples of whatever clothing is acceptable, cut the labels out, and let "same jumper every day" be a solved problem rather than a battle for variety.

Transitions deserve real engineering, not just warnings. Countdowns help some children; for others a visual timer they can watch, or a "first–then" card (first shoes, then the fox story continues in the car), works better than any amount of talking. Keep the sequence identical every day — sameness isn't a rut for this child, it's a handrail — and expect that a supply-teacher day or a new lunchbox may cost you the whole

morning, because their system is already spending heavily on the change ahead. An ADHDer may also genuinely not register time passing: that's not carelessness, so lend them your scaffolding cheerfully (one instruction at a time, the visual chart doing the remembering) rather than asking them to grow a clock they don't yet have. Assume competence everywhere else: the same child who can't find their shoes can very possibly programme your phone, and they know exactly how their mornings look from the outside. Protect their dignity while you build the ramps.

When to let it go

Some mornings, the maths simply doesn't work: the night was broken, the jumper is unbearable, the tears are real, and the only route to the door on time runs directly through a screaming match. Let it go. Put them in the car in the wrong jumper. Do the socks yourself even though they "should" manage it — helping a struggling child isn't losing, it's parenting. Arrive four minutes late with a calm child rather than on time with a shattered one, because school receives whichever child you deliver, and so does the teacher, and so do you, all day.

There are whole seasons for this, too. The first term of school, the month after a new baby, the dark half of winter when nobody wants to leave the duvet: lower the bar on purpose and tell yourself you've done it. Simpler breakfasts, clothes that cause no wars, a routine cut to its bones. You're not letting standards slip; you're matching the load to the crew you actually have this season, which is what good captains do.

A morning where you dropped every standard except kindness is not a failed morning. And no single morning — not even the one with the shoe thrown down the stairs — teaches your child anything permanent. The pattern teaches. One bad Tuesday is just weather.

2 · Tantrums and big feelings (little kids)

The banana was broken. You broke it, by peeling it, which is what she asked you to do, and now the world is ending on the kitchen floor at a volume the neighbours can hear. There is no unbroken banana. There is no way back.

What's actually happening

A tantrum is not a behaviour problem; it's a plumbing problem. A small child's feelings arrive at full adult size — real fury, real grief, real disappointment — years before the brain machinery that manages feelings has been built. The calming, reasoning, perspective-taking part of the brain matures slowly across the whole of childhood, so a two-year-old experiencing rage is like a house with mains pressure and garden-hose pipes. The overflow isn't naughtiness. It's the only thing that can happen. This is also why reasoning with a mid-tantrum child fails so completely: the part of the brain that could hear your excellent logic is offline. You're posting letters to a house that's on fire.

The second thing worth knowing is that a tantrum, once truly started, is a storm that has to pass through — not a performance that can be cancelled. (There *is* a performance version — the shopping-centre special with one eye open checking the audience — and you'll learn to tell them apart: the performance stops when the audience leaves; the storm doesn't.) Your job during a storm isn't to end it, fix it or teach anything. Teaching happens later, in calm. Your job is to be the lighthouse: solid, boring, still there. A child who rages and is neither punished for the feeling nor given the thing they screamed for learns, over hundreds of repetitions, the single most valuable lesson of early childhood — feelings are survivable. That lesson is built almost entirely out of your boringness.

Say this

As it breaks — the all-purpose opener:

> "I'm here. You're safe. I'm not going anywhere."

Low, slow, few words. Volume and speeches feed a storm; a quiet broken record starves it kindly.

Holding the boundary AND the child:

> "You really wanted the biscuit. I'm not changing my mind, and I'm right here while you're cross about it."

Both halves matter. The no stays a no — giving in mid-scream teaches screaming works — but the child stays company. You are allowed to be the wall and the cushion at once; that's the whole job.

Naming it, once they can hear anything at all:

> "That was a big one. Your body got so cross. It's going now, isn't it."

Delivered like the weather report, not the verdict. You're teaching the most useful grammar there is: feelings arrive, feelings peak, feelings pass — and putting words on the storm, after it, is how a child slowly gains a vocabulary that can one day replace the screaming.

The firmer version — for the parent who needs the line held crisply:

> "I won't let you hit me. I'm putting you down here, and I'm staying close. When you're done, we'll sort it out."

Firm is fine. Cold is the only thing to avoid. This script draws a hard physical line — no hitting, no kicking, put down if needed — while keeping the one promise that matters: you don't leave. Held that way, firmness is a kindness; it tells the child someone bigger than the storm is in charge of the ship.

In public, for the audience as much as the child:

> "We're going to sit in the car together until you're done. Nothing bad is happening. I've got you."

Scooping up a flailing child and leaving the trolley is not defeat. It removes the audience (which shrinks the performance kind), shrinks the world to a car-sized calm space (which soothes the storm kind), and — say this part to yourself — every parent watching has been you. The ones who matter are silently on your side.

Do this

You can't prevent tantrums — you'd be preventing childhood — but you can stop stacking the deck against your child:

- **Track the fuel gauges.** The great majority of meltdowns are hunger, tiredness or overstimulation wearing a costume. A snack at 4.30 defuses the 5.15 apocalypse. Guard naps and bedtime like appointments. Leave the soft-play before the fun tips over — the last twenty minutes are never worth it.
- **Cushion the transitions.** Most tantrums detonate at a switch: leaving the park, ending the bath, turning off the telly. Warnings help ("two more slides, then coats"), but what helps more is giving the child a job across the border: "You press the button." "You carry the ticket." A child walking out of the park holding something important is a child mid-mission, not mid-loss.
- **Spend your no's wisely.** Before it leaves your mouth, ask: would I defend this no in an hour? If yes, hold it to the end, kindly. If no, say yes *now* — a fast cheerful yes teaches nothing bad. It's the scream-then- yes sequence that trains screaming, so decide early and mean it.
- **Build the calm-down spot in peacetime.** A cushion corner, a blanket, a favourite soft thing — introduced on a good day, as a cosy place, never as a punishment cell. Mid-storm you can offer it ("shall we go to the cosy corner?"), and one day, unbelievably, they'll take themselves.

- **Debrief in calm, briefly.** Hours later or at bedtime, thirty seconds: "Big feelings this morning, hey. The banana one. You got cross, and then it passed, and we were fine." You're writing the story of the storm with a safe ending — that story is the actual lesson, and it can only be written in peacetime.
- **Plan the outings like expeditions, briefly.** The supermarket tantrum is usually built before the supermarket: no snack, nap skipped, a hungry child wheeled past a wall of engineered temptation at adult speed. Go after food and sleep where you can, give them a mission ("you're in charge of finding the pasta"), and keep the trip shorter than your child's actual fuse, not the fuse you wish they had.
- **Narrate your own weather.** "I'm getting frustrated, so I'm taking a big breath." Said out loud at low stakes, this does more teaching than any mid-tantrum lesson ever will — it hands them the manual for what regulation looks like from the inside, from the person they copy most.

If your child is wired differently

First, learn the difference between a tantrum and a meltdown, because they need opposite handling. A tantrum has a goal — the biscuit, the staying, the not-broken banana — and a working connection to you. A meltdown is a nervous system past capacity: too much noise, light, change, demand, all stacked up until the circuit trips. For an autistic child especially, a meltdown is not a bid for anything, which is why boundaries, audiences and consequences do nothing to it. What helps is subtraction: less light, less sound, less talking — often no talking at all — fewer people, more space, and any pressure to make eye contact or "use your words" taken off entirely. Deep steady pressure helps some children; being touched at all makes it worse for others. Your child will teach you which, and what they do to self-soothe — rocking, flapping, repeating a phrase — is the repair kit working. Never take it away.

The better game is upstream: meltdowns are usually the last domino, so keep a gentle log of what came before — the supermarket lights, the scratchy jumper, the surprise change of plan, the party that was lovely but *long* — and start managing the load rather than the explosion. An ADHDer's version is often a frustration flashpoint with a hair trigger and a fast recovery; same rule, mind: regulate first, teach later, and never make them pay afterwards for a state they didn't choose. Aftercare matters more here too: a

meltdown is exhausting and often embarrassing for the child, so the kind move afterwards is water, quiet and normality — not a post-match analysis, and never an apology demanded for something their body did without asking them. And say the quiet part to your child in calm, because they will meet less generous interpretations out in the world: "Your brain feels things very strongly. That's not bad. We're learning what helps."

When to let it go

Let go, first, of the timetable. Tantrums peak in the toddler and preschool years and then genuinely fade as the brain's plumbing catches up with its pressure — but they fade on the child's schedule, not the parenting books', and a four-year-old still having big storms is not evidence that you've handled the last two years wrong. Different children ship with different boilers. The loud one is not the badly raised one.

Let go of the idea that a good parent could have prevented this, that the floor of the supermarket is a verdict on you, and — most of all — that every storm must end in a lesson. Some tantrums need no debrief, no consequence, no talking-about-it-later: they were weather, they passed, and the kindest teaching available is a normal afternoon carrying on as if the storm changed nothing between you. Because it didn't.

And on the day when you're too empty to be the lighthouse — when you hold the line on the biscuit and then hand it over four minutes later because you simply cannot — that's not ruin. One surrendered biscuit teaches almost nothing; patterns teach, and your pattern is hundreds of days long and full of love. Take the quiet afternoon. The storm-riding will still work tomorrow, when you're back.

3 · The homework table

It's a worksheet about fractions. It should take ten minutes. You are twenty-five minutes in, the pencil has been thrown twice, and a child who did long division happily last week has just announced, with total conviction, "I'm stupid" — and looked up to see whether you believe it too.

What's actually happening

By the time homework starts, your child has already done a full day's work. School asks for hours of sitting still, holding it together, being told what to do, managing friendships and swallowing frustrations — and children spend their best self there, because school is where the social stakes are. What comes home to your table is the leftovers: a tired brain, a thin temper, and nothing in reserve for the one subject they find hard. So the tears over fractions are rarely about fractions. They're the sound of an empty tank being asked for one more mile. That's also why the child who "did this fine at school" can't do it at 4.30 — same child, different fuel level.

The "I'm stupid" moment has its own machinery. Around mid-childhood, children discover comparison: they suddenly see who reads faster, who finishes first, who gets picked. A child who hits a wall in that new light doesn't conclude "this is hard yet" — they conclude something about themselves, and they say it out loud partly to test it on you. Perfectionism is the same discovery wearing different clothes: the rubbed-through paper and the screwed-up third attempt aren't fussiness, they're a child who has started to care how their work looks to other eyes and doesn't yet know that rough drafts are allowed. None of this is a crisis. It's the age at which effort needs to be spoken about out loud, because the child has started keeping score.

Say this

When "I'm stupid" lands on the table:

> "You're not stupid — you're stuck. Stuck is normal. Stuck is where everyone starts. Let's find the exact bit that's stuck."

Don't argue the verdict at length; replace it. "Stuck" is temporary and fixable in a way "stupid" isn't, and hunting for the exact stuck bit turns a judgement into a puzzle.

When they want you to just do it:

> "I won't do it for you, because it's yours and you're closer than you think. But I'll sit with you while you do it. Which bit shall we look at together?"

The line between helping and taking over is simple to say and hard to hold: their pencil, their paper, their answer — your company. The moment your hand is doing the writing, the teacher is marking you.

When perfectionism has screwed up the third attempt:

> "First tries are meant to look like that. That's what a first try is FOR. Show me the roughest version you've got and we'll build on it."

The firmer version — resistance, not distress, and the wriggling is the game:

> "Homework's happening — that's settled, so I'm not discussing whether. You choose when: now, or straight after your snack. Tell me which."

Firm parents, this is your page too. The non-negotiable is the *whether*; handing over the *when* isn't going soft, it's removing the only battlefield on offer. Said once, evenly, and then followed through without a lecture, it usually ends the nightly wriggle inside a week.

When the tears are real and the tank is empty:

> "This isn't working tonight, and that's not your fault. We're stopping.
>
> I'll write your teacher a note — that's my job, not yours."

Ending a broken session on purpose, calmly, is a decision — not a defeat. The child learns that the adults manage the workload, that struggling has a dignified exit, and that tomorrow exists. All three beat anything the last twenty minutes of that worksheet was going to teach.

Do this

- **Refuel before you ask for the extra mile.** Food and movement first, homework second — straight-off-the-bus is the worst slot in the day. Ten minutes of running around plus a snack turns a 40-minute battle into a 15-minute job more reliably than any incentive chart.
- **Same time, same place, lights on the runway.** A predictable slot ends the nightly negotiation about *whether*, which is where most of the fight lives. A clear table, the pencils already there, distractions elsewhere — make starting cost as little as possible, because starting is the hard part.
- **Shrink the visible mountain.** Fold the worksheet so only one question shows. Say "just do the first two, then show me" rather than "do your homework". A child who refuses a page will often do a strip.
- **Be a wall, not a co-pilot.** Sit nearby doing your own boring task — forms, a list, anything — rather than hovering over the page. Hovering broadcasts "this is beyond you"; nearby-but-busy broadcasts "you've got this, and I'm here". When they ask for help, ask a question back ("what do you know already?") before you ever supply an answer.
- **Praise the verbs, not the verdicts.** "You stayed at the table even though it was hard" and "you tried it a second way" are sentences a child can act on tomorrow. "You're so clever" is a verdict they'll fear losing — it feeds exactly the machinery that produced "I'm stupid".

- **Change the personnel when the chemistry is the problem.** Some parent-child pairs simply combust at the homework table — too alike, too close, too much history by Tuesday. If every session ends in flames with you and goes fine with the other parent, a grandparent, an older cousin or the school's homework club, that's not a verdict on your relationship; it's chemistry, and rerouting around it is management, not surrender. Save yourselves for the subjects you're good at together.
- **Cap it, and email the teacher instead of fighting nightly.** If homework regularly takes triple the intended time, or ends in tears more nights than not, the information belongs at school, not in your kitchen. One short note — "she's working hard but twenty minutes is her limit at the moment; this is what we managed" — and stop at the cap with a clear conscience. Teachers would rather know than not, and most would far rather have a rested child than a tear-stained worksheet. Protecting the relationship at your table IS supporting the school.

If your child is wired differently

For an ADHDer, homework is the perfect storm: a boring task, requiring sustained attention, at the tiredest hour, with the interesting world in view. The refusals and the sudden urgent need to reorganise the pencil pot aren't cheek — starting genuinely costs this brain more, and medication, if your child takes it, has often worn off by homework time (worth telling the prescriber, not solving with willpower). Work *with* the wiring: shrink tasks to minutes not pages, use a visible timer and race it cheerfully, let them stand, kneel, fidget, chew or work in bursts with movement between — output matters, posture doesn't. A body doing something is often what lets the mind settle. Company helps too, more than it "should": many ADHDers work far better with someone simply present and busy alongside them — you at the same table with your own paperwork, not supervising, just there. It has a name, body doubling, and it costs you nothing but sitting down.

For an autistic child, the sticking point is often not the content but the switch: home is home, work is school, and homework smudges a boundary their system relies on. A visible routine (same slot, same seat, a clear start-and-finish ritual), plus exact instructions rather than open ones ("write four sentences" beats "write about your weekend"), can dissolve what looked like refusal. Watch for handwriting as the real wall

— many children have ideas years ahead of their hands, and typing or scribing isn't cheating, it's access. In both cases, be your child's ambassador: schools can and do adjust — shortened homework, alternative recording, extra time — and asking is not special pleading. It's giving a competent child a fair run at showing what they know.

When to let it go

Homework is the strongest candidate in this whole book for a dropped battle, so hear this clearly: no primary-school worksheet is worth your relationship with your child, and there is no evidence-shaped reason to believe one lost homework ever mattered to a life. If the evening is broken — the tears are real, the tank is empty, the fractions have won — stop. Close the book. Write the note. Do something warm together instead, and let school be the place where school's consequences live.

It helps to remember what the table is actually for. Nobody reaches adulthood remembering the content of Year 4 homework; everybody reaches adulthood remembering how it felt to struggle in front of their parents. The lasting cargo of those evenings isn't the fractions — it's whether "I find this hard" became a safe thing to say out loud at your table. A child who can say it at eight, and get help instead of heat, is being built for every classroom, workplace and kitchen table that comes after. That's the homework. The worksheet is just the props.

Watch, too, for the version where the letting-go is bigger: if homework is tears most nights for weeks, the problem is not your kitchen and cannot be solved there. That's a pattern for the teacher, possibly for a hearing or eyesight check, possibly for a longer conversation about how your child is finding school. Dropping the nightly fight in order to see the pattern clearly isn't giving up. It's the most useful thing at the table.

4 · Screens without the nightly war

"One more episode" was twenty minutes ago. You reach for the tablet and a child who was silent and glassy-eyed erupts like you've torn off a limb. Upstairs, an older one is "just finishing a game" that cannot, apparently, ever be finished.

What's actually happening

Screens are hard to leave because they are built to be hard to leave — the autoplaying next episode, the game round that ends just as the next begins, the group chat that never sleeps. That's not a moral failing in your child; it's professional design meeting an ordinary developing brain. Stopping requires the self-interruption machinery that grows slowly across all of childhood, so a small child handed a tablet and told "you decide when to stop" has been given an adult's job without an adult's tools. The handover tantrum makes extra sense when you add the switch itself: a screen delivers a rich, fast, effortless stream, and turning it off means falling out of that stream into a slow quiet room. The crash you see is a nervous system changing gear too fast — which is why endings need ramps, not cliffs.

For olders, screens change species. A teenager's phone isn't a toy; it's where their friendships live — the group chat is the bus stop, the game is the park. That's why confiscation lands as social exile rather than lost entertainment, and why it produces fury out of all proportion to "no more games". None of this means no limits. It means limits on a teenager's screen are limits on their social world, and they go far better negotiated than imposed — with one exception, sleep, which is worth holding firmly at every age because tired changes everything else.

Say this

The ending, announced before the beginning (little kids):

> "Two episodes. When the second one ends, the telly has a rest. Deal?"

The limit set *before* the screen goes on is a fact of the landscape; the same limit invented mid-viewing is a provocation. Agree the ending while everyone still has their reasoning brain.

At the handover, riding the protest:

> "That's the end, like we said. I know — it's hard to stop. Come and help me in the kitchen; you're in charge of stirring."

Empathy plus a bridge to the next thing. The job matters: a child falling out of the fast stream needs somewhere to land.

For the gamer mid-round (olders):

> "I'm not going to kill it mid-game. Finish this round, then off — how long's left, five minutes? I'll come back at quarter past."

Respecting the round isn't weakness; it's the difference between an ending and an ambush, and it buys you the credibility that makes the ending stick.

The firmer version — the agreement is being surfed nightly:

> "We agreed the ending and it's stopped being a discussion. Hand it over now, please. If tonight's another fight about it, tomorrow is a screen-free day and we'll try again on Thursday."

Level voice, consequence named once, then done — no speech, no scorekeeping. Firmer parents: the strength here is in the follow-through being certain, boring and short, not in the volume.

For the teenager, opening the negotiation rather than the war:

> "I'm not trying to take your phone off you — that's your people in there,
>
> I get it. I care about two things: sleep, and some hours that are ours.
>
> Help me design the rules and I'll hold you to less than I would've."

A teenager invited into the rule-making argues the rules less, partly because they're fairer, mostly because they're *theirs*. And the opening concession — naming what the phone actually is to them — buys more cooperation than any amount of "when I was your age".

Do this

- **Decide the family agreement in peacetime — and write it down.** Which hours, which rooms, what happens at bedtime, what breaks the deal. Made together at a calm kitchen table, with olders genuinely shaping it, an agreement survives contact with reality in a way that decrees never do. Expect to revise it each school year; that's the agreement working, not failing.
- **Ramp the endings.** Autoplay off, so episodes end rather than flow. A ten-and-two-minute warning for littles; for gamers, ask "how long's the round?" and set the ending at a real seam in the game. Always have a landing: snack, bath, job, dog. "Off" is not a destination.
- **Make the geography do the enforcing.** Screens live in shared rooms; chargers live in the kitchen; every device — including yours — sleeps there overnight. A rule built into the house doesn't need nightly re-litigating, and phones out of bedrooms is the single highest-value screen rule there is, because it protects sleep without a single argument.
- **Fill the vacuum before you fight the screen.** A bored child defaults to the most engineered thing in the room. The cheap version: boredom is allowed (they'll find something, after complaining), pens and Lego stay visible, and the park still works. You don't have to out-entertain a tablet — just stop it being the only door in the corridor.
- **Protect two screen-free anchors and defend no others.** The table and the car (short trips, anyway) are worth ring-fencing for everyone, parents included —

not because screens are poison, but because those are the two places conversation happens by accident, and accidental conversation is where family life actually lives. Two anchors, held cheerfully, beat a house full of contested rules.

- **Watch what they watch, sometimes, on purpose.** Ten minutes inside their world — the game played together, the series watched alongside, the YouTuber endured — does two jobs: it turns "screens" from a battlefield into a shared country you occasionally visit, and it means that when something in that country worries them, you're already a person who knows the map.
- **Audit your own phone, gently.** Children learn "how screens work here" from watching us scroll mid-conversation. You don't need to be a monk. Just let them see you put it down sometimes — face down, other room, "I'm leaving it in the kitchen while we eat" — because the family agreement is only as believable as its most-watched member.

If your child is wired differently

Screens are often an autistic child's or ADHDer's most reliable regulation tool — predictable, controllable, exactly stimulating enough — which is why the crash at switch-off can be genuinely bigger, and why "just turn it off" advice fails so hard here. Respect what the screen is *doing* for your child before you renegotiate how much of it there is. Then engineer the endings like transitions from chapter one, doubled: warnings that are visual, not just spoken (a timer they can watch, a "first–then" card), an ending at a real seam (end of the episode, end of the build — mid-round cut-offs can feel physically unbearable), and a soft landing that actually regulates, not a cold demand pile ("wash hands, set the table, NOW" straight off a screen is asking for the explosion you got). For a hyperfocusing ADHDer, know that they may honestly not have heard the first two warnings; a hand on the shoulder and eyes met beats a voice from the doorway.

Two guardrails matter more than minutes. First, don't measure your child against a neurotypical child's screen diet: an autistic child rewatching one episode for the fortieth time is doing something calming and orderly, not something broken, and a special interest lived partly on YouTube is still a special interest — a strength. Second, be careful about using screen bans as an all-purpose consequence: if the screen is a main regulation tool and a main social channel, removing it for unrelated crimes takes away

the repair kit exactly when it's needed. Protect sleep, keep the agreement visual and predictable, and change it slowly, with notice. Sameness is a handrail here too. And when a screen change must happen — a new limit, a lost charger, an app that has to go — deliver it in calm, in advance, in writing if that helps, never as a surprise landing on an already loaded evening.

When to let it go

There are days when the tablet is the babysitter, the peacemaker and the only thing standing between the household and collapse: the illness day, the long journey, the week the baby arrived, the afternoon you needed to cry in the kitchen. Use it. A heavy-screen day inside a connected childhood is a rounding error, and the guilt-hours parents spend on it are worth more than the screen-hours themselves. The dose that matters is the pattern across months, not the total on a bad Tuesday.

Let go of the minute-counting, mostly. What a child does on a screen matters more than the raw total ever did: an hour building something, video-calling a grandparent or watching the same beloved film again is not the same hour as autoplay at midnight, and a family agreement built around *what and when* rather than a daily stopwatch is both saner to hold and closer to the point. The stopwatch mainly measures your guilt.

Let go, too, of winning every handover. If the ending was agreed, held, and grieved loudly — the protest is not a sign it went wrong. That IS it going right; you don't also need them to be graceful about it. Take the eye-roll, skip the lecture on gratitude, and let the evening move on. Calm tonight beats a conceded argument every time.

5 · Siblings at war

"He's LOOKING at me." A scream from the back seat, a thud from the playroom, and two children appear before you mid-sentence, both talking, both wronged, both certain — and both watching your face to see whose side the judge is on.

What's actually happening

Sibling conflict is not a malfunction of family life; it is one of its main classrooms. Two (or more) people who did not choose each other are sharing the two scarcest resources on earth — space and you — and every day supplies fresh disputes to practise on. Negotiation, losing, teasing that lands wrong, repair, alliance, betrayal, making up: children rehearse the entire social curriculum on a sibling first, because a sibling is the one opponent who will still be there at breakfast. So the fighting itself isn't evidence you've raised them wrong, and quantities of it that would alarm a visitor are ordinary. What matters — and what the rest of this chapter is about — is which skills the fighting is teaching, and whether anybody is genuinely getting hurt, in body or in role.

The part parents feel most is the summons: be the judge. And here is the trap — you almost never saw the start, you cannot rule fairly, and every verdict teaches both children that conflict is settled by recruiting the biggest available power rather than by dealing with each other. Worse, the child who's quicker to run and cry learns that tears win cases, and the slower, louder one learns the court is rigged. Refereeing feels like parenting; mostly it's feeding the machine. The great move of this chapter is resigning from the bench — not from supervision, from *verdicts* — and it changes more than any script in it.

Say this

The resignation, delivered at the scene:

> "Two children, one problem. I'm not deciding who started it — I didn't see, and you're both capable. Come back and tell me what you two decided."

For roughly school-age and up, when nobody's hurt. Expect appalled outrage the first week. Expect, some weeks later, the sound of a negotiation happening without you — which is the actual prize.

When you must intervene — separating, not judging:

> "I'm stopping this because bodies aren't safe — not because I know whose fault it is. Separate rooms, both of you, and we'll talk when everyone's calm."

Both children, no verdict, even when you have a strong suspicion. Safety is your jurisdiction; blame isn't.

For "it's not FAIR" — the fairness-versus-sameness line:

> "Fair doesn't mean same. It means everyone gets what they need. She needed new shoes; you'll get yours when your feet do the growing."

Children can absorb this surprisingly young if you say it calmly and often — and it quietly frees you from a lifetime of measuring out identical portions of everything, which is a game nobody wins.

The firmer version — a repeat pattern, one child persistently targeting another:

> "This stops today. Whatever he did, you're bigger and you know it. You'll stay in the kitchen with me this afternoon, and tomorrow we start again. I'm not angry at you — I'm ending a habit."

Notice what firm sounds like here: certain, boring, unhumiliating, and finished in four sentences. The child is corrected without being cast as the villain of the family — because a child who gets that role tends to keep playing it.

Opening a repair, once everyone's calm:

> "You don't have to say sorry yet — sorry works better when it's true. But her tower is broken and something needs putting right. What could you do?"

A forced "sorry" teaches the word as a toll booth — mumble it, barrier lifts, nothing repaired. Asking for a putting-right instead (help rebuild the tower, fetch the ice pack, lend the good pen) teaches the actual skill, and the real sorry usually turns up on its own somewhere in the rebuilding.

Do this

- **Run the peace process for repeat offenders.** For the pair who have the same fight daily, hold a five-minute sit-down in calm — not after a battle. Each child says their side while the other listens without interrupting (this is agony; hold it). Then one question: "What could you both do differently next time it starts?" Write their answer down — their words, on the fridge. Children follow treaties they drafted with startling loyalty, and the fridge, not you, becomes the referee.
- **Engineer the flashpoints away.** Chart a week of fights and most trace to three or four fixtures: the front seat, the good cup, whose turn on the game, the last twenty minutes before dinner. Rota the seat and the cup (odd dates, even dates — the calendar can't be argued with), timer the turns, and split them up at the hungry hour. It isn't giving in to buy peace with structure; it's removing the furniture they trip over.
- **Give each child ten undiluted minutes.** A startling amount of sibling war is competition for you, run through the nearest available proxy. Ten minutes a day per child — them choosing, you not multitasking, sacred-ish — shrinks the underlying scarcity that the fights are pricing.
- **Guard the roles, not just the bodies.** "The clever one", "the naughty one", "the easy one" — families hand out parts without noticing, and children fight hardest

against a role they've been cast in. Catch yourself narrating them ("he's my wild one") and stop; catch each child *out* of role ("you were so patient with her just then") and say it out loud.

- **Teach the exit.** The most useful anti-war skill is leaving: "You're allowed to walk away. Walking away isn't losing." Praise it lavishly the first time the little one stomps off instead of escalating. An exit both children trust defuses more fights than any treaty.
- **Don't draft the eldest as deputy parent.** "Watch your sister", "you should know better", "let him have it, he's little" — each one is small, and together they quietly bill the older child for the younger one's whole existence. Responsibility can be offered as an honour sometimes; it can't be their standing job description, or the resentment you're refereeing at nine resurfaces at nineteen with interest.

If your child is wired differently

When one sibling is autistic or an ADHDer, the wars have extra physics that verdicts can't see. An autistic child's belongings and routines may be load-bearing — the tower wasn't "just Lego", it was order made visible, and a sibling crashing through it lands as a genuine violation, not teasing. An ADHDer may snatch, barge and blurt with no malice at all and be genuinely bewildered by the fury it causes. Meanwhile the sibling of either may be quietly carrying their own load: interrupted games, public meltdowns, the family schedule bending around someone else's needs. All of this is real, and nobody in it is the villain.

Adapt the machinery rather than the child. Protected space and protected objects are legitimate accommodations, not unfairness — a shelf that is simply out of bounds, a room a sibling knocks before entering, and the fairness-not-sameness script from above doing daily work in both directions. The peace process still works, run slower: concrete words, one question at a time, written outcomes (many autistic children trust a written agreement far more than a spoken one). Never require the sibling of a melting-down child to be endlessly saintly about it — give them their own ten minutes, their own space, and honest words: "His brain finds sharing space hard. That's not your fault, and your feelings about it are allowed here." Assume competence on all sides: the autistic child can learn the knock-first rule too, taught explicitly and given time, and the ADHDer can learn "ask before you borrow" with a visual reminder on the door doing

the nagging. Accommodation runs both ways; that's what makes it a family and not a hierarchy — and children raised inside that two-way deal tend to grow into adults who are genuinely good at people, which is a long prize for a lot of short wars.

When to let it go

Most sibling fighting needs no intervention at all — that's not neglect, it's the curriculum running. Bickering in the back seat, squabbles over whose turn, wrestling that both parties keep rejoining, outrage that blows over by lunch: let it run, stay in earshot, and resist the urge to convert every scuffle into a teachable moment. Children who are left to finish their own small wars get better at ending them; children whose every skirmish is adjudicated get better at appealing. The noise is the sound of practice.

Let go of the fights you didn't witness, entirely. The playroom thud, the mutual accusations, the case with no evidence and two unreliable witnesses: you cannot try it fairly, so don't try it at all. "Sounds like it went wrong in there. Glad everyone's in one piece" is a complete judicial response, and it returns the problem to the only court that was ever going to solve it — theirs.

Let go, too, of the dream of children who don't fight — and of the fear underneath it. The sibling relationship is long; it is being built across decades, not afternoons, and today's mortal enemies are startlingly often each other's adult first phone call. The line worth watching is narrower than the noise: bodies unsafe, one child always the loser, cruelty that's cold rather than hot. Everything outside that line is two people learning, loudly, how to share a world. You did that too, probably. Ask your sister.

6 · Food fights

You made the pasta. The pasta was requested, by name, at volume, this morning. It is now "disgusting", untouched, and the requester is asking what else there is — while across the table, a smaller person is dismantling a sandwich to check it for evidence of crumbs touching.

What's actually happening

Somewhere around toddlerhood, most children narrow what they'll eat — sometimes dramatically — and the beige years begin: bread, pasta, crackers, the one acceptable brand of the one acceptable nugget. Infuriating at the table, this is ordinary development. Small children are wired to be wary of new and bitter foods and to trust the familiar, and a food often needs to be met many, many times — seen, smelled, touched, ignored on the plate — before it's trusted enough to try. A refused vegetable isn't a verdict; it's an early round in a long acquaintance. Appetites also swing wildly with growth: the child who ate nothing all Tuesday and everything all Thursday is running a system that works fine across a week, even when it looks broken across a meal.

The second thing happening at the table is a tug-of-war over control — and this one, parents genuinely can lose by winning. Eating is one of the few things a small child has total power over: you can put food in front of them, and nothing on earth can make them swallow it. The more a meal turns into pressure — one more bite, no pudding until, sitting here until it's gone — the more eating becomes about the contest instead of the food, and pressure reliably makes wary eaters warier. The most useful sentence in this chapter is a division of labour: you decide what's offered, when and where; your child decides whether they eat it, and how much. Hold your half firmly, hand over theirs completely, and most food fights lose their fuel within weeks — because you've stopped turning up to the tug-of-war.

Say this

When the plate is refused entirely:

> "You don't have to eat it. It stays on the table till we're done, in case you change your mind."

Flat, cheerful, final. No selling, no sighing, no eulogy for the pasta. The refusal gets no audience, and the food stays available without a single gram of pressure.

When they ask what else there is:

> "This is what's for dinner. There's bread on the table if you're not a pasta person tonight — and breakfast is coming in the morning."

The boring safe option (bread, plain rice, fruit — always on the table, never a reward) means no child sits hungry, and no parent becomes a short-order cook at 6.40pm.

When a new food gets the horror treatment:

> "You don't have to try it. It's just living on your plate tonight. You can ignore it — it's quite shy anyway."

Silly beats stern here. A food that's allowed to be ignored gets investigated sooner than a food with an agenda.

The firmer version — for table behaviour, which IS your jurisdiction:

> "You don't have to eat, but you do have to let everyone else enjoy their dinner. Yuck-talk and plate-shoving are done now, or you can get down and the meal is over."

This is the line that keeps firm parents sane: what goes in their mouth is their side of the deal — how they behave at the table is yours, and you can hold it as crisply as you

hold anything.

When pudding is being used as a lever (by them or by you):

> "Pudding isn't a prize, it's just part of dinner. Everyone gets their bit — eaten vegetables or not."

Serving a modest pudding unconditionally takes it off the throne. Sweet things earned by broccoli teach exactly one lesson: broccoli is the toll, sweet is the treasure.

Do this

- **Run the same table, whoever's eating.** One family meal, served to everyone, always including something the wary eater accepts (the pasta plain before the sauce goes on costs you nothing). No separate menus, no negotiations — the kitchen isn't a restaurant, and knowing that removes half the evening's bargaining before it starts.
- **Let food be met away from the fork.** Shopping, unpacking, washing, stirring, growing a tomato in a pot — every no-stakes encounter with a food is a deposit in the trust account. A child who helped make the soup has met the soup socially; trying it stops being a leap.
- **Shrink the portions, kill the theatre.** A full plate in front of a wary eater reads as a demand. Serve small — absurdly small for the suspicious items, one bean is a fine opening offer — with more available. Finishing a tiny plate and asking for seconds builds the identity of someone who eats; scraping a big one builds the other identity.
- **Eat the food in front of them, and enjoy it out loud.** Children learn eating the way they learn accents — by exposure to the locals. A parent visibly enjoying the salad, without once suggesting anyone else try it, does more advertising than a hundred "just one bite"s, because it carries no hook. Eat together when you can manage it, even if "together" is ten minutes and the menu is beige; the table's real dish is the company.

- **Time the hunger honestly.** A child grazing crackers at 4.45 has already had dinner, whatever you serve at 5.30. Close the kitchen for the last stretch before meals, and let actual appetite arrive at the table — it's the best sauce you own.
- **Retire the scoreboard.** No logging mouthfuls, no "she ate NOTHING" delivered over their head to the other parent, no triumphant announcement when a carrot goes in (praise is pressure in a party hat — a wary eater who gets applause for a carrot learns the carrot mattered to you, and the tug-of-war rope twitches). The less a meal is a performance review, the sooner eating goes back to being just eating. Judge the week, not the meal, and say so out loud to yourself on the bad nights.

If your child is wired differently

For many autistic children — and some ADHDers — food is a sensory event first and nutrition a distant second. Texture, smell, temperature, foods touching, the wrong brand, the wrong *shape* of the right brand: these can make a food genuinely unmanageable, not fussily declined, and a child who gags is not performing. The accommodation-first move is to believe the plate: serve the accepted foods without commentary or campaign, keep them reliably in stock (a discontinued safe brand is a genuine crisis — buy ahead), and let "separate foods, not touching, same plate as yesterday" be a solved problem rather than a daily negotiation. A short list of accepted foods served with peace beats a long list served with dread, and pressure tactics — hiding vegetables, bribing bites, "just try it" — cost trust at the exact table where trust is the only currency that works.

Expansion is still possible; it just runs on safety, not persuasion. New foods do better as near-neighbours of accepted ones (a different shape of the same pasta, the same chip in a new size), met with zero stakes and no audience, and abandoned without sighing when the answer is no. ADHDers add their own physics: appetite can be genuinely absent at mealtimes (worth mentioning to your prescriber if your child takes medication), and sitting still through a family dinner may cost more than the dinner is worth — movement breaks and a smaller sitting-time ask are accommodations, not indulgence. Pack the safe foods for the world, unapologetically — the party, the holiday, the school trip, Granny's Sunday lunch all go better with the accepted crackers in the bag, and "he's brought his own, he's fine" said breezily enough closes most

conversations. And a line for the grandparents, verbatim if needed: "He's not spoiled, he's wired differently, and the rules at our table are the rules at your table too."

When to let it go

Almost all of it. Of every battlefield in this book, the table is the one where surrender most reliably wins the war: children eat better, over months, at tables where nobody is fighting about eating. So let go of the refused pasta without a eulogy, the vegetable-free Tuesday, the beige birthday-party plate, the week where dinner was mostly toast. Judge the month; feed the relationship; keep offering without keeping score.

Let other tables go, too. The party where lunch was cake and crisps, the grandparents' house where the rules dissolve on arrival, the holiday week of chips: children are excellent at running different rules in different places, and none of these visits undoes the calm you're building at home. The occasional free-for-all isn't a breach in the system. It's one of the things childhood is for, and the wise parent waves it through with a smile and reinstates normal service at the next home meal, wordlessly.

One quiet caveat, kept in its right size: if your child's eating comes with health worries that genuinely nag at you, or mealtimes are distress rather than defiance, that's a conversation for your GP or health visitor — not a battle to win at the table, and not a chapter of this book. For everyone else: the goal was never a child who eats everything. It's a grown person who sits down to food without flinching, and every relaxed meal you serve is a brick in that wall. Even the toast ones.

7 · Bedtime and the child who won't stay in it

Lights out was 7.30. It is now 8.15, and you have delivered water, escorted a wee, re-tucked a blanket, evicted an imaginary spider and answered a question about whether jellyfish sleep. Footsteps on the landing again. You haven't sat down yet.

What's actually happening

Bedtime asks a child to do something genuinely hard: stop the day, leave the warm lit world where everyone is, and lie alone in the dark with nothing to do but be with their own head. Small children resist it because separation is the price of it — every "water… wee… one more hug" is less a request than a rope thrown back to you, checking the connection still holds. Add the mechanics of sleep itself: bodies wind down on ramps, not switches, and a child who was bouncing at 7.10 cannot be asleep-shaped at 7.30 whatever the clock says. (Miss the window the other way and it gets worse — an overtired child is wired, not drowsy, which is why later bedtimes so often backfire.) None of this is manipulation. It's a small person negotiating the loneliest transition of their day, nightly.

Night fears deserve their own sentence, because they arrive on schedule: somewhere in early childhood, imagination outgrows the ability to file it — a child who can now picture a monster cannot yet un-picture one, and the dark is where pictures live. That's development, not damage. Older children and teenagers have the opposite problem: their body clocks genuinely shift later in adolescence — the teen who isn't sleepy at ten isn't being defiant, and the morning zombie isn't being lazy — but the phone in the bed exploits that shift ruthlessly, and "revenge bedtime scrolling" (staying up to claw back the only unsupervised hours of the day) is as real for fifteen-year-olds as for their parents. Different ages, same core truth: bedtime is a separation, and it goes best when the connection is topped up before the light goes out, not chased down the landing after.

Say this

Building the ramp (little kids), same words nightly:

> "Bath, jamas, two books, one song, lights out. Same as always. You pick the books."

The sequence said out loud IS the wind-down. Ritual does what instructions can't: it tells the body what's coming, and bodies argue less than minds.

For the curtain calls — one ticket, honoured warmly:

> "One more visit is included — one. Use it well. After that, my answer at the door is 'it's sleep time now', and that's all I'll be saying."

The genius of the included visit: it converts the rope-throwing into a ration the child controls. Most children spend it fast the first nights, then start saving it, then forget it exists.

At the door, every visit after the ticket (the broken record):

> "It's sleep time now. I love you. Back to bed."

Nine words, zero decoration, identical every time. Boring is the entire strategy — a landing appearance that earns conversation is a landing appearance worth repeating.

For night fears — allying with the child, not debating the monster:

> "You're safe — checking things is my job, and I've checked. Your brain is so good at making pictures that it made a scary one. Let's have it make a different one: tell me the den you'd build if the garden was snow."

Arguing "monsters aren't real" loses on the child's home turf. Crediting the imagination and redirecting it wins — the machinery that built the monster builds the snow den just as vividly.

The firmer version — the seasoned campaigner who's surfing your warmth:

> "Bedtime's had its cuddles and they were lovely. From here it's my boring voice and your bed. Every trip out of it, I'll walk you back without a chat — all night if we have to. Night night."

Then do exactly that: silent, calm, repeated return trips. Firm parents, this is one of the places firmness genuinely shines — but notice where it lives: in the walking, not the words. Firmness at bedtime works as certainty; it backfires the moment it becomes threat, because a child scared at lights-out has just been handed a real fear to replace the invented one.

For the teenager (the negotiation, not the decree):

> "I can't set your bedtime any more — that's yours now. Two things are still mine: the phone sleeps in the kitchen, and if mornings keep being brutal, we look at the evidence together and adjust. Deal?"

Do this

- **Build a ramp, not a cliff.** Thirty to forty-five minutes of descent: screens off first (they're the steepest part of the cliff), then bath, dim lights, books, bed — same order, same phrases, every night including the nights you're tired of it. Predictability isn't the garnish here; it's the sedative.
- **Pre-empt the curtain calls.** Water already by the bed, wee already done, the landing light already agreed, "who's picking me up tomorrow" already answered — audit a week of requests and build the top five into the routine. Most encores are booked before the show ends.

- **Top up connection before the light goes out.** Ten unhurried minutes — books, chat, the daft jellyfish questions — inside the routine buys back forty on the landing. The child who got you at 7.15 has less need to fish for you at 8.
- **Expect the confessions, and budget for them.** Lights-out is when the day's held-back cargo surfaces — the friendship wobble, the worry about the test, the thing they did and regret. It's not a stalling tactic (mostly); the dark and the closeness genuinely open the hatch. Build five unhurried minutes of lying-there-chatting into the routine so the cargo has a scheduled unloading slot, and park the big ones kindly: "That's important. I'm writing it down, and we'll sort it at breakfast."
- **Guard the wake-up window, not just lights-out.** Sleep runs on the morning anchor: roughly the same wake time daily (weekends drifting an hour, not four) does more for bedtime than any evening tactic, at every age including yours.
- **For olders, move the phone, not the goalposts.** Devices sleeping in the kitchen (chapter four's best rule, doing its best work here) removes the scrolling battle without a nightly fight. Then give the teen real ownership of the rest: a lie-in that fails on Monday is better evidence than your lecture, and "let's adjust based on how mornings go" keeps you the ally, not the alarm clock.

If your child is wired differently

For an autistic child or an ADHDer, the standard advice often fails for reasons that are physical, not behavioural. Falling asleep requires a nervous system to downshift, and some brains genuinely downshift late, slowly, or only from a very settled starting point — an ADHDer's mind may be at its loudest exactly when the lights go off (many describe bedtime as the moment the thoughts queue up), and an autistic child may be processing the day's entire sensory load in the first quiet hour they've had. So build the ramp longer and lower: start the descent earlier, cut the demands in it (a bath is optional; the sequence isn't), and expect that "lies awake for a while" may just be your child's settings, best met with calm company or audiobooks rather than a nightly campaign to fix it.

Then believe the sensory reports. Pyjama seams, tag labels, the wrong duvet weight, a ticking clock, the landing light too bright or its absence too dark — these can each

singlehandedly hold a child awake, and the child often can't name which one until you hunt together. Deep pressure (firm tucking, heavier bedding, a wall-side bed) settles some children remarkably; others need the opposite. Sameness is load-bearing at bedtime more than anywhere: same order, same words, same duvet, and real notice before hotel nights or clock changes. And drop the neurotypical scoreboard: a child who needs a parent nearby to fall asleep at eight, or music, or the same chapter of the same audiobook for a year, isn't behind. They're using supports that work — which is exactly what you'd want a competent person to do. If sleep stays brutal despite all of it, that's a fair conversation for your GP, not a failure of your routine.

When to let it go

First, a permission about the routine itself: it serves you, not the other way round. Some nights the routine is beyond everyone — the party ran late, the day broke the child, the child is ill, you are ill. Skip the bath, do one book badly, lie down next to them until they're asleep even though "they should fall asleep alone", and count the night a win, because a child asleep next to a calm parent beats a child crying at a consistent one every single time. No habit is built in a night. Rescue tonight; resume tomorrow.

And let go of the picture of children who go down like clockwork and stay down. Some children need less sleep than the charts imply; some need company longer than the neighbours' kids did; every child changes the rules the week you've cracked them. The measure that matters isn't the landing being silent by 7.31 — it's a child who ends the day feeling that bed is a safe place and you're on their side of it. If you're holding that, the jellyfish questions are just the sound of a childhood, and one evening — you will not believe this at 8.15, but it's true — you'll miss the footsteps.

8 · "No", whining and negotiation Olympics

"Can I have a biscuit?" No. "Just one?" No. "Half one?" No. "Whyyyyy though?" — and here it comes, the pitch that could open tins, the sound engineered by evolution to be impossible to ignore, deployed by a seven-year-old barrister who has argued you back from three separate no's this week and knows the odds.

What's actually happening

Whining works. That's the uncomfortable science of it, and it's worth saying plainly because it dissolves the moral panic: the whine is pitched almost perfectly to adult nerves, and a child who whines is not broken or bratty — they're running the strategy that has paid out before. Children are superb statisticians of their own households. If the ordinary voice gets a distracted "mm" and the whine gets eye contact, a lecture, or a biscuit at attempt four, the household has been quietly training the whine for years. Nobody did this on purpose. It's just learning, working as designed — which is the good news, because anything learned can be relearned, and the retraining takes weeks, not years.

Negotiation is a different animal wearing similar clothes, and it deserves more respect than it gets at 5pm. A child who counters, bargains, finds the loophole and appeals the verdict is practising one of the most valuable skill sets an adult can own — the same machinery that will one day negotiate a salary or talk a friend out of a bad idea. The problem was never the negotiating; it's the venue and the hours. Meanwhile, your "no" has its own physics: every no that later collapses under pressure teaches that no means "opening offer", and every no that holds — kindly, boringly — teaches that no means the negotiation is over. Children don't actually need fewer no's than we give them. They need the no's we do give to be load-bearing.

Say this

For the whine — retraining the channel, no shame attached:

> "That's your whiny voice — it doesn't work on me. Try it in your ordinary voice and I'll really listen."

Then the crucial half: when the ordinary voice comes, *really listen* — stop, turn, answer properly, even if the answer is still no. The script only retrains if the advertised channel genuinely pays better.

Holding a no kindly — the full sequence:

> "No biscuits before dinner. I know — you love them, and it's rubbish being told no. It's still no, and I'm not going to change it, so you don't need to keep asking."

Empathy is not a crack in the wall. You can be entirely warm about the feeling and entirely immovable about the biscuit; that combination — not coldness — is what makes a no believable.

Closing the courtroom (for the barrister on appeal four):

> "You've asked, I've answered, and the answer's finished. If you ask again, I'm just going to say 'asked and answered' — that's all you'll get."

Then honour it: two words, mild voice, every repeat. A four-word verdict is a terrible audience, and barristers don't argue long to empty rooms.

The firmer version — the no that's being surfed hard:

> "The answer was no the first time, and asking five more times means the answer to the NEXT thing you ask is also no. Choose your moment better tomorrow — you're usually good at that."

Delivered level, once. Firmer parents: the sting here is consequence, not contempt — the last line hands back dignity, which is what makes the lesson land as strategy advice rather than a defeat.

Welcoming the negotiation — in the right venue:

> "That's a proper argument, and I like it. This one's not up for negotiation — but make me that case again on Saturday about your pocket money, and you might win."

Do this

- **Pay the ordinary voice, starve the whine.** The whole retraining programme in one line: whines get the flat script and nothing else — no lecture, no sighing, no eventual biscuit — and ordinary voices get prompt, warm, full attention *especially when you're busy*, which is exactly when the whine used to be the only voice that worked. Expect the whining to get louder before it fades; that's the old strategy making its final bids, and it's the sign the retraining is working, not failing.
- **Audit your no's, then defend the survivors.** For one week, notice what you refuse on autopilot — and how many of those no's were really "I'm tired" or "not while I'm cooking". Convert the flimsy ones to quick yes's or honest "ask me after dinner"s, and give the remainder the full backing of the state. Fewer no's, all load-bearing, is the whole architecture.
- **Slow your answers down.** Half the collapsed no's in any house were never considered — they were reflexes, regretted mid-argument. "Let me think for a minute" is a legal move for parents, and it produces answers you can actually hold. A considered no survives appeals that a reflex no can't.
- **Give the negotiator a portfolio.** A skilled bargainer with nothing legitimate to bargain over will practise on your biscuits. Hand over real negotiable territory — weekend plans, menu night, how to spend their pocket money, the case for a later bedtime made in writing — and schedule the hearings ("pitch me at the weekend"). The skill gets its gym; your Tuesday-teatime courtroom closes.

- **Catch them asking well, and say so.** The retraining has a positive wing that's easy to forget: the day the request arrives in an ordinary voice, at a decent moment, with a reason attached — name it. "That was a really good ask. The answer's yes, partly because of how you asked." Children repeat what gets noticed, and a child whose good asks visibly pay learns the lesson faster than a child whose whines merely fail.
- **Get the household on one script.** A no that's a maybe at Granny's, or that Dad overturns on appeal, isn't a no — it's a jurisdiction question, and children shop jurisdictions brilliantly. Agree the handful of standing rules with every adult involved, including the "asked and answered" wording, so the appeal court gives the same verdict as the first judge.

If your child is wired differently

Start by re-hearing the whine. In an autistic child or an ADHDer, what sounds like manipulation is very often a system running out of capacity — the whine as the last audible stop before a meltdown, not an opening bid. The tell is what it responds to: strategy-whining stops when the channel stops paying; capacity-whining escalates, because the need underneath is real. When it's capacity, the move is chapter-two territory — reduce demands, add regulation, skip the retraining scripts entirely. Getting this reading right matters more than any script in this chapter, because retraining a child for running out of fuel teaches them only that running out of fuel is punished.

Negotiation has its own wiring notes. Many autistic children argue from pure logic and precedent — "you said after lunch, and it IS after lunch" is not cheek, it's a contract dispute, and it deserves a straight answer rather than "don't answer back". Be precise on the front end ("one episode, the short kind, then off") and honour your own wording, because a child who trusts your words argues them far less. Sudden no's can land as genuine derailments for a child who'd already built the plan in their head — where you can, give no's with notice ("not today — Saturday") and keep them consistent, since an inconsistent rule set costs this child more than it costs most. For ADHDers, the asking may simply repeat because the answer genuinely didn't stick or the wanting is that loud; a visual answer (the biscuit tin closed, "after dinner" on the kitchen whiteboard) argues less than you do. And protect the persistence itself from

being pathologised: the child relentlessly arguing their case is showing you focus and advocacy. Channel it; don't extinguish it.

When to let it go

Not every request deserves the full constitutional process. If the biscuit doesn't actually matter — if your no was reflex, and appeal three has revealed that you don't believe in the verdict either — you are allowed to say so and reverse it: "You know what, I've thought about it, and it's a yes." Done occasionally, out loud, with the reasoning shown, this doesn't teach children that pestering works. It teaches them that good arguments do, and that the people in charge of them can update — two lessons worth more than most held biscuits.

Let go of the whining some days, too. A child whining at the end of a long Thursday is often just tired in a shape that has a soundtrack, and the wise move is a snack and a sofa, not a training protocol. Whining also spikes, reliably, around every big transition — the new school, the new sibling, the growth spurt, the week after the holidays — because it's the regression that asks "do you still look after me when I'm little?" The answer is yes, delivered as a cuddle rather than a script, and the spike passes on its own schedule. The retraining works across weeks; it does not require you to win every evening, and it survives the nights you hand over the biscuit just to buy silence — provided they're the exception and not the system. Calm tonight, consistency on average. That's the deal this whole book keeps offering, and it holds here too.

9 · Lying, cheekiness and testing the fence

There is chocolate on the chin. There is chocolate on the hand. The wrapper is IN the bin she is standing next to, and she looks you in the eye and says, with the calm of a seasoned diplomat, "I didn't eat it." Somewhere upstairs, a nine-year-old has just answered you in a tone you'd have been walloped for, and is watching to see what happens next.

What's actually happening

The first lies are, oddly, good news. To tell one, a child has to work out that your mind is separate from theirs — that you don't automatically know what they know — and that discovery is a genuine developmental milestone, arriving in the preschool years and getting more skilful from there. So early lying isn't a moral collapse; it's a new ability out on its first wobbly rides, usually in the service of very old motives: dodging trouble, keeping your good opinion, or wishing something were true hard enough to say it. Here's the part that changes how you respond: children lie more, not less, where the cost of truth is high. The chin made of chocolate lies because the truth looks expensive. Your job isn't to make lying cost more — children just get better at it — it's to make truth cost less, reliably, until honesty is simply the better deal in your house.

Cheekiness and fence-testing are the same project at a different fence. A child pushes at rules, tones and limits to answer a question they can't ask out loud: where are the edges, and do they hold? Backchat spikes exactly when independence does — the nine-year-old's tone and the thirteen-year-old's eye-roll are clumsy first drafts of "I'm a separate person with my own opinions", which is something you actually want them to become. That doesn't mean every draft gets published. It means the behaviour is developmental, not a verdict on your authority — and that the fences worth defending should be few, visible and solid, because a child who meets forty wobbly fences tests all of them, while a child who meets five firm ones learns where the edges are and mostly gets on with their day.

Say this

When the truth is standing there with chocolate on its chin:

> "I can see what happened, so I'm not going to ask you if you did it.
>
> Let's skip that bit. What shall we do about it?"

Never stage the trap — asking "did you eat it?" when you know the answer isn't a truth test, it's a lie rehearsal with an audience. Skip the trial and go straight to repair.

Making truth cheap — said often, meant always:

> "I'm not cross about the truth. Tell me what happened and we'll fix it
>
> together."

This is the house policy, and it only works if the small print is honoured: when they DO tell a hard truth, the response is visibly calmer than the crime deserves. "Thank you for telling me — that can't have been easy. Now let's sort the window out."

When a lie has already been told and you both know it:

> "That's the story you'd like to be true. I get why. Have another go at
>
> the real one — I'll wait, and I won't shout."

Naming it as a wish, not branding them a liar. The label is the thing to avoid — a child who gets called a liar has less reason than ever to practise truth.

For backchat — correcting the draft without crushing the author:

> "You're allowed to disagree with me — you're even allowed to be right.
>
> You're not allowed to talk to me like that. Try the same sentence
>
> again in a voice you'd accept from me."

The firmer version — the fence is being rattled on purpose:

> "Enough. That tone doesn't work in this house and you know it. You'll speak to me properly or the conversation's over — and when you're ready to redo that sentence, I'm ready to hear it. I always am."

Firmer parents, note the anatomy: the line is hard, the door stays open, and there's no character verdict anywhere in it — the behaviour is named, the child is not. That last line ("I always am") is what turns a shutdown into a fence: something solid a child can push against and find still standing, still theirs.

Do this

- **Retire the courtroom.** The single biggest structural change: when you know, don't ask. Interrogations ("WAS it you?") train performance under pressure, not honesty. State what you see, move to repair, and save your questions for things you genuinely don't know.
- **Pay honesty visibly.** Make "you told the truth, so we're only dealing with the window — not a cover-up as well" an explicit, spoken-aloud house rule, and honour it even when the truth is infuriating. Children track this ledger with actuarial precision; two honoured payouts do more than twenty lectures.
- **Shrink the fence count, then defend every survivor.** List your actual non-negotiables — most families find five or six: bodies safe, words respectful, a few household laws. Everything else gets demoted to preference, negotiable, or ignored. Fewer fences means every fence can be solid, and solid fences get tested less.
- **Give the boundary-pusher legitimate frontier.** The child rattling fences hardest is often the one whose territory has grown slower than they have. Expand something real — a later time, a new freedom, a genuine responsibility — and say why: "You've been handling X, so you've earned Y." Fence-testing drops when the map is being redrawn officially.
- **Keep consequences boring and repair-shaped.** Where a lie does need a consequence, make it about the mess, not the soul: the broken thing gets mended

or saved for, the cover-up costs a privilege briefly, and then — this is the important part — it's over, fully, without a probation period of suspicious looks. A child who serves their sentence and is then trusted again learns that honesty restores things. A child who stays under suspicion learns the account can't be repaired — so why keep paying into it?

- **Model the product.** Children clock every white lie done in front of them — "say I'm not in", the fibbed age at the ticket desk, "tell Granny you love it". You don't owe the world radical honesty, but know that your household's real truth policy is the one they watch, not the one they're told. Repairing your own fibs out loud ("actually, that wasn't quite true — I'll ring back") is the masterclass.

If your child is wired differently

Recalibrate the radar first, in both directions. Many autistic children lie later, less and worse than their peers — some are so committed to accuracy that the social fibs ("say thank you for the lovely jumper") are the genuine struggle, and what reads as rudeness or cheek is often literal honesty arriving without packaging. Don't punish the bluntness; coach the packaging, explicitly and kindly, as a skill ("true things sometimes need soft wrapping — here's how"). Meanwhile an ADHDer's "lies" are frequently not lies at all: an impulsive "no!" that beat the brain to the truth, a genuinely patchy memory of who started it, or a story reshaped by embarrassment at the fourth telling-off this hour. The gap between "deceiving you" and "answered too fast" matters enormously, because only one of them is about trust — give the do-over ("have another run at that answer, no penalty") and watch how often the truth arrives on the second pass.

Fence-testing needs the same translation. An autistic child who "won't comply" may be mid-overload, may need the rule made explicit and literal (house rules written down beat house rules implied — "be respectful" is fog; "no name-calling" is a fence), or may be asking the entirely reasonable question "why?" and getting "because I said so", which to a logic-first mind is not an answer. Answer the why once, properly, and many battles simply close. And guard the labels with your life: these children hear "liar", "rude" and "defiant" from the world at rates their peers never will, and they believe what they're repeatedly told about themselves. Assume competence, assume good faith first, and say what you see instead of what it means — that habit alone rewrites this whole chapter for a differently wired child.

When to let it go

A great deal of what rattles parents in this chapter is safely ignorable. The tall tales of a five-year-old ("a wolf came to nursery") are imagination, not delinquency — enjoy them. The muttered last word as a teenager leaves the room is the sound of someone swallowing most of what they wanted to say; count the swallowed part as the victory and let the mutter go. Fantasy lies, face-saving wobbles in the retelling, cheek that's actually wit (you know the difference — one has a smile in it): not every fence matters, and pretending they all do is how fences stop meaning anything.

Even the proper lies rarely need the full weight of your fear. Parents hear a lie and fast-forward to a dishonest adult; children lie in the present tense, about chocolate, to keep your good opinion — which means the relationship is working, not failing. Hold the few fences that matter, keep truth cheap, and give the long game time to run. The child who can afford to tell you the truth at seven is in training to be the seventeen-year-old who tells you the hard thing at 2am — and that's the fence that was always the point.

10 · Feelings too big for words (worry, anger, sadness)

She was fine at pick-up. Fine on the walk, fine at the snack — and then the cup was the wrong cup and she is sobbing on the floor like the day has finally found a door to leave through. Upstairs, later, a boy who "doesn't want to talk about it" lies in the dark worrying about a sleepover that is eleven days away.

What's actually happening

Children feel everything adults feel — dread, grief, fury, the specific loneliness of a friendship going wrong — long before they can name it, explain it or even locate it. A big feeling in a small person often has no words attached at all: it comes out sideways, as a stomach ache on school mornings, an explosion over the wrong cup, a mean streak at a little brother, a bedtime that suddenly grows fears. This is normal machinery, not a warning light. The naming comes slowly, across the whole of childhood, and it's mostly learned in one place: from an adult who puts calm words on the weather ("you seem heavy tonight") often enough that the child ends up owning the vocabulary themselves.

The after-school volcano deserves its own paragraph, because once you see it you can't unsee it — and you'll stop taking it personally. Holding it together at school is genuinely hard labour: all day your child has been managing their face, their body, their friendships and their frustrations for an audience they can't fully relax with. Home is where the manager goes off duty. The child who was "an absolute delight" for the teacher and dissolves over the wrong cup at 3.47 isn't saving their worst for you; they're saving their *real* for you, because you're the safe place where the day's held-in load can finally be put down. It's called restraint collapse, it's a compliment wearing a disguise, and the wrong cup was never the wrong cup. It was just the door.

Say this

At the after-school volcano — receive the load, skip the inquest:

> "You held it together all day, and now you're home and you don't have to. Come here. We can talk later or not at all."

Not "what's wrong?", not "how was school?" — questions are demands, and the tank is empty. Food, sofa, low light, you nearby. The talking, if it comes, comes out sideways later, usually in the car or the dark.

For the worried child at bedtime — the listen that doesn't interrogate:

> "That worry sounds heavy. Tell me the whole thing — I'm not going to fix it while you're talking, I'm just going to listen."

Then actually don't fix it. The fast reassure — "you'll be FINE!" — teaches a child that the worry was too big to be heard. Heard all the way to the end, worries shrink on their own surprisingly often.

When the worry wants certainty you can't give:

> "I can't promise the sleepover will be perfect. I can promise you've handled new things before, and that whatever happens, you can call me and I'll come. Your job isn't to feel brave — it's just to go and see."

For the angry child — allying with them against the anger, not fighting both:

> "Something's made you furious, and I want to hear it — I'm on your side. I won't let you smash things, and I will listen to every word. Start wherever."

The firmer version — feelings honoured, behaviour still fenced:

> "You're allowed to be as angry as you like — you're not allowed to take it out on your sister. Walk it off or bring it to me. Those are the choices, and they're both fine ones."

Firmer parents, this is your chapter more than you may think: a child in a storm is genuinely steadied by an adult who is unafraid of the feeling and immovable about the fence. What doesn't work is punishing the feeling itself — "go to your room until you can be pleasant" teaches a child that their real weather is unwelcome here, and the lesson they draw isn't calm. It's concealment.

For the sad spell nobody can explain:

> "You don't have to know why you're sad. Sad doesn't always come with a reason. Want company or space? Both are fine — I'll check on you either way."

Do this

- **Feed the volcano before it erupts.** The after-school window is a fuel problem before it's a feelings problem: snack in the bag at pick-up, no questions for the first twenty minutes, no clubs or errands stacked straight onto the school day for the child who collapses hardest. You're not spoiling them — you're refuelling a worker at the end of a shift.
- **Move the talking sideways.** Face-to-face interrogation is the worst extraction method ever designed for children. Side-by-side works: the car, the walk, the washing-up, the dark at bedtime. Keep hands busy and eyes forward, ask one small question ("what was the weirdest bit of today?"), and let silence do some of the lifting.
- **Give worries a container.** A worry time (ten minutes, same slot daily, worries welcome, then closed), a worry jar to post them into, a notebook by the bed — containers work because they honour the worry AND give it edges. "That's a good

one for worry time" is kinder than it sounds; it means *this will be dealt with, and you don't have to carry it all evening*.

- **Keep the door open after the no-thanks.** "Want to talk about it?" "No." That no is rarely the end of the conversation; it's a test of whether the offer survives rejection. "Okay. Offer stands" — then genuinely nearby, genuinely unbothered — gets more eventual talking than any second attempt at the question, because it proves the door doesn't close when they push it.
- **Name feelings out loud, all week, at low stakes.** "I'm frustrated with this drawer." "You seem disappointed about the match." "That film made me sad too." You're building their vocabulary in peacetime so it's there in wartime — a child who has words for the weather needs fewer volcanoes.
- **Let anger have a body.** Anger is physical before it's verbal: running, kicking a football against a wall, ripping up scrap paper, stomping upstairs loudly. Agree the legal outlets in calm ("you can slam YOUR door; you can't slam words into your sister") so the energy has somewhere lawful to go.

If your child is wired differently

Two translations change everything here. First: many autistic children and ADHDers genuinely struggle to read their own internal weather — not won't, can't yet. Some can't reliably tell anxious from hungry from overwhelmed; the feeling arrives as pure body (heat, noise, a need to run) with no label attached, so "use your words" and "how are you FEELING?" are demands for a language they don't have yet. Work concrete: a feelings scale on the fridge (1–5, with what helps at each number, agreed in peacetime), body clues named gently ("your fists are tight — I wonder if you're at a 4"), yes/no questions instead of open ones. Second: the restraint collapse runs bigger for these children, because school costs them more — masking, sensory load, changes, social decoding, all day, every day. The after-school hour may need to be a demand-free zone, not just a snack: quiet, screens or a special interest allowed without commentary, and absolutely no debriefing at the door. It isn't avoidance. It's the decompression a heavier dive requires.

Honour the different shapes feelings take. Worry in an autistic child often attaches to change, uncertainty and sensory prospects (the fire drill, the supply teacher, the party's

noise) and responds far better to information than reassurance: what will happen, in what order, with what exits — a plan is worth fifty "it'll be fine"s. Anger in an ADHDer can go nought-to-sixty with no visible ramp and be over as fast; don't build a courtroom around a storm that has already passed. And watch your own decoder: flapping, pacing and repeating phrases are regulation, not distress to be extinguished; a child scripting lines from a film may be telling you exactly how they feel in borrowed words. Assume the feeling underneath is as rich as any child's — it is — and be the one place its native language is understood.

When to let it go

Most big feelings need no response at all beyond company. Not every tear needs a cause found, not every worry needs a solution, and not every storm needs a debrief — some feelings just need to pass through a child while someone loving is in the room, and the parent who can sit with a sad kid without fixing anything is doing advanced work, not none. Let go, especially, of needing your child to be happy at all times: sadness, worry and fury are not malfunctions of childhood. They're the childhood, doing what it's for — a safe first run at the full human range.

Let the day's version go, too. The volcano at 3.47 doesn't need to be processed at 3.48, or possibly at all; tomorrow's pick-up is another chance, and the pattern of a warm landing matters more than any single eruption handled perfectly. And if a heaviness seems to have moved in rather than passed through — weeks, not days, and it's crowding out the things they love — that's not a script situation, and there's a page for it at the back of this book. For everything else, which is nearly everything: sofa, snack, sideways. You're enough for this.

11 · The teenage door

"How was school?" "Fine." The door closes — not slammed, just closed, which is somehow worse — and you stand in the hallway holding a conversation that ended before it started, wondering when exactly the child who used to narrate their entire day from the bath became a lodger who communicates in single words and the occasional exhale.

What's actually happening

Adolescence has one great developmental job: becoming a separate person. Everything that stings in this chapter — the closed door, the one-word answers, the eye-roll, the sudden allergy to being seen with you — is that job being done. A teenager pulls away from parents because they're supposed to; the pulling IS the developing, the same force that once drove a toddler to wobble away across the park, now scaled up and aimed at the front door. Friends surge in importance because friends are the future — the practice ground for the relationships that will carry adult life. And the teenage brain runs on remodelled wiring: big feelings arrive amplified, social pain registers like physical pain, and the machinery for pausing before reacting is still — famously — under construction. Add a body clock shifted late and a phone where their whole social world lives, and the lodger upstairs starts to look less like a rejection of you and more like exactly what the manual said would happen.

Here's the part the manual whispers, though: they still need you — as much as ever, differently shaped. The research-informed picture and every exhausted parent's experience agree that teenagers do best with warmth AND structure — parents who stay interested, keep a few firm limits, and don't take the doorframe personally. What they can't use any more is pursuit. Chasing a withdrawing teenager — knocking, prying, narrating their moods, demanding the old closeness back — teaches them to withdraw further, because it turns connection into another demand on a person already drowning in demands. The art of this chapter is the opposite of chasing: becoming the parent who

is reliably, undemandingly *there* — the lit landing light of a person — so that when the wave comes (and waves come), yours is the door they knock on.

Say this

Instead of "how was school?" — questions that don't have a "fine":

> "What was the most annoying thing that happened today? I'll trade you mine."

Specific, sideways, with an offer attached. You won't always get an answer. You're not owed one. You're keeping a channel warm.

Receiving a one-word answer without prosecuting it:

> "Fair enough. I'm around if that changes — I'll be in the kitchen making a ridiculous amount of toast."

The most underrated script in this chapter. No pursuit, no wound, an open door and a reason to walk through it. Teenagers surface for food long after they stop surfacing for conversation.

When something real finally comes out — hold it like an egg:

> "I'm really glad you told me. I'm not going to freak out, and I'm not going to fix it unless you ask me to. Keep going."

Then keep your face still and your lecture holstered. How you receive the small disclosures decides whether you ever hear the big ones — this is the 2am relationship being built, deposit by deposit, years before the 2am call.

Setting a boundary with a growing adult — structure with respect:

> "You're old enough that I'm not tracking your every move — and I'm still your parent, so three things stand: I know where you are, I know who with, and you answer when I ring. That's the whole price of the freedom. It's a good deal."

The firmer version — a line crossed, consequence without contempt:

> "You came home an hour late and your phone was 'dead'. I'm not shouting and I'm not lecturing — but next weekend's curfew just moved an hour earlier, and you'll earn the hour back by keeping your word. You're better than tonight, and we both know it."

Firmer parents, this is the shape that works at fifteen: calm, specific, finite, and ending with respect rather than a character verdict. What stops working at fifteen is volume, sarcasm and open-ended punishment — a teenager grounded "until further notice" has no reason to climb back, and teenagers always need a route back.

The standing offer — said once, meant forever:

> "There is nothing you could tell me that would make me stop being on your side. Nothing. If you're ever stuck somewhere, any hour, ring me — I'll come, and the lecture can wait for another day."

Do this

- **Feed them and drive them.** The two great listening posts of the teenage years: the kitchen (keep stocking it; they'll keep coming) and the car — side by side, eyes forward, journeys with a fixed end. More gets said on a twenty-minute drive than in a month of "can we talk?". Volunteer for the lifts. Yes, even that one.

- **Learn the new language of connection.** The old closeness was conversation; the new one is proximity and shared stupid things — the series you watch together, the meme sent at 11pm, the game they deign to explain to you, the takeaway ritual. Answer the meme within the hour. This IS the relationship now, not a consolation prize for it.
- **Knock, and mean it.** The closed door is a border, and respecting it is how you keep a say in what crosses it. Knock, wait, take "not now" without sulking — and watch what modelling boundary-respect buys you when you need them to respect yours.
- **Move the fences as they grow.** Audit the rules each birthday-ish: what were they trusted with last year, what have they earned since, what's the next freedom and what's it contingent on? A teenager who can see the fences moving outward on a schedule fights them less — it's the fences that never move that get climbed at midnight.
- **Catch them being who they're becoming.** Teenagers get a running commentary on their failures — the room, the grades, the tone — and near silence on their emerging virtues. Reverse the ratio where you can: the loyalty to a friend, the shift at the weekend job, the opinion well argued at dinner, named plainly and without a lesson stapled to it. "You were really good with your cousin today" costs nothing and lands deeper than they'll ever show you.
- **Stay boringly findable.** Same chair, same evening rhythms, phone down when they wander in, bedtime kept lateish enough that the night-owl hours overlap yours sometimes. Teenagers talk when THEY'RE ready, which is rarely when you are, and the whole strategy is being reliably in the room when the readiness strikes.

If your child is wired differently

Adolescence often lands harder on autistic teens and ADHDers, and the door needs reading differently. For an autistic teenager, the closed door may be less separation-project and more recovery ward: secondary school is a sensory and social marathon, frequently run while masking, and the hours alone with a special interest afterwards are legitimate decompression, not concerning isolation. The test isn't hours-alone per week; it's whether they're basically themselves — eating, sleeping, lit up by their interests, connecting on their own terms (and online counts: for many neurodivergent

teens, online friendship around a shared interest IS the social life, and a good one). Enter their world through the interest rather than demanding they exit into small talk — the parent who learns the game, the fandom, the coding project, gets conversation the "how was school?" parent never hears.

For an ADHD teenager, the flashpoints are usually executive, not attitudinal: the forgotten bus pass, the homework black hole, the room like a crime scene — at an age where the world (and tired parents) starts reading support-needs as character flaws. Keep the scaffolding and update its interface: shared calendar instead of wall chart, alarms instead of nagging, systems built WITH them rather than imposed. Say the quiet part out loud, because they're hearing the loud part everywhere: "Your brain is built for interest, not admin. We'll build the admin around it — that's not babying, it's engineering." And for both: the standing offer script matters double here. Neurodivergent teens who've spent years being corrected can conclude the door only opens for their fixed version. Make unmistakably sure yours opens for the real one.

When to let it go

Let go of the daily scoreboard. The eye-roll, the "fine", the headphones at dinner once in a while, the bedroom that smells like a locker room, the music through the wall — this is weather, not damage, and prosecuting every gust turns you into background noise before the conversations that matter. Save your authority for the short list that counts (safety, respect, the household's few real laws) and let the rest pass with a raised eyebrow at most. A teenager needs something to push against; better the small stuff, cheaply conceded, than the big stuff, expensively.

And let go of the grief-shaped fear underneath it all: that the closed door is the end of something. It isn't. It's a chrysalis with a lock on it, and the child who used to narrate their day from the bath is still in there, being rebuilt into someone who will one day sit in your kitchen at twenty-four, eating your food, telling you everything. The parents who get that future are, overwhelmingly, the ones who didn't force the door — who stayed warm, stayed findable, kept making the ridiculous amounts of toast. Keep the light on. This is the long game, and you're still in it.

12 · When YOU lose it

You shouted. Properly shouted — the kitchen-shaking kind, over a spilled drink that any calm person could see was an accident. The little face did the thing you can't stop seeing, and now bedtime's done and you're at the sink replaying it, running the maths on how much damage one shout does to a childhood.

What's actually happening

You lost it because you're a human being running an impossible workload on insufficient fuel — not because there's something wrong with you or your love. Parents' storms obey the same physics as children's: the calm, patient, perspective-holding machinery lives in the part of the brain most expensive to run, and it's the first thing that goes offline when you're exhausted, hungry, touched-out, worried about money, or on hour fourteen of being needed. The shout at 5.40 was rarely about the spilled drink, just as the tantrum was never about the banana; the drink was the last domino in a chain that started with a broken night and ran through a work email, a whining hour and no lunch to speak of. This is why "just stay calm" advice fails so completely: calm isn't a decision, it's a resource — and resources run out. The arithmetic of patience is real arithmetic. Sleep, food, margin, help, something in the week that refills you: these aren't self-indulgence, they're the raw materials your patience is manufactured from, and no technique in this book works on an empty tank.

Now the part to read twice, because it's the load-bearing wall of this whole book: rupture isn't what damages — rupture without repair is. Every close relationship on earth runs on a cycle of connection, rupture and repair, and children don't need parents who never break the connection (no such parents exist, anywhere, and never have). They need parents who reliably mend it. A repaired shout teaches a child some of the most valuable lessons available: that love survives anger, that strong people apologise, that relationships bend without breaking, and that when THEY one day lose it — at a friend, a partner, their own child — there's a road back. Your worst moments, repaired,

become the curriculum. That's not a consolation prize. It's how the whole thing was always designed to work.

Say this

The repair, child-facing — the most important script in this book:

> "I shouted, and that wasn't okay. It wasn't your fault — my anger was too big for the mistake. I'm sorry. You didn't deserve that voice."

Short, owned, unconditional. No "but you have to admit you were…" — a sorry with a *but* in it is a lecture in a trench coat, and children frisk every apology for one. The mess stays yours; the repair lands clean.

When they're still wary of you afterwards:

> "You don't have to be fine with me yet. I'll be on the sofa, and there's room next to me whenever you're ready."

Repair on their clock, not yours. A child allowed to finish being hurt forgives faster than a child hurried to absolve you — the hurry is for your comfort, and they know it.

Mid-storm — pulling out of the dive in front of them:

> "I'm getting too cross and my voice is going shouty. I'm going to the kitchen for three breaths, and then I'm coming back to sort this out kindly. Stay here — I'm not leaving, I'm cooling down."

Walking away mid-fury isn't losing control of the situation; it's the most advanced demonstration of control a child will ever witness. Done out loud like this, it hands them the exact manoeuvre you most want them to own at fifteen.

Partner-facing repair — because they caught the shrapnel too:

> "I was horrible in the hallway and you didn't deserve it — you were just the nearest adult. I'm sorry. I think I'm running on empty, and I need us to look at the load, because I don't want to keep paying it out of us."

The firmer household's version — same repair, your dialect:

> "Right. That was too much and I got it wrong — the rule about respectful voices is for me as well, and I broke it. I'm sorry. Consequences still stand, but the shouting was mine to own, and I just did."

Firmer parents: apologising doesn't dissolve your authority — it completes it. A child who watches you hold the line AND own your misses learns that strength and accountability are the same thing worn on different days. That's the exact authority you were building.

Do this

- **Learn your dominoes.** Storms have run-ups. For one week, jot when you snapped and what the two hours before looked like — most parents find the same three fixtures (the 5-to-6pm corridor, the getting-out door, the interrupted task) and the same fuel states (no lunch, no sleep, no minute alone since waking). You can't remove the triggers, but seen clearly, you can stop scheduling your empties against their hardest hours.
- **Refill on purpose, in small denominations.** The tank rarely gets a spa day; it can get ten walked minutes, a lunch actually eaten, a swapped lie-in, one evening a week that is yours on the calendar and defended like an appointment — because it is one. Whoever shares the load with you is a co-signatory on this: patience is household infrastructure, and it's maintained the way infrastructure is — regularly, unglamorously, before it fails.

- **Install a circuit breaker.** Decide NOW, in calm, what you'll do at the feeling of the storm rising — because mid-surge is too late to design one. Cold water on the wrists, three slow breaths at the window, the kitchen script above, even just narrating it ("I'm at an eight"). It matters less what the breaker is than that it's pre-chosen and rehearsed; you're building yourself the calm-down corner from chapter two.
- **Reset the day at half-time.** A morning that went to bits does not own the afternoon. Declare it, out loud, as a family move: "This day started terribly. We're starting it again — everyone back to bed for ten seconds, and up we get. Take two." It's silly, it works, and it teaches the single most useful idea in this chapter: any moment can be the first moment of doing better.
- **Watch the pattern, not the incident.** One shout repaired is a Tuesday. Shouting as the household's main weather — most days, most conflicts, and the repairs wearing thin — is a tank problem that deserves real help: more support, honest redistribution of the load, and possibly the page at the back of this book, which is for parents too. Asking for help with your own storms isn't failing at this chapter. It's doing it.

If your child is wired differently

Two things run hotter in these households, and both deserve saying without flinching. First: the load is objectively heavier. Parenting a child whose needs are intensive — the meltdowns, the broken sleep, the school meetings, the constant advocacy and translation, the vigilance that never quite switches off — burns patience-fuel at a rate other parents aren't paying, and pretending otherwise is how good parents end up ashamed of ordinary exhaustion. You will lose it more often than the parent next door, not because you're worse at this but because you're running a steeper course. The arithmetic of patience applies double: respite isn't a luxury, other parents who get it (find them — the school gate has more of them than you think, and so do local support groups) aren't optional, and your own refills are part of your child's support plan whether anyone wrote them down or not.

Second: repair still works, adapted. An autistic child may need the repair concrete and unhurried — plain words, no demand for eye contact or instant reconciliation, sometimes written down (a note pushed under the door outperforms a doorway speech

more often than you'd guess), and real recovery time before they can receive it at all. Say the specific thing: "I shouted about the shoes. The shouting was wrong. You weren't bad" — and expect the ledger to be long, because these children often remember ruptures precisely; let them see the repairs land just as precisely, every time. An ADHDer may seem to shrug it off in seconds — repair anyway; the shrug isn't always the whole story. And guard one line with everything you have: never let the repair imply their wiring caused your storm. "I shouted because you melted down" hands a child shame for their own nervous system. The load is real, and it is never theirs to carry. It goes in the partner script, the friend phone call, the support group — upward and outward, never down.

When to let it go

Tonight, at the sink: let it go. Run the maths honestly — one shout, against the thousands of ordinary kindnesses you've banked and the repair you're about to make, is weather against a climate. Your child will not remember the spilled-drink shout; they'll remember what it was like to live with you, on average, over years — and the fact that you're at the sink replaying it is itself the evidence of the climate. Guilt this heavy, over a shout this ordinary, isn't a verdict. It's love, misfiling itself as evidence. Make the repair in the morning if tonight's too late. Then put the tea towel down and go to bed; the tank refills there.

And let go — finally, on the last page of these chapters — of the parent you keep meaning to become: the one who'd have handled the morning, the homework, the door slam, the drink, all of it, serenely. That parent doesn't exist, has never existed in any home in history, and your children aren't waiting for them. They're attached to the real one — the one who loses it sometimes, repairs it reliably, and keeps showing up. Calm was never the destination of this book. It's just the weather you're learning to ride, together, in the only home your children want: the real one. Yours.

The one-page cheat sheet

The ten most-reached-for scripts in this book, in one place. Stick it on the fridge, photograph it, fold it into the kitchen drawer — it's built to be grabbed.

1. **Stalled mid-task, clock winning** — "Do you want to put your jumper on yourself, or shall I do the arms and you do the head?"
2. **Tantrum breaking** — "I'm here. You're safe. I'm not going anywhere."
3. **Holding a boundary through the storm** — "You really wanted the biscuit. I'm not changing my mind, and I'm right here while you're cross about it."
4. **"I'm stupid" at the homework table** — "You're not stupid — you're stuck. Stuck is normal. Stuck is where everyone starts. Let's find the exact bit that's stuck."
5. **Siblings both wronged, both certain** — "Two children, one problem. I'm not deciding who started it — I didn't see, and you're both capable. Come back and tell me what you two decided."
6. **The plate refused** — "You don't have to eat it. It stays on the table till we're done, in case you change your mind."
7. **Every landing appearance after the last ticket** — "It's sleep time now. I love you. Back to bed."
8. **The whine** — "That's your whiny voice — it doesn't work on me. Try it in your ordinary voice and I'll really listen."
9. **Making truth cheaper than lies** — "I'm not cross about the truth. Tell me what happened and we'll fix it together."
10. **After you lost it — the repair** — "I shouted, and that wasn't okay. It wasn't your fault — my anger was too big for the mistake. I'm sorry. You didn't deserve that voice."

Say them badly. Say them through gritted teeth. They still work.

When it's more than a rough patch

Everything in this book lives in the territory of ordinary family weather — the flashpoints every home has, in some mix, at some volume. But sometimes a parent's gut says this is different: a heaviness that has moved in rather than passed through, a fear that's shrinking your child's world, eating or sleeping that's gone properly awry, a change that's lasted weeks and is crowding out the things they love. That gut feeling deserves respect, not another chapter of scripts.

If that's where you are, the right next step is a professional one, and it is a completely ordinary thing to do — parents book these conversations every day, and no one behind the desk will think you're overreacting. Start with your GP, your health visitor for little ones, or your child's school, who can often refer you to the right support faster than you'd expect. Write down what you've noticed and roughly when it started; take the notes with you; say it plainly. You are not diagnosing your child by asking — you're doing what you've done on every page of this book: noticing, and showing up.

And the same door is open for you. If your own tank has been empty for weeks rather than days — if the storms in chapter twelve are most days, or the low mood is yours and it isn't lifting — your GP is for that too. Parents are famously bad at booking this appointment. Book it. The whole house runs better when the person holding it is held.

Where this comes from

This book wears its evidence lightly, so here's where the weight sits. The ideas in these chapters — how children's brains and feelings develop, why connection and repair matter more than perfection, how routines, boundaries and warmth actually work — are drawn from the published guidance of world-renowned organisations: the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the Anna Freud Centre and their peers, alongside the broad, settled findings of child development research. Nothing in here is one clever person's theory or this year's fashionable method; where the evidence is genuinely settled, we've translated it into scripts and kitchen-table moves, and where it isn't,

we've said what generations of ordinary family experience say instead — and tried to be honest about the difference.

You'll find no citations mid-sentence and no named studies, because a parent mid-flashpoint doesn't need a bibliography — but every "what's actually happening" section was written to be something a developmental researcher would nod along to, in plainer clothes. The neurodiversity-affirming stance in every chapter reflects the same sources and the lived expertise of autistic people and ADHDers themselves: accommodation and understanding, never "fixing". Where your child's own professionals — a GP, a teacher, a specialist who knows them — say something different from a page in this book, they outrank us. They know your child; we know the averages.

About ParentUp

ParentUp is a parenting app built on the same idea as this book: that what a parent needs at the hard moment isn't a theory, but the actual words — scripts for the flashpoints, tiny daily moments of connection, and gentle ways to notice your family's patterns over time. It's warm-hearted, evidence-informed and shame-free, it supports every parenting style from gentle to firm, and it treats autistic children and ADHDers as ordinary children — because they are. Your family's data stays on your device: private by design, no feed, no comparison, no score.

This is the third of three ParentUp books, alongside *Mum, Breathe* (for mothers, on the load and the guilt and staying you) and *Dad On* (for fathers, on small ways to be a big presence). If this handbook earned its place on your fridge, the app is the same voice, in your pocket, at 5.40pm.

parentup.co