

DITCH THE POWER STRUGGLES—LEAD WITH CURIOSITY & CONNECTION

A Guide to Contextual
Parenting & Teaching
using the C.O.R.E.
Framework

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Hello & Welcome

I'm Megan DeLeon (Miller),
Contextual Parenting Coach



How To Make The Most Of This Resource

Parenting and teaching can feel like a constant tug-of-war when children refuse, melt down, or push back. It's easy to slip into power struggles, especially when our own stress and expectations collide with a child's needs. But what if we paused and got curious instead of controlling?

Contextual Parenting & Teaching combines insights from behavior analysis, Polyvagal Theory, and contextual behavior science. By viewing behavior within its context—both internal (emotional states, thoughts, sensory experiences) and external (environment, relationships, cultural factors)—we can uncover the why behind behavior and respond with compassion and clarity.

Key Goals of This Resource

- Shift from managing behavior to understanding it.
- Offer a science-backed model (CORE) to navigate challenging moments.
- Provide a practical, visual tool (the Traffic Light) to recognize a child's regulatory state.
- Foster deep connection and trust while setting firm, kind boundaries.

Why Contextual Parenting & Teaching?

A Holistic View of Behavior

“Contextual” means considering all factors—biological, environmental, emotional, relational, and cultural—that influence how children learn, feel, and behave. This perspective is central to:

- **Association for Contextual Behavior Science (ACBS):** Founded on the work of Dr. Steve Hayes, ACBS emphasizes psychological flexibility, mindfulness, and the powerful role that environment and relationships play in shaping human actions.
- **Neuroscience & Polyvagal Theory:** Building on the work of Stephen Porges and others, we recognize that a child’s felt sense of safety in their environment drastically impacts their ability to regulate emotions and learn new skills.
- **Behavior Analysis:** We focus on observable actions and the contexts that reinforce or maintain them. However, rather than just controlling or “managing” behavior, we use these insights to promote meaningful growth and connection.

Key Principles

- **Values & Relationships Matter:** Align your response with long-term goals like trust, emotional safety, and mutual respect.
- **Behavior is Communication:** When children struggle, it often signals unmet needs or skill deficits—rather than mere defiance.
- **Self-Reflection is Vital:** Understanding your own triggers, emotional responses, and nervous system states allows you to respond more effectively to a child’s needs.

The Stress Response in Children (and Adults)



Fight or Flight:

When children perceive a threat (real or perceived), their sympathetic nervous system is activated. This can look like yelling, running away, refusing to comply, or pushing back.



Freeze or Shutdown:

If the threat feels too big, some children “go offline” emotionally—shutting down, dissociating, or completely withdrawing.



Social Engagement Mode:

When the child feels safe, calm, and emotionally supported, they can engage in positive interactions and learning.

Polyvagal Theory in Brief

Stephen Porges's Polyvagal Theory highlights how the vagus nerve influences emotional regulation and social connection:

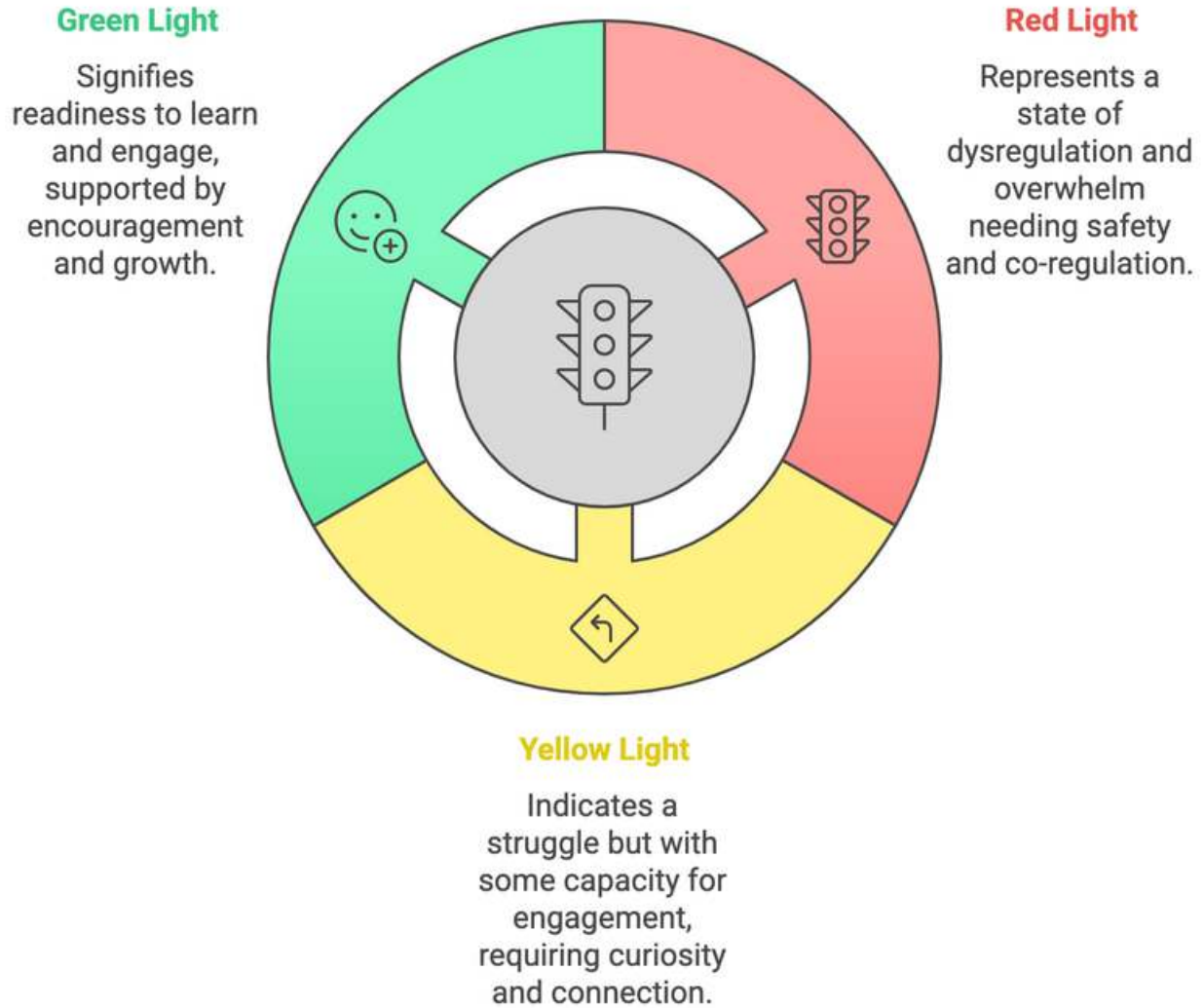
1. **Ventral Vagal State:** Safety and connection (often aligns with Green Light in our model).
2. **Sympathetic Activation:** Mobilization, fight/flight (often aligns with Yellow/Red Light).
3. **Dorsal Vagal Shutdown:** Immobilization, freeze/collapse (often aligns with Red Light if the child is completely overwhelmed).

Children move up and down this “ladder” of regulation. Our job is to meet them with understanding, co-regulation, and boundaries that feel safe rather than threatening.

Why It Matters

- To truly “ditch the power struggles,” it helps to grasp the basic workings of the nervous system—both yours and your child’s.
- **Regulation is Contagious:** A dysregulated adult (tense voice, rigid posture) can escalate a child’s distress. A calm, centered adult can help a child return to a state of safety and openness.
- **Interpret Behavior Through a Nervous System Lens:** Asking “Which state is the child in right now?” helps you respond effectively, reducing power struggles and guiding you toward empathetic solutions.

Traffic Light of Emotional States



Traffic Light Tool

Use the Traffic Light as a quick reference to understand a child's emotional or physiological state:

Red Light	Yellow Light	Green Light
Dysregulated & Overwhelmed	Struggling but Reachable	Ready to Learn & Engage
Needs Safety & Co-Regulation	Needs Curiosity & Connection	Needs Encouragement & Growth

How to Use It Effectively

The Traffic Light Tool is a simple yet powerful way to assess a child's state of regulation and guide your response accordingly. The goal is to move away from a one-size-fits-all approach to behavior and instead meet the child where they are, responding in a way that helps them feel safe, connected, and ultimately ready to engage and learn.

Why Use the Traffic Light Tool?

Children don't always have the ability to verbally communicate how they feel or what they need. Their nervous system reacts before their words can catch up, which can result in what adults perceive as misbehavior. However, what looks like defiance is often dysregulation.

Using this tool helps adults:

- Identify a child's emotional state quickly based on observable behaviors.
- Respond in a way that aligns with their needs, rather than reacting with frustration.
- Foster co-regulation, which teaches children to regulate their own emotions over time.
- Reduce power struggles by shifting from a control-based approach to an understanding-based approach.

Understanding the Traffic Light Tool

The Traffic Light Tool helps caregivers recognize three regulation states:

Light	Child's Regulation State	What it Looks Like	What they need from you
 Red (Overwhelmed Dysregulated)	The child is in a fight, flight, or freeze response. They are overwhelmed and unable to engage in problem-solving.	- Screaming, hitting, running away (Fight/Flight) - Shutting down, staring blankly, avoiding eye contact (Freeze) - Uncontrollable crying or complete withdrawal	Safety & Co-Regulation - Reduce demands and lower stimulation. - Offer presence and calm, reassuring body language. - Use few words. Focus on regulating yourself first so they can co-regulate with you.
 Yellow (Struggling but Reachable)	The child is dysregulated but still able to communicate and engage somewhat. They may be anxious, frustrated, or agitated but not fully shut down.	- Complaining, whining, resisting instructions - Fidgeting, avoidance, defiance - Mildly raised voice, crossing arms, frustration	Connection & Curiosity - Get curious: "I see you're having a hard time. What's up?" - Validate emotions: "That feels frustrating, huh?" - Offer choices to regain control in a safe way. - Lower demands slightly while keeping boundaries firm.
 Green (Calm, Regulated, Engaged)	The child is regulated, open to learning, and able to follow directions or problem-solve. They are in their social engagement system, meaning they feel safe and connected.	- Calm body, making eye contact, engaging in conversation - Following directions or problem-solving with you - Playing, exploring, or laughing naturally	Encouragement & Teaching - Reinforce positive engagement. - Build skills that will help them stay in this state longer. - Celebrate their effort: "You worked really hard on that!" - Encourage independence and problem-solving.

3 Steps to Use the Traffic Light Tool in Real Time

1

Pause & Assess

Take a moment to observe the child's state (Red, Yellow, or Green) before responding. Their body language and behavior will guide your approach.

2

Match Your Response to Their State

Adapt your response to their state—co-regulate in Red, connect in Yellow, and teach in Green. Meet them where they are to support regulation.

3

Maintain Boundaries While Offering Support

Keep limits firm but adjust how you enforce them based on the child's needs. Boundaries and connection work together, not against each other.

1

Step 1: Pause & Assess

Before responding, take 2–5 seconds to observe the child’s behaviors and identify their current state:

-  Are they in full meltdown or completely shut down?
-  Are they irritated but still reachable?
-  Are they engaged and able to process guidance?

Ask yourself:

- ✓ What does their body language tell me?
- ✓ What does their tone of voice sound like?
- ✓ How much verbal processing are they capable of right now?
- ✓ What happened right before this?

The child’s nervous system state determines how much they can handle in that moment. If they are in Red, they are not choosing to be irrational—they are overwhelmed and need safety first.

2

Step 2: Match Your Response to Their State

Now that you've identified their regulation level, adjust your approach accordingly:

Child's State	Your Approach	Sample Response
 Red (Overwhelmed Dysregulated)	Co-Regulate First, No Demands - Reduce verbal instructions. - Lower your voice, slow your breathing. - Remove extra stimulation (bright lights, noise). - Use simple, validating phrases.	✗ "Stop crying right now." ✓ "You're having big feelings. I'm here with you."
 Yellow (Struggling but Reachable)	Connect & Guide - Validate their emotions: "This feels frustrating." - Offer choices: "Do you want to walk or hop to the car?" - Reduce pressure, but keep limits in place.	✗ "Just do what I said." ✓ "It looks like this is tough. Do you need a minute, or can we figure this out together?"
 Green (Calm, Regulated, Engaged)	Teach & Encourage - Reinforce their positive behavior. - Help them problem-solve independently. - Teach skills when they are calm.	✗ "Just do your homework and stop asking questions." ✓ "You figured that out! How did you come up with that idea?"



Step 3: Maintain Boundaries While Offering Support

One of the biggest misconceptions about using this tool is that it means being “too soft” on children. That’s not the case!

💡 Boundaries stay in place—but how you enforce them depends on the child’s state.

Boundary Needed	Green (Engaged)	Yellow (Struggling)	Red (Overwhelmed)
Leaving the Park	“5 more minutes, then we go. Do you want to do one last swing?”	“I see you’re sad about leaving. Let’s take one more slide, then we go.”	“I know this is really hard. I’m going to carry you to the car so we can calm down together.”
Doing Homework	“Let’s get started. Which part do you want to do first?”	“This seems frustrating. Let’s do 10 minutes, then take a break.”	“It looks like you’re too overwhelmed right now. Let’s take a movement break and try again later.”
Bedtime	“Time to get ready for bed! Pajamas or brushing teeth first?”	“I get that you don’t want to stop playing. Let’s set a timer for 5 more minutes.”	“It’s bedtime, and I know you’re upset. I’m going to help you get cozy in bed, and I’ll stay nearby if you need me.”

Teaching Kids How to Use the Traffic Light Tool Themselves

Once you've been using this model for a while, you can teach your child to use it too!

- Label feelings together: "I think you might be in Yellow. What do you think?"
- Use a visual aid: Print a red/yellow/green chart and have them point to their state.
- Model self-awareness: "I'm feeling Yellow because I'm really busy. I need a minute to breathe."
- Practice co-regulation: "Let's take some deep breaths together to get back to Green."

This helps children build self-awareness and learn that emotions are temporary and manageable.

Summary: How to Use the Traffic Light Tool

- ✓ Step 1: Pause & Assess the child's nervous system state.
- ✓ Step 2: Match your response to their state (co-regulate, connect, or teach).
- ✓ Step 3: Keep boundaries firm while adapting how you enforce them.
- ✓ Teach kids to recognize their own emotional states over time.

By using this tool consistently, you can reduce power struggles, foster emotional intelligence, and create a more connected, regulation-friendly environment.

C.O.R.E. Framework Explained

The C.O.R.E Framework stands for: Curious, Open, Responsive, Engaged. It's a simple mnemonic to help adults approach children with connection first while maintaining psychological flexibility in our own responses.

- **Curious**

- Question: "What's really going on for this child right now?"
- Action: Pause before reacting. Investigate triggers (lack of sleep, overstimulation, worry, transitions, historical context).

- **Open**

- Mindset: "I'm willing to listen and not jump to blame or punishment."
- Action: Use non-judgmental language, validate the child's emotions, and acknowledge the context (e.g., "I see you're upset after that loud noise in the cafeteria.").

- **Responsive**

- Strategy: Meet the child where they are.
- Action: In Red, focus on co-regulation; in Yellow, foster connection and gentle problem-solving; in Green, teach and guide collaboratively.

- **Engaged**

- Habit: Remain present, collaborate on solutions, uphold boundaries with empathy.
- Action: Encourage input from the child, offer choices, and highlight their progress to build confidence and trust.

Psychological Flexibility

From a contextual behavior science standpoint, psychological flexibility means noticing and accepting difficult emotions (in ourselves and our children) without letting them drive impulsive or harsh reactions. Instead, we act in ways that align with our values—like love, respect, safety, and growth.



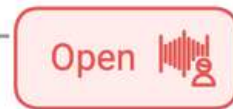
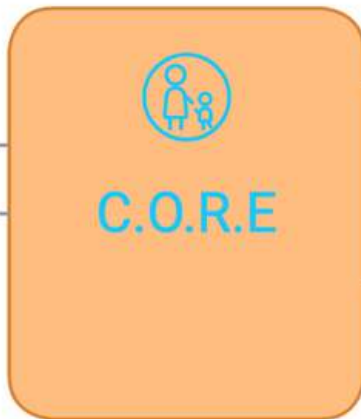
Curious

Investigate Triggers
Pause Before Reacting



Responsive

Collaborative Teaching
Gentle Problem-solving
Co-regulation



Open

Acknowledge Context
Validate Emotions



Engaged

Offer Choices
Encourage Input
Highlight Progress



Pause. Get Curious. Move
Forward with C.O.R.E.

~ DR. MEGAN DELEON

Example 1: The Grocery Store Meltdown

Situation: A 4-year-old sees candy, you say “not today,” and they collapse in tears.

Likely Nervous System State: Red Light (fight or flight meltdown).

C.O.R.E. Approach:

- **Curious:** Check if they’re overstimulated by the store’s lights, noise, or hungry/tired.
- **Open:** “Wow, you really wanted that candy. I see you’re upset.”
- **Responsive:** Co-regulate with a calm voice, possibly a gentle touch. Offer a statement of understanding before quickly trying to “fix” the situation.
- **Engaged:** Once they calm, redirect: “Let’s look for those apples you like,” or allow them to hold a favorite toy while you finish shopping.

Example 2: Homework Refusal

Situation: An 8-year-old slumps and refuses to do math worksheets.

Likely Nervous System State: Yellow Light (resistant, anxious, but not fully shut down).

C.O.R.E. Approach:

- **Curious:** Is math anxiety a factor? Are they exhausted after school?
- **Open:** "You seem worried or tired about this. Want to tell me more?"
- **Responsive:** Offer a break or a supportive approach: "How about we do the first problem together?"
- **Engaged:** Collaborate on solutions, possibly chunking the work and celebrating small wins.

Example 3: Sibling Conflict

Situation: Two siblings (6 and 9) shout, “It’s mine!” repeatedly.

Likely Nervous System State: Both are moving into Red Light territory.

C.O.R.E. Approach:

- **Curious:** “Hmm, they both want the same thing at the same time. What’s behind that? A sense of fairness? Feeling left out?”
- **Open:** Reflect feelings—“Sounds like you’re both really upset not getting the turn you want.”
- **Responsive:** Suggest a compromise or set a boundary if physically fighting.
- **Engaged:** Let them propose solutions. “Do we need a timer? Could we find a similar toy?” Affirm their efforts to solve it peaceably.

Example 4: Morning Routine Battles

Situation: A 6-year-old refuses to get dressed for school daily.

Likely Nervous System State: Yellow Light (early protest, if not yet meltdown).

C.O.R.E. Approach:

- **Curious:** Could they be anxious about school, or do they hate the rush?
- **Open:** “I get that mornings can feel tough. Any idea what might help?”
- **Responsive:** Offer a visual schedule, choice of outfit, or 5-minute “wake-up cuddle” to ease the transition.
- **Engaged:** Problem-solve together; maybe prepare clothes the night before. Celebrate any cooperation to reinforce success.

Example 5: Transition Trouble

Situation: A 5-year-old cries and refuses to leave the park.

Likely Nervous System State: Red Light meltdown.

C.O.R.E. Approach:

- **Curious:** They might be overtired, or they love the playground so much that leaving feels like a big loss.
- **Open:** “This is hard—you’ve had so much fun here.”
- **Responsive:** Offer co-regulation. “I can see how upset you are. Do you need a hug?” or “Two more slides, then we go.”
- **Engaged:** Maintain the boundary but provide empathy and a heads-up next time. Possibly schedule a time to come back soon.

Traffic Light Table of Examples

Common Issue	Green (Engaged)	Yellow (Struggling)	Red (Overwhelmed)
Homework Refusal	Child's State: Calm, open to tasks, possibly just needs routine guidance Approach: - Discuss the plan: "Homework first, then play." - Provide choices: "Which assignment do you want to do first?" - Reinforce effort and progress. Boundaries: Homework time remains non-negotiable, but child has input on how/when to complete it.	Child's State: Mild resistance, anxiety, or fatigue Approach: - Validate and explore: "Homework can feel long. Anything specific worrying you?" - Break tasks into smaller steps; offer partial solutions (e.g., "Let's do 10 minutes together, then a break"). Boundaries: Clearly state the expectation: "We will finish these two tasks tonight, even if we do them in short chunks."	Child's State: Total refusal or meltdown Approach: - Pause academic push. Focus on co-regulation: "Let's take a moment to breathe." - Lower voice, reduce stimulation, offer empathy: "I see this is really overwhelming." - After calming, revisit a smaller piece of work or postpone if truly impossible. Boundaries: Homework still needs to get done but not in the heat of a meltdown. Schedule a clear time to return to it once calm.
Morning Routine Struggles	Child's State: Cooperative, possibly just needs reminders Approach: - Use visual routine charts ("Brush teeth Get dressed Breakfast"). - Praise independence: "Great job getting dressed on your own!" Boundaries: Must leave by a certain time; child can choose clothing or breakfast to add autonomy.	Child's State: Complaining, dawdling, but not fully shut down Approach: - Provide empathic statement: "Mornings can be tough. Let's see how we can make it better." - Offer two options: "Do you want to put on clothes first or have breakfast first?" Boundaries: Remind them: "We do need to leave in 20 minutes, so we can pick one 'fun' thing if we're on time."	Child's State: Crying or refusing to move Approach: - De-escalate: "I see it's really hard to get going today. I'm here to help." - Reduce overwhelm: Possibly assist with dressing, bring clothes to them, or simplify tasks. - After some calm, gently restate the next step. Boundaries: Remain firm on leaving time; keep a calm tone and offer co-regulation, but do not negotiate away the main requirement (going to school).

Traffic Light Table of Examples

Common Issue	Green (Engaged)	Yellow (Struggling)	Red (Overwhelmed)
Leaving the Playground	Child's State: Generally cooperative, enjoying play Approach: - Provide advance notice: "10 more minutes, then we leave." - Engage child in closure: "Let's do two more slides together!" Boundaries: Set a clear departure time; stay consistent so they trust the routine.	Child's State: Grumbling, complaining, but not in full meltdown Approach: - Empathize: "I know it's hard to stop playing." - Offer a small compromise: "One last swing, then it's time to head out." Boundaries: Depart after the agreed-upon "one last activity," showing kindness but consistency.	Child's State: Full meltdown, screaming "I don't want to go!" Approach: - Immediate co-regulation: Get low, calm voice, "You really want to keep playing. It's hard to leave." - Validate big feelings; if safe, give space or gentle physical comfort. - Once calmer, exit. If meltdown persists, carry them out if necessary, but keep voice and body calm. Boundaries: Leaving is non-negotiable. Acknowledge upset but follow through.
Sibling Conflicts	Child's State: Minor disagreements, but can talk it out Approach: - Model problem-solving: "What's your idea for sharing?" - Guide them to compromise, congratulate them on teamwork. Boundaries: Clear rule—"We solve problems with words, not with hurting each other."	Child's State: Tense, raising voices, but can still hear each other Approach: - Step in calmly: "Seems like you two can't agree. Let's each take turns talking." - Reflect emotions: "You both want this toy. Let's find a way to share." Boundaries: If they can't resolve, offer a short separation or remove the item temporarily until both calm.	Child's State: Physical fighting, screaming Approach: - Ensure safety first—separate if necessary. - Use a calm, firm tone: "We can't be safe right now, so everyone needs space." - Once calm, come back together for repair and problem-solving. Boundaries: Zero tolerance for harm. After co-regulation, discuss respectful ways to handle conflict.

Implementation Checklist

The “Pause & Notice” Steps

This is a rapid-check process to help you pause, assess the context, and respond with the CORE mindset—all while honoring boundaries. Print this out as a standalone sheet or keep it on your phone for easy reference.

1. PAUSE

- Take a deep breath—literally. Just 2–3 seconds to ground yourself.
- Quick inner check: Am I regulated enough to help my child regulate?

2. NOTICE & LABEL

- Child’s State: Are they calm (Green), slightly upset/resistant (Yellow), or fully overwhelmed (Red)?
- Context Clues: Time of day? Hunger? Sensory overload? Known triggers? Relationship factors? (e.g., sibling tension, fear, embarrassment, etc.)
- Your State: Are you in a place to co-regulate, or do you need a quick self-reset?

3. CHOOSE YOUR APPROACH

- If **Green**:
 - Focus: Collaboration & Guidance
 - Tools: Offer choices, set expectations, give positive feedback.
 - Boundaries: Clearly stated but child has some autonomy in how to meet them.
- If **Yellow**:
 - Focus: Connection & Empathy
 - Tools: Validation, short breaks, chunk tasks, reduce demands slightly.
 - Boundaries: Maintain them, but deliver with extra warmth and understanding.
- If **Red**:
 - Focus: Safety & Co-Regulation
 - Tools: Calm presence, reduced talking, gentle reassurance, possible physical comfort or personal space.
 - Boundaries: Still firm, but calmly enforced after child is somewhat calmer.

4. CORE MINDSET

- **Curious**: “What’s this behavior telling me about their needs or environment?”
- **Open**: Listen without judgment; consider your child’s perspective.
- **Responsive**: Align your action with their current state (Green, Yellow, or Red).
- **Engaged**: Stay with the situation; guide them toward solutions once they’re calmer.

5. CHECK & FOLLOW THROUGH

- Re-Check: Has the child’s state shifted from Red to Yellow or from Yellow to Green? If so, adjust your approach accordingly.
- Boundary Reminder: “I care about you, and this boundary stays in place to keep everyone safe/respected/on track.”
- Positive Closure: Once the issue is resolved or de-escalated, acknowledge the effort. “We got through that. Thank you for working with me.”

Implementation Checklist

The Checklist

Use this checklist to monitor your application of the Traffic Light Tool, the CORE Framework, and your understanding of the nervous system. Revisit weekly to track progress.

1. Identify the Light

- I pause to notice whether the child is in Red, Yellow, or Green.
- I tailor my response based on their state (co-regulation, connection, or teaching).

2. Practice CORE

- Curious
 - I ask "What internal or external factors might be influencing this behavior?"
- Open
 - I validate the child's feelings, remembering that behavior is communication.
- Responsive
 - I adjust my approach (co-regulate in Red, connect in Yellow, teach in Green).
- Engaged
 - I stay with the process, collaborating on solutions that align with values (safety, respect, connection).

3. Incorporate Nervous System Awareness

- I watch for signs of fight, flight, or freeze.
- I regulate my own breathing and tone when I see a child escalating.
- I remember that calm begets calm (my regulated state helps them co-regulate).

4. Contextual Mindset

- I consider the broader environment (time of day, transitions, sensory overload, hunger).
- I remain mindful of any cultural, familial, or historical context.
- I observe how my own past experiences or stress levels may be contributing to the situation.

5. Firm, Kind Boundaries

- I communicate limits clearly and calmly.
- I offer reasonable choices where possible.
- I follow through consistently, paired with empathy.

6. Reflect & Adjust

- I note which moments went smoothly and which ones were challenging.
- I adjust my approach, focusing on building psychological flexibility and empathy.

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