



**Move More,
Learn More!**

Dr. Lynne Kenney | Wellington-Alexander Center

The Overloaded Brain

Why a Child Who Looks Like They Are Not Trying May Simply Be Running Low

A guide for parents

There is a moment many of us recognize. A child's behavior changes, and the reason is not obvious. It shows up as loss of focus, big feelings, refusal, withdrawal, restlessness, trouble with a transition, or the sudden inability to handle something that seemed fine an hour earlier.

When behavior changes, we look for the trigger. Was it the noise, the transition, the request that came at the wrong time? Those details matter, but they rarely tell the whole story. The more useful question is what your child's brain and body had already been managing before that moment arrived.

The one idea to hold onto

Behavior is the *end* of the story, not the beginning. What you see in a hard moment is the output of a system that has been carrying load for hours. The behavior is late information. It tells you the tank ran empty. It does not tell you how much was already spent to get there.

What Your Child Was Already Carrying

Long before the hard moment, your child may have spent hours doing invisible work. None of it looks like effort from the outside, and all of it draws from the same limited account.

Listening and language

- Filtering noise in rooms that were never built for developing ears.
- Keeping pace with fast speech and multi-step directions, and holding instructions in mind while doing the first step.

Body and movement

- Sitting upright is a motor task. Staying still and organized against gravity costs energy that is then unavailable for thinking.
- When handwriting, gripping a pencil, or tracking across a page are not yet automatic, they draw from the same small pool as attention.

Social and sensory

- Reading faces, tone, and intent in real time, and responding, (all day long) can be exhausting. Build in moments of quiet and pause.
- Holding it together at school and releasing at the door at pickup. The afterschool meltdown is not a report card on your parenting. It is evidence that home is safe enough for the system to finally stand down.

Sleep, food, and body state

- **Sleep.** Short or broken sleep shows up as behavior long before it shows up as yawning.
- **Food and timing.** The late morning and mid-afternoon dips are not a coincidence; provide protein and healthy fats throughout the day.
- **Body state.** A child who feels unsafe or overwhelmed cannot reach the calm, thinking part of the brain. State comes before skill.

Key Takeaway

No single item on that list is the problem. The sum is the problem. Each demand is manageable on its own and unsustainable all together. This is why the same child succeeds with a task at nine in the morning and cannot manage it at two in the afternoon. Nothing about the task changed. The reserve changed.

When Listening Becomes Easier, the Brain Pays Itself Back

Here is the hopeful part, and it is the heart of the work. When we say a child is listening, we do not just mean their ears work. A whole timing system is running underneath: the brain takes in sound, predicts what comes next, keeps pace, and organizes it all in real time.

When that system is disorganized, listening is expensive. The child can do it, but it costs so much that little is left for anything else. When listening becomes more organized, it gets cheaper, and whatever the brain is no longer spending on decoding gets **paid back** to whichever system needed it most.

Where the returned capacity tends to show up

- **Attention.** A brain that can anticipate the rhythm of a moment does not have to fight to keep up. Attention becomes less effortful, and less effortful is what lets it last.
- **Participation.** When understanding keeps pace with the room, your child can step into the activity instead of watching from just behind. They join while it still matters.
- **Communication.** Cleaner input gives cleaner output: steadier speech, better turn taking, holding a direction long enough to follow it.
- **Regulation.** A predictable world is one the nervous system does not have to guard against. Less surprise means less threat, and the effort that went into just keeping up gets handed back as calm.

When listening becomes easier for the brain, everything the brain was borrowing against gets paid back. Your child was never short on attention, language, or calm. They were quietly spending it all to keep up. Make the foundation more automatic, and you give it back.

What You Can Do

You are not lowering the bar. You are making sure your child can reach the bar you set.

- Audit the day before you audit the child. Look at sleep, food timing, how many transitions, how loud and busy the environment, how much social demand.
- Protect the recovery window. Do not schedule the hardest conversation of the day into the emptiest tank of the day. The twenty minutes after school are for refueling, not for questions.
- Front load the hard things. Put the demanding tasks into the high energy part of the day whenever you have the choice.
- Build predictability. Knowing what comes next is the cheapest calming strategy there is.
- Build automaticity. Practice the skills over and over until they are naturally accessible to your child because they have achieved automaticity.
- Add movement and rhythm. These are not breaks from the thinking work. They are how the brain lowers the cost of the thinking work.
- Change one word. When it looks like "will not," try "cannot right now." That single shift protects your relationship, and the relationship is how everything else gets delivered.

Coach of your own brain

The goal is a child who can read their own system. Give them the words: "my engine is running low," or "my brain needs to move before it can think."

Self-knowledge is the one strategy that travels with them when you are not in the room.

A closing thought

A child who looks like they are not listening, not following through, or not staying organized is very often a child who has been holding it together for longer than anyone noticed. Before you interpret a behavior, reconstruct the hours that came before it. The reason was rarely invisible. We were simply looking at the wrong moment.

Learn More

Diamond, A. (2013). Executive functions. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 64, 135 to 168.

Ladanyi, E., Persici, V., Fiveash, A., Tillmann, B., & Gordon, R. L. (2020). Is atypical rhythm a risk factor for developmental speech and language disorders? *WIREs Cognitive Science*, 11(5), e1528.

Lieberman, M. (2013). *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect*

Kuczala, M. & Kenney, L. (2026). *Move More, Learn More! Harnessing the Brain-Body Connection in Early Childhood*. Teachers College Press.

McEwen, B. S. (1998). Protective and damaging effects of stress mediators. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 338(3), 171 to 179.

Murphy, L. (2020). *The declarative language handbook*. RDI Connect.

Nicolson, R. I., & Fawcett, A. J. (1990). Automaticity: A new framework for dyslexia research? *Cognition*, 35(2), 159 to 182.

Porges, S. W. (2007). The polyvagal perspective. *Biological Psychology*, 74(2), 116 to 143.

Beebe, D. W. (2011). Cognitive, behavioral, and functional consequences of inadequate sleep in children and adolescents. *Pediatric Clinics of North America*, 58(3), 649 to 665.

Move More, Learn More! Dr. Lynne Kenney | Wellington-Alexander Center

