

# Printable Version



## Understanding Trauma Responses

*It's not bad behavior — it's a survival strategy*

### FIGHT

What It Looks Like in a child: Aggression, defiance, arguing, tantrums, hitting, screaming, "You can't make me." Looks like: a behavior problem.

What It Looks Like in a Parent: Anger, irritability, snapping at kids, controlling behavior, rigid rules, "Because I said so."

The Trauma-Informed Response: This is a child (or parent) whose nervous system is in threat mode. They need safety, not consequences. De-escalate first. Address behavior later.

### FLIGHT

What It Looks Like in a child: Avoidance, running away, hiding, constant movement, can't sit still, leaving the room, shutting down conversations. Looks like: ADHD or defiance.

What It Looks Like in a Parent: Avoiding hard conversations, staying busy to avoid feelings, workaholic, leaving the room during conflict, emotional unavailability.

The Trauma-Informed Response: This is escape behavior — the nervous system is saying "get away from the threat." Reduce the perceived threat. Make the environment safer. Don't chase or corner.

### FREEZE

What It Looks Like in a child: Zoning out, blank stare, going silent, inability to answer questions, "I don't know" to everything, appearing to not care. Looks like: laziness or apathy.

What It Looks Like in a Parent: Emotional numbness, dissociation, inability to make decisions, feeling paralyzed, "checking out" during stressful parenting moments.

The Trauma-Informed Response: This is a shutdown response — the nervous system has decided fighting and fleeing won't work. The child (or parent) isn't choosing to disengage. Their brain has taken them offline. Gentle sensory input (warm drink, soft texture, grounding) brings them back. Don't demand engagement.

### FAWN

What It Looks Like in a child: People-pleasing, excessive compliance, agreeing with everything, taking care of others' feelings, "I'm fine," hypervigilance about others' moods. Looks like: a "good kid."

What It Looks Like in a Parent: Over-apologizing, inability to say no, putting everyone's needs first, avoiding conflict at all costs, losing sense of self in caregiving role.

The Trauma-Informed Response: This is the most overlooked response — because it looks like cooperation. But fawning is survival, not connection. The child (or parent) is performing safety, not feeling it. Build genuine safety so they don't have to perform it.

***Every 'behavior problem' is a child's nervous system doing exactly what it was designed to do: survive. Your job isn't to stop the response. It's to make the environment safe enough that the response isn't needed.***