WHAT IS MY CHILD'S PROTECTIVE RESPONSE?

A GENTLE GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING FIGHT, FLIGHT, FREEZE AND FAWN AND WHAT ACTUALLY HELPS.



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Introduction

When Behaviour Feels Bigger Than The Situation

Sometimes behaviour doesn't seem to match what's happening on the surface.

Big reactions.
Shutdowns.
Over-compliance.
Control.
Anger.
Anxiety.

These responses aren't random.

Children develop protective responses when their nervous system is trying to stay safe.

That can happen for many reasons:

- Big transitions
- Social pressures
- School challenges
- Changes in family dynamics
- Unpredictability
- Or simply the intensity of growing up

This guide isn't about labels. It's about understanding.

How to Use This Guide

On the following pages, you'll see four common protective responses.

As you read each section, tick the statements that feel familiar or simply make a mental note of what resonates.

There's no need to overthink.

Most children lean toward more than one response. The goal isn't to define your child, but to notice patterns that might help their behaviour make more sense.



Fight Energy

Children leaning towards fight energy often:

- [ ] React quickly with anger
- [ ] Struggle with ‘fairness’
- [ ] Try to control situations
- [ ] Become explosive over small changes
- [ ] Argue intensely
- [ ] Push boundaries regularly
- [ ] Seem highly sensitive to tone of voice

What’s happening underneath:

Fight energy is often about protection. When a child feels unsafe or overwhelmed, their nervous system prepares them to defend themselves. This isnt defiance. It’s protection.

What actually helps:

- Calm, steady tone of voice
- Clear predictable boundaries
- Co-regulation before correction
- Reassurance without over-explaining



Flight Energy

Children leaning towards flight energy often:

- [ ] Change the subject when something feels uncomfortable
- [ ] Keeps themselves constantly busy
- [ ] Struggle to slow down, even when they are tired
- [ ] Avoid talking about difficult situations
- [ ] Worry about getting things wrong
- [ ] Become very upset over small mistakes
- [ ] Complain of tummy aches or feeling unwell before stressful situations

What's happening underneath:

Flight energy involves moving away from discomfort.
When something feels overwhelming or uncertain, the nervous system looks for an exit, through distraction, movement, overthinking.
This isn't avoidance in the behavioural sense. It's protection.

What actually helps:

- Slowing things down
- Reducing performance pressure
- Creating predictable routines
- Offering reassurance without urgency
- Allowing space for feelings without forcing them



Freeze Energy

Children leaning towards freeze energy often:

- [ ] Go very quiet during conflict
- [ ] Often say “I don’t know” when asked how they feel
- [ ] Struggle to answer questions under pressure
- [ ] Shut down or withdraw when overwhelmed
- [ ] Avoid eye contact during difficult moments
- [ ] Seem distant or “spaced out” at times
- [ ] Take longer than usual to respond when upset

What’s happening underneath:

Freeze energy is protective stillness.
When something feels too big, too fast, or too overwhelming, the nervous system shifts into pause mode. It reduces engagement to conserve energy. From the outside, it can look like withdrawal. Underneath, it’s protection.

What actually helps:

- Gentle connection without pressure
- Slowing conversations down
- Sitting nearby rather than insisting on eye contact
- Offering simple choices instead of open-ended questions
- Allowing processing time without filling the silence



Fawn Energy

Children leaning towards fawn energy often:

- [ ] Worry about disappointing adults
- [ ] Apologise quickly, even when something wasn't their fault
- [ ] Try to keep the peace during tension
- [ ] Check how others are feeling before expressing their own needs
- [ ] Agree easily, even when they don't really want to
- [ ] Seem very aware of changes in other people's moods
- [ ] Say "it's okay" when something clearly upset them

What's happening underneath:

Fawn energy protects through connection.
When something feels uncertain or tense, the nervous system may try to stay safe by pleasing, agreeing, or smoothing things over.
From the outside, it can look like being "easy" or "very mature."
Underneath, it can mean the child is working hard to maintain safety.

What actually helps:

- Reassuring them that they are not responsible for adult emotions
- Encouraging healthy disagreement
- Making space for their own feelings
- Reinforcing that mistakes don't threaten connection
- Modelling calm boundaries

What Felt Most Familiar?

Count how many boxes you ticked in each section.

The response with the highest number may indicate the protective pattern your child leans towards most.

If your answers are mixed, that's completely normal.

Many children move between responses depending on the situation.



This isn't about defining your child.

It's about noticing patterns that might help their behaviour make more sense.

As you look back over your answers,
what situations tend to bring this response out most?

What happens next ?

RIGHT NOW

- You don't need to decide anything
- Take your time noticing what felt familiar
- There's no "right" pattern to land on

COMING NEXT

- Tomorrow, we'll explore what each response can mean
- Support can look different depending on the pattern
- Small shifts in understanding can make a big difference



Hi, I'm Ashling

A child emotional wellbeing educator and children's author. Tomorrow I'll help you explore what each protective response can mean for your child.

I have spent may a late evening exploring fight, flight, freeze and fawn responses, to better understand how to support my own children. Now, I'm here to help you understand it too.

