

A photograph of several young children standing on a wooden rooftop or deck, looking upwards with their arms raised. The scene is dimly lit, suggesting dusk or dawn, with a warm glow from the sky. The children are wearing casual clothing; one girl in the foreground wears a light-colored, pleated dress with a wide belt. The background shows the wooden structure of the roof and a distant horizon with some trees.

BEYOND THE DEBATE: Responding to a changing childhood with clarity and coherence



A White Paper by Navigate Education
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Foreword: A shared starting point

It is a genuine privilege to work alongside schools - every one different, every community unique. We are continually in awe of the leaders who open their doors, allowing us to support, to learn and to grow alongside them.

Across the schools we have worked with, we have seen deep commitment. Adults are working relentlessly. Leaders want to act thoughtfully and with integrity and yet they are doing so with fewer resources, sharper accountability and increasing complexity. Needs are higher. Teams have changed. The behaviours presenting in classrooms are often more complex, with trauma and adversity more visible. The stakes for learning feel higher than ever, while the barriers feel higher still.

We see systems saturated with strategies. Approaches overlap or compete. Intuitive reactions pull against deliberate intentions. With little space for strategic thinking, response becomes reaction, followed by repair, followed by the next reaction. Urgency dominates; calm becomes difficult to access. In striving to meet changed need, some systems layer initiative upon initiative, creating overwhelm rather than relief. Cultures become biologically dysregulated, and coherence is lost - sometimes to the point that a shared behaviour system fragments altogether.

And yet, clarity is possible. Rapid improvement is achievable when work begins from a biologically grounded understanding and is held within a coherent strategic frame. We know that advising schools is different from living the work daily. Even so, teachers and leaders are doing extraordinary, life-changing work, whether it feels that way or not. The profession remains remarkable. Our hope is that this paper offers renewed clarity and a sustainable way forward.



Executive Summary

Education is operating within a landscape that has shifted. Childhood is shaped by digital saturation, social comparison, economic pressure and post-pandemic disruption. Staff are navigating increasing complexity alongside sustained accountability. Most schools have responded with commitment and significant investment; in behaviour frameworks, trauma-informed practice, curriculum reform and professional development.

The challenge facing leaders is rarely a lack of belief. It is a lack of coherence. Behaviour, teaching, pastoral systems and leadership practice interact continuously. When these systems pull in different directions, pressure increases; for both adults and learners.

At the same time, emerging evidence from developmental psychology and neuroscience is clear: prolonged stress reduces access to executive function, amplifies reactivity and narrows learning capacity. Compliance alone does not guarantee regulation. Awareness alone does not guarantee implementation. In a polarised sector debate, leaders are often asked to choose sides.

This paper argues that the way forward is not ideological alignment, but systemic coherence. High expectations and developmental understanding are not opposites. They are strongest when aligned. Schools do not need another initiative. They need what they have already invested in to land. Coherence reduces pressure and that pressure reduction stabilises culture. A stable culture improves access to learning, to opportunity and to our expected standards of behaviour - all of which will improve outcomes for all.

This paper explores the biological realities shaping modern classrooms and outlines a strategic, implementation-focused approach to alignment for headteachers and trust leaders seeking clarity in a complex landscape.



A changing landscape: childhood in context

Childhood does not exist in isolation from the society that shapes it. Over the past decade, several structural shifts have altered the developmental context in which young people are growing up in.

Digital saturation has accelerated exposure to rapid reward cycles, persistent social comparison and constant connectivity. Research into adolescent brain development highlights heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation during this period, with digital environments amplifying those signals. Sleep patterns have shifted. Blue light exposure and late-night device use are associated with disrupted melatonin production and reduced sleep quality, which in turn affect emotional regulation, attention and executive function. Economic pressure has increased baseline stress in many households. Studies on chronic stress demonstrate its impact on cortisol regulation and cognitive bandwidth in both adults and children. The pandemic disrupted routine, one of the most powerful regulators of the nervous system. Extended uncertainty, social isolation and heightened family stress have been linked to sustained increases in anxiety and emotional dysregulation among young people. Unstructured play, critical for developing self-regulation, social negotiation and risk assessment, has reduced in many contexts, limiting natural rehearsal of executive function skills.

None of these shifts make children less capable. But they do alter the biological and social conditions under which learning takes place. When context shifts, systems must respond. Emerging evidence from neuroscience and developmental psychology consistently demonstrates that prolonged stress narrows thinking, heightens threat sensitivity and reduces access to executive function. In other words, behaviour and learning are influenced not only by policy and expectation, but by physiology. The question for leaders is not whether standards should remain high. It is whether systems are aligned with the developmental realities of the children in front of them. Standing still in a changed landscape risks increasing pressure without increasing access.



The biology of behaviour and learning

Stress and Executive Function:

Behaviour is often framed as a matter of choice. But prolonged stress alters the brain systems that govern choice. When a young person perceives threat, whether physical, social or emotional, the body activates the stress response system, commonly referred to as the HPA (hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal) axis .

This activation increases cortisol and adrenaline. In short bursts, this response is adaptive. In prolonged activation, it becomes disruptive.

Research consistently demonstrates that elevated stress impairs the functioning of the prefrontal cortex, the region responsible for impulse control, working memory, emotional regulation, flexible thinking, planning and problem-solving.

Under sustained stress, the brain prioritises survival over higher-order cognition. In practical terms, this means that a dysregulated child may struggle to access the very skills required to meet behavioural expectations. This does not remove accountability. But it does change how leaders think about system design.

Adolescence and social sensitivity:

Adolescence is a period of heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation and social status. Neural systems involved in social pain and belonging are particularly active during this stage. Public humiliation, persistent comparison or exclusion activate similar neural pathways to physical pain. In a digitally saturated environment where social comparison is constant, this sensitivity can be amplified. For adolescents already navigating chronic stress, shame can trigger rapid survival responses.

Again, this is not permissiveness. It is a developmental reality. Expectations do not need to be lowered, but systems must account for the physiological conditions under which those expectations are met.



The biology of behaviour and learning

Shame, identity and regulation:

Shame differs from accountability. Accountability addresses behaviour whereas shame threatens identity. Neuroscientific studies indicate that experiences of humiliation activate stress and threat circuits in the brain, narrowing thinking and increasing defensiveness. Short-term compliance may increase. Long-term trust and regulation may weaken.

Clear, predictable boundaries delivered with dignity do not produce the same physiological stress response as humiliation. The distinction is subtle, but biologically significant.

Adult stress and co-regulation:

Importantly, these physiological realities do not apply only to children. Adults under chronic stress experience similar reductions in executive function capacity. In high-pressure environments, tolerance narrows and threat detection increases. Children's nervous systems are highly attuned to adult emotional cues, a process sometimes referred to as neuroception. When adult stress rises, pupil stress often follows. Staff wellbeing and pupil behaviour are therefore not separate challenges. They are interacting nervous systems within a shared system.



System implications for leaders

For systems to be effective, they must work together. They must be integrated, accessible to all adults, and coherent across contexts. Continuity matters. When behaviour systems, teaching practices, reporting structures and regulation supports operate in isolation, fragmentation follows. When they reinforce one another, stability increases.

Improvement does not move in straight lines. It moves in circles of support. The model above illustrates how we weave behaviour support and prevention directly into teaching and learning. At the centre sits leadership support and clear accountability. Surrounding this are structured responses – restorative conversations, natural consequences, reasonable adjustments and improvement-based follow-up. Beyond these sit proactive practices: predictable language, check-ins, positive noticing, support plans and regulation routines.

Each layer strengthens the next. Prevention reduces escalation. Clear responses protect dignity. Consistency reduces ambiguity. Leadership ensures coherence. This circular design reflects the biology of behaviour. Regulation rises and falls. Motivation fluctuates. Relationships repair and strengthen over time. Systems must therefore be continuous, not episodic.

Leaders can extend this thinking further. How do regulation practices connect with reporting systems? How does behaviour data inform curriculum design? How do teaching routines reduce cognitive load and protect adult capacity? How does language used in classrooms mirror the language used in restorative conversations?

When these elements connect, schools move from managing behaviour to designing stability. Support is not a separate intervention; it is embedded within the daily experience of teaching and learning



Beyond polarisation: why the debate is incomplete

In recent years, the conversation around behaviour and culture has become increasingly polarised - stricter or more relational, higher expectations or fewer sanctions, protecting adults or protecting children. These binaries feel decisive. Yet they compress complex human systems into either/or thinking that rarely serves schools well.

Most leaders are not ideological. They are pragmatic. They are working within significant accountability pressure, navigating workforce strain, and responding to the shifting developmental landscape outlined earlier in this paper. The vast majority have already invested heavily in behaviour frameworks, trauma-informed approaches, curriculum reform and professional development.

The issue facing schools is rarely a lack of commitment. It is fragmentation. Behaviour policy, pastoral care, curriculum design and staff wellbeing are often addressed separately. Training days create awareness. Policies create structure. However, without alignment, systems pull in different directions.

When systems misalign, stress chemistry begins to drive behaviour. Cognitive load increases, adult stress rises, inconsistency creeps in, trust weakens and escalation becomes more likely. What appears as individual behaviour difficulty is often a sign of collective dysregulation - a system operating under sustained pressure rather than shared coherence.

In a polarised debate, leaders are often asked to choose a position. However, the realities explored earlier suggest that the question is not which ideology to adopt. It is whether systems are coherent.



Compliance without regulation is fragile. Understanding without implementation does not scale. Compassion without structure increases ambiguity. Structure without dignity increases threat.

High-performing cultures do not sit at either pole. They align expectations, developmental understanding and implementation architecture.

This is not a call for softer schools. Nor is it a call for harsher ones. It is a call for coherence.

Leaders do not need another philosophical shift. They need what they have already invested in to function as a unified system. In a complex landscape, simplification through ideology is tempting. But sustainable improvement requires integration.



From insight to architecture: designing for coherence

Understanding the biology of behaviour is necessary. It is not sufficient on its own however. Insight alone does not change outcomes. Sustainable improvement requires architecture too.

In many schools, strong work is already underway; in behaviour reform, trauma-informed practice, curriculum redesign or pastoral development. The challenge is not absence of effort. There are often gaps in understanding, access and consistent development of foundational skills that allow practice and chemistry to connect.

Coherent systems share three characteristics:

1. Clarity of purpose
2. Alignment of practice
3. Sustainable implementation

Understand

Before change accelerates, leaders must develop diagnostic clarity.

What is the lived experience of staff and pupils? Where does stress concentrate? At what point do systems pull in different directions? Where are expectations clear but not accessible?

Understanding at this stage is about insight over ideology and should be driven by data. Behaviour data, attendance patterns, staff absence, corridor transitions, tone of correction, consistency of response. These all offer diagnostic information. When leaders understand the interaction between biology and environment, responses become more precise.

Align

Alignment is where most improvement efforts falter.

Behaviour systems, curriculum demands, pastoral interventions and staff expectations must reinforce one another. If behaviour policy emphasises strict consistency but leadership culture amplifies unpredictability, coherence breaks.



From insight to architecture: designing for coherence

If relational language is promoted but accountability systems rely on public correction, misalignment emerges. Alignment reduces cognitive load. When adults know what to expect, how to respond and why it matters, regulation becomes easier. Coherence lowers stress. Lower stress increases access.

Equip:

Expectations without skill create pressure.

Adults need practical building blocks: clear scripts for predictable moments; shared language; simple regulation strategies; thoughtful implementation pacing; and protected time to practise and embed. Professional development must move beyond awareness. Insight alone does not change behaviour. Implementation science is clear - change requires rehearsal, feedback and sustained leadership attention. Sustainable systems protect adult capacity in order to strengthen pupil access.

Equipping is also about access. Staff bring different experiences, intuitive responses and levels of confidence. A leader may read a book and integrate its ideas fluently; a member of support staff may interpret the same material very differently. Alignment therefore requires more than shared exposure; it requires shared understanding and shared practice.

In literacy, we secure phonics before expecting fluency. We teach the sounds and rehearse the building blocks before handing over the novel. In behaviour work, we often skip this stage — discussing values and principles without explicitly teaching the daily scripts, routines and regulatory habits that make them real. When foundations are secure and accessible to every adult, coherence becomes possible. But coherence is not sustained by training alone. It must also be tested against the structures of the school day.



What this means for leaders now

The purpose of this paper is not to introduce another initiative. It is to offer clarity in a complex landscape. The following principles provide a structured starting point for leaders seeking to develop a predictable culture and emotionally safe environment. Audit for coherence, not compliance

Ask:

Alignment is not accidental; it is designed and continually refined. As we review our systems, we need to look closely at where they reinforce one another and where they unintentionally compete. Where adult language subtly contradicts policy, and where stress tends to concentrate across the day - for pupils and for adults alike. What can look like inconsistency is often fragmentation. Behaviour systems, curriculum design and pastoral structures interact constantly, shaping how regulated or dysregulated a school feels. Systems affect nervous systems. The question, therefore, is not simply whether a policy exists, but whether our structures support how human beings actually function.

Across the school day, how are we building steady motivation? Do our routines create frequent experiences of progress and completion, or long stretches of uncertainty? When we use rewards, do they support stable engagement, or do they produce spikes and dips in regulation? When we correct behaviour, do we consistently separate behaviour from identity, preserving dignity and connection? It is helpful to think of regulation as a dial rather than a switch. Transitions, feedback and expectations can either gradually guide behaviour or abruptly escalate it. High expectations do not require high threat. Sustainable systems work with human biology rather than against it, protecting adult capacity while preserving pupil access to learning.



Review:

Once we have asked the right questions, we must review our systems for coherence, clarity and access. Not everything needs to change but the foundations must be secure.

Start with predictability. Do adults and pupils experience the school day as structured and certain, or variable and reactive? Is the adult response dependable enough that pupils know what will happen next, even when they get it wrong? Certainty reduces threat. Predictability supports regulation.

Consider shame carefully. Do our systems correct behaviour without attaching it to identity? Do they allow pupils and adults to recover without loss of dignity? Shame narrows thinking, reduces motivation and quickly destabilises connection. If our responses inadvertently amplify shame, access to learning shrinks.

Review access to support. When stress rises, is there a clear, shared structure that helps adults pause, regulate and respond deliberately rather than reactively? Are the basic skills - waiting a minute, separating behaviour from the child, adjusting tone and pace explicitly taught and practised?

Staff are not separate from the system; they are integral to it, and when adult stress rises, pupil stress often follows, which means that protecting adult regulation is not a concession but a foundational leadership responsibility. In a biologically aware, emotionally safe environment, leadership behaviour carries layered impact, because the way leaders communicate, respond to pressure and repair relationships inevitably models the very practices they expect adults to use with learners.



This requires leaders to understand what their adults need, to create safe conditions in which support can be requested without stigma, and to recognise that confidence, experience and intuitive responses to behaviour differ across teams. It involves noticing early signs of strain, celebrating progress, and deliberately building structured opportunities for professional growth. That is a significant responsibility, which is why leadership support and, at times, supervision are essential to sustaining the work over time.

Emotional safety cannot exist for pupils alone; the behaviour and wellbeing of every adult shapes the climate of the school. Regulated learners cannot thrive in dysregulated systems, and sustained engagement with learning is unlikely if adults feel overwhelmed or disconnected from purpose. Coherent systems acknowledge this interdependence, reducing unnecessary threat, strengthening clarity and creating the conditions in which adults and pupils alike can remain regulated enough to teach, learn and lead well.

Align:

Alignment means designing every system around the biology of behaviour. Behaviour is shaped moment by moment by chemistry shifting in response to noise, uncertainty, success, shame, connection and threat. These chemicals do not switch on and off; they rise and fall across the day. When systems ignore this, instability increases. When systems align with it, culture strengthens.

Take playtime. An hour “off” is often assumed to be restorative. For many learners, it is highly activating. Noise, unstructured movement, social negotiation and constant decision-making can drive adrenaline up and destabilise dopamine. The important question is not whether break exists, but whether there is a structured opportunity for learners to settle before lessons resume. A short, predictable “ready to return” routine: walk, don’t run - speak, don’t shout; put equipment away; move to the right space - can give the opportunity many young people will need to ‘dial’ their regulation back down so that they are ready to access learners.



Support spaces require the same thinking. A sensory room is not automatically regulating if a learner is too heightened to access it. High adrenaline reduces the capacity to engage with structured support. Too many choices can increase stress rather than reduce it. In secondary schools, large sites, crowded corridors and busy canteens can elevate arousal for some young people. The way free time is structured will determine whether learners return to lessons ready to access learning or still too emotionally heightened to engage.

Knowing our learners is essential but it must translate into personalised response. If we use tools such as Zones of Regulation, we must look beyond labels and understand patterns. Anger does not look the same for every learner. Some become loud; others become quiet. The key question is: what does movement towards dysregulation look like for this individual? What are the early indicators? What increases adrenaline? What restores serotonin or oxytocin? How will adults respond consistently before escalation occurs?

Even restorative practice depends on biological alignment. A restorative conversation cannot be the first time a pupil hears language of support and accountability. Oxytocin which develops connection and trust must be built daily. Restoration works when it sits within a predictable, coherent culture that reduces shame and protects dignity.

When systems align with the biology of behaviour consistency increases, threat reduces and motivation stabilises. The chemicals begin to work for us rather than against us. And when biology stabilises, learning becomes more secure.



Commit:

Alignment creates the conditions for change. Commitment sustains it.

When schools commit only to a behaviour initiative, that commitment can waver as soon as behaviour fluctuates. Behaviour will always move. Commitment must be steadier than the data.

Commitment means supporting every adult. Skills must be built deliberately and consistently. Training cannot be episodic or awareness-based; it must follow the principles of good pedagogy. Five minutes a week can be more powerful than a single twilight session when it includes modelling, rehearsal, feedback and recall. Adults, like pupils, learn through practice and repetition. We progress when we revisit, refine and build from secure foundations.

This means starting from the ground up. Not underestimating the basics. Being explicit about what “good” looks like. Capturing early signs of improvement in week one so that confidence grows alongside competence. Commitment is not blind faith in a distant destination; it is visible, incremental progress.

It also means choosing clarity over emotion. Acting predictably rather than reactively. Doing the next right thing, even on the hardest days. That is commitment both for the long haul and in the moment and it reflects the diagonal quality of strong leadership. It holds a clear vision of where the school is going while attending carefully to what must happen now. It protects coherence, sequences improvement and strengthens adult skill step by step. It is disciplined, steady and aligned.

When every adult is supported to develop skill, when systems are predictable, and when the developmental changes in modern society are respected rather than ignored, improvement becomes sustainable. Commitment is not intensity. It is consistency.



Conclusion: clarity in a changing landscape

Education is navigating a period of profound change. Childhood has shifted, social conditions have shifted, and yet expectations have not. Leaders are carrying extraordinary responsibility within increasing complexity, often under sustained pressure. The challenge facing schools is not a lack of commitment; it is the difficulty of maintaining coherence in a landscape that rarely stands still.

Polarised debates can offer the comfort of simplicity, but simplicity rarely reflects reality. Biology reminds us that stress narrows thinking and amplifies threat. Development reminds us that adolescence heightens sensitivity to belonging, fairness and identity. Leadership reminds us that systems shape experience, and that experience shapes behaviour. When these insights are held together rather than separated, high expectations and developmental understanding cease to compete. They strengthen one another.

Schools do not need another doctrine layered onto what already exists. They need alignment - systems that move together, language that reinforces rather than contradicts, and structures that work with the biology of behaviour rather than against it. When coherence increases, pressure begins to reduce. Regulation stabilises. Motivation strengthens. Access to learning widens. Outcomes improve not because intensity increases, but because systems support human functioning more effectively.

The work ahead is not ideological; it is disciplined. It is the steady commitment to supporting every adult, protecting dignity, and designing schools in which high expectations are biologically achievable. That work is demanding, and it requires courage. But it is possible - and it is already happening in the schools willing to align with clarity and purpose.



About Navigate Education

At Navigate Education, we work alongside headteachers, trust leaders and cross-sector partners to support whole-system alignment in response to today's developmental landscape, recognising that schools succeed when adults feel capable and connected, and young people feel safe, understood and able to engage.

Our work is rooted in evidence and lived experience, bringing together developmental psychology, neuroscience-informed practice, behaviour and curriculum alignment, implementation science and leadership systems design to build emotionally safe environments, predictable daily experiences and accessible recovery for all.

Through a structured process of Understand, Align and Equip, we help schools and colleges build coherence across teaching, behaviour and pastoral systems so that clarity, predictability and dignity become ingrained in everyday practice – strengthening access to learning without increasing pressure on the adults who deliver it.

We do not introduce standalone initiatives. Instead, we help what already exists function as a unified system that works with the biology of behaviour - reducing escalation, supporting engagement and improving outcomes over time.

To discuss partnership or request further information, visit:

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