

TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE · ALL GRADES

# When a Child Shuts Down

Recognising and responding

## What 'shut-down' looks like

Dissociative or freeze responses are commonly misread. In a busy classroom, a child who has shut down often looks 'rude,' 'oppositional,' or 'cheeky.' The behavior is the opposite of what the body is doing — it's a survival response, not defiance. Signs include:

- Going quiet, not responding to questions
- Staring blankly, sometimes at the floor or middle distance
- Body still — sometimes very still, sometimes slow movements
- Refusing to make eye contact (or making fixed, unfocused eye contact)
- Slow or absent verbal response, or single-word answers
- May appear to 'switch off' mid-conversation
- May look pale or flushed; may cry quietly without expression
- Doesn't follow instructions, even simple ones

Key diagnostic: a child in shutdown is NOT being defiant. They are NOT trying to wind you up. Their nervous system has gone into protection mode. They are not fully present.

## Why this happens

Fight, flight, freeze, and fawn are the four nervous-system stress responses. Freeze (shut-down, dissociation) happens when:

- Fight isn't possible (the threat is bigger than them)
- Flight isn't possible (no escape)
- Or these have been tried and didn't work in the past

For children who've experienced situations where neither fighting nor running was an option — domestic violence, repeated abuse, situations of complete powerlessness — freeze becomes the default response. The body learned: when overwhelmed, go offline. This is a survival adaptation, not a behavior choice. It worked at home. It now appears in school when the child experiences something as threatening — even when, by adult standards, it isn't.

## What WON'T work



<p><b>'Look at me'</b></p> <p>Demanding eye contact when shut-down often deepens the freeze. Eye contact is socially demanding; the system doesn't have the resources.</p>	<p><b>Repeating the question louder</b></p> <p>Volume reads as more threat. Pushes the system further into freeze, not out of it.</p>
<p><b>'Snap out of it'</b></p> <p>They can't. Telling them to adds shame to the already-overwhelmed system.</p>	<p><b>Threatening consequences</b></p> <p>Future-thinking requires cortex, which is offline. Threats land as more threat. Doesn't increase capacity to comply; reduces it.</p>
<p><b>Touching to get attention</b></p> <p>Sudden physical contact can be intensely triggering for children with trauma. Risks deeper shutdown or sudden flight/fight response.</p>	<p><b>Embarrassing in front of class</b></p> <p>Public attention deepens shut-down. Layer of shame on top of activation. Will produce deeper, longer freeze.</p>

## What DOES work

<p><b>Lower yourself physically</b></p> <p>Sit, crouch, get to their level. Reduces threat signal. Physical lowering is metaphorical of de-escalation.</p>	<p><b>Quiet voice</b></p> <p>Whatever volume you were at — quieter. Calm voice transmits calm to nervous system.</p>
<p><b>Minimal language</b></p> <p>'Take your time.' 'I'm here.' 'You're OK.' Don't elaborate. Five words at a time, max.</p>	<p><b>No questions</b></p> <p>Questions require cognitive response. Statements don't. Use statements only while in shutdown.</p>
<p><b>Sensory anchor</b></p> <p>Something to hold. Cool water. A specific texture. Helps return to physical present.</p>	<p><b>Wait</b></p> <p>Recovery from shutdown is slow. 10-30 minutes is normal. Don't rush. Don't fill the silence.</p>

## Coming back — the timeline

MINUTES 1-5: System still shut. Quiet presence. No demands. Maybe a sensory anchor offered.

MINUTES 5-15: Some return of awareness. May start tracking your face. Eye contact may flicker. Still don't push.

MINUTES 15-30: Verbal response possible. Single words. Brief sentences. Voice may be flat.

AFTER 30+ MINUTES: Closer to baseline. Conversation possible. Still proceed gently. **DON'T DEBRIEF YET.** Even when they seem 'back,' the cortex is still recovering. Reflective conversation about what happened is best done hours later, often the next day. Pushing too soon produces partial answers, lying, or another shutdown.



## When shutdown is frequent

If a particular child is shutting down repeatedly — daily, multiple times a week — this is a significant concern. Things to do: 1. LOG. ABC tracking. When does it happen? What triggered? What helped? 2. PATTERN-LOOK. Same time of day? Same activity? Same person involved? 3. REDUCE TRIGGERS. If pattern reveals something, change what you can. 4. SENDCo INVOLVEMENT. They may need additional support, possibly outside-agency referral. 5. WORK WITH FAMILY. Sensitive conversation about what's happening at home that might be affecting school. 6. SAFEGUARDING ALERT if there's any indication of ongoing harm. Frequent shutdown can be a red flag. 7. SELF-CARE. Holding repeated dysregulated children is exhausting. Make sure you're getting support yourself.

