

Is It Really a Behavior Problem, or Is Your Child's/Teen's Nervous System Crying for Help?

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Raise your parent hand if come the end of a long summer, you wish you were a gerbil. (They often eat their offspring!) Yuck, I know. But we have all been there! What if there was a better way besides having our little honey for dinner?

Here is the good news: There IS a better way! In fact, maybe they aren't driving us crazy on purpose and instead they are showing symptoms of a dysregulated nervous system? Want some more good news? The research shows it does not take forever or heroic effort to turn things around. A randomized clinical trial found that children who received focused nervous system and emotional regulation intervention showed meaningful improvements in classroom behavior, focus, peer social skills, and overall emotional control in as little as four months. Four months. That is just about one summer.

The back to school prep list is long. Supplies, haircuts, new shoes. But the most important thing your child needs before that first bell rings may have nothing to do with any of that. A child whose nervous system is stuck in survival mode cannot learn, focus, or thrive the way they are capable of, no matter how bright or motivated they are. At Heights of Health, we want to change that in the summer of 2026.

What Is Nervous System Dysregulation, and Why Are So Many Kids Affected?

The autonomic nervous system is basically the body's command center. It has two primary modes: fight or flight, which kicks in when there is stress or danger, and rest and digest, which is where learning, healing, and connection happen.

When a child experiences ongoing stress, that system can get stuck. Instead of moving fluidly between activated and calm, it stays locked in high alert or shuts down altogether. Researchers actually have a name for this now: nervous system dysregulation. And it is far more common than most people realize. Studies suggest up to 1 in 6 children are affected, yet because it often looks like a behavior problem, a mood disorder, or an attention issue, the nervous system piece almost never gets addressed.

It Does Not Just Show Up as Meltdowns

This is one of the most important things to understand. Nervous system dysregulation in children does not always look like big, dramatic behavior. It is often quiet, subtle, and easy to miss or misattribute to personality, laziness, or defiance.

Are you curious if your kiddo is dysregulated versus a behavior problem (good chance they are!) At Heights of Health, we have developed four free age-specific nervous system assessment tools to capture the full picture: 1) [Child Self Report for ages 6-12 yrs](#), 2) [Parent/Caregiver Version for 6-12 yrs](#), 3) [Teen Self Report for ages 13-17 yrs](#) and 4) [Parent/Caregiver Version for Teens 13-17 yrs](#). Together they reflect what dysregulation actually looks like across different developmental stages and across 5 different domains. These tools help us understand how

dysregulation shows up specifically for your child. A dysregulated nervous system can hide in all kinds of nooks and crannies. Our assessments sniff out the hiding spots and help pave a road to healing.

Lets take a closer look to the 5 domains present in our assessments. One area where dysregulation can show up is in the **physical body**. In the body, dysregulated children may experience frequent stomachaches or headaches with no medical explanation, disrupted sleep, sensory sensitivity to light, noise, or textures, sudden crashes from hyperactivity to exhaustion, and a system that gets sick more than it should. These are not hypochondria or attention-seeking characteristics. They are the body communicating that the nervous system is not in balance.

Cognitively, dysregulation can affect a child's ability to focus, transition between tasks, follow multi-step directions, organize their thoughts, and access memory under pressure. Research confirms that big feelings hijack the brain. When a child is anxious, overwhelmed, or shut down, the thinking center of the brain loses access to clear reasoning, and the result can look like attention problems, poor academic performance, or emotional volatility. A growing body of evidence clearly documents the relevance of self-regulation to both short and long-term academic and behavioral outcomes in school. In other words, a child who cannot regulate their nervous system is going to struggle academically, not because they lack intelligence, but because their brain is too busy managing threat signals to focus on learning.

Emotionally, dysregulation can look like mood swings that seem to come out of nowhere, meltdowns that are wildly out of proportion to the situation, or a child who just cannot calm down once they are upset. It can also go the other direction entirely. As in a child who seems flat, checked out, spacey or emotionally numb. Many dysregulated kids also have a hard time even identifying what they are feeling, which makes it nearly impossible for them to ask for help.

Behaviorally, dysregulation shows up in what a child does when their system is overwhelmed. They may startle easily, shut down and go silent, or constantly scan their environment for the next problem. They may avoid anything that feels like too much, like busy places, new situations, unexpected changes, or challenges. Many kids also develop soothing habits like nail biting, picking, or hair twirling, and struggle to follow through on basic tasks even when they genuinely want to.

Socially, dysregulation affects how safe kids feel around their peers, how well they read social cues, and how easily they trust adults. A child who frequently misreads neutral behavior as threatening, who clings to rigid routines, who needs constant reassurance, or who withdraws during conflict is often showing you nervous system patterns that have very little to do with social skills and everything to do with a system that has learned the world is not safe enough to relax in.

For teens, the picture shifts somewhat. Social dynamics take on greater weight. The body becomes more visible as a source of anxiety. The stakes of academic performance increase. And crucially, teens are far less likely to name what they are feeling or ask for help. A teen who seems irritable, withdrawn, unmotivated, or checked out may actually be a teenager whose nervous system has been running on fumes for a long time.

What Happens When Dysregulation Goes Unaddressed

Research indicates that nervous system dysregulation in children may act as a harbinger of illness and disease in adulthood. Studies show that children who frequently experience emotional overwhelm are also more likely to develop internalizing disorders such as anxiety and mood disorders as they grow older. The patterns that take hold in childhood do not simply resolve on their own. Without intervention, a nervous system that learned to stay in survival mode will continue operating that way and can ultimately affect physical health.

This is not meant to alarm parents. It is meant to underscore why summer is actually the perfect time to intervene. School is out, the schedule is lighter, and there is room to do meaningful, sustainable work without the pressure of Monday morning looming.

So What Actually Helps?

The research is clear that regulation is teachable. The nervous system is not fixed. It is plastic, responsive, and capable of learning new patterns at any age. What children need are tools that meet them where they are, taught by people who understand what is actually happening beneath the behavior.

At Heights of Health, our holistic therapists work with children and teens across multiple evidence-based modalities. These include somatic and body-based regulation tools, breathing techniques and vagal toning practices, mindfulness and grounding approaches adapted for different developmental stages, focus and attention hacks, nervous system education that helps kids understand their own experience, calming individualized supplementation, and co-regulation work that involves parents and caregivers, because a child can only regulate as well as the environment around them supports them to.

We also have a little “magic” device that we rent out called the Alpha-Stim, a small FDA-cleared medical device that uses cranial electrotherapy stimulation (CES) to gently support nervous system regulation. The Alpha-Stim works by delivering a mild, low-level electrical current through ear clip electrodes and through neuroplasticity, it helps rewire brainwave activity toward a calmer, more regulated state. It promotes relaxation and helps balance neurotransmitter levels, which can improve mood, reduce anxiety, and enhance sleep quality.

The research on Alpha-Stim with younger populations is genuinely encouraging. A randomized, sham-controlled clinical trial studied children between the ages of 8 and 16 with mixed anxiety and depressive disorder and found significant reductions in both anxiety and depression scores following cranial electrotherapy stimulation treatment. A separate study examined its safety and effectiveness in treating children with emotional disorders and found supportive results. Research with university students has shown that Alpha-Stim cranial electrostimulation used as a daily home-based treatment over six weeks produced meaningful changes in anxiety and depression symptoms. For teens in particular, the appeal of a non-invasive, drug-free tool they can use independently is significant. It does not replace therapeutic work. It supports it, helping the nervous system become more available for the regulation skills we are teaching.

A Summer Investment That Pays Off All Year

Think of what it actually costs a child to walk into a new school year dysregulated. The teacher who misreads their shutdown as indifference. The friendship that falls apart after an emotional outburst. The test they blanked on because their brain was flooded. The stomachache every Sunday night. The exhaustion that never really lifts.

Now imagine your child walking in regulated. Present. Able to handle disappointment without unraveling. Able to ask for help. Able to sit in the discomfort of something hard without the whole system going offline.

That is what we are working toward this summer. Start by having your child take the age appropriate Nervous System Dysregulation Assessment linked above and fill out the accompanying Parent/Caregiver Version.

Your child is not broken. Their nervous system is just begging for some support. Don't be the gerbil. Be the parent who gives their child a gift of a lifetime.

To learn more about next steps, contact us at Heights of Health. info@heightsofhealth.com or 713.861.6777
