Behaviour vs Capacity Mapping Tool

Identifying when "behaviour" is actually overload

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Important note

This resource is intended to support understanding and good practice in neuro-inclusive workplace design. It provides general guidance and does not constitute legal, medical, or clinical advice. Organisations should apply the principles in line with their own policies, regulatory obligations, and professional judgement.

Before responding to behaviour, check capacity.
Many "behaviour issues" are access issues.

This tool helps educators decide **what kind of response is needed…** support, adjustment, or boundaries… **without escalating harm**.

How to use this tool

- Use **in the moment** or during reflection
- Complete **top to bottom**
- Focus on **patterns**, not single incidents
- Use findings to guide **supportive action**, not punishment

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STEP 1. Describe What You See (No Interpretation)

Write only what is observable.

What happened?

Examples:

- left seat repeatedly
- put head on desk
- raised voice
- stopped responding
- missed deadline

Avoid words like *rude, lazy, defiant, disengaged* at this stage.

STEP 2. Capacity Check (What Might Be Draining?)

Tick any that apply **today** or **this lesson**:

Sensory load

- ☐ Noise
- ☐ Light
- ☐ Visual clutter
- ☐ Crowding / movement

Cognitive load

- ☐ Multi-step instructions
- ☐ New or abstract content
- ☐ Time pressure
- ☐ Task switching

Emotional / social load

- ☐ Being observed or evaluated
- ☐ Public correction
- ☐ Group work
- ☐ Uncertainty or ambiguity

Physical load

- ☐ Fatigue
- ☐ Hunger
- ☐ Illness / pain
- ☐ Poor sleep

If **multiple loads are present**, capacity is likely compromised.

STEP 3. Early Overload Signals

(Often misread as behaviour)

Tick any observed:

- ☐ Withdrawal / silence
- ☐ Irritability
- ☐ Tearfulness
- ☐ Restlessness
- ☐ Increased mistakes
- ☐ Zoning out
- ☐ Task avoidance
- ☐ Emotional escalation

These are **warning signals**, not misconduct.

STEP 4. Ask the Key Question

Is this behaviour happening *in response to load…* or *in defiance of expectations*?

Clues it's **capacity-related**:

- behaviour varies by context
- student usually wants to do well
- skills appear on other days
- escalation follows increased demand
- behaviour improves when load is reduced

Clues it may need **behavioural boundaries**:

- behaviour persists despite reduced load
- safety is at risk
- clear expectations were understood and ignored
- behaviour is not linked to overload patterns

Most ND presentations fall in the **capacity-related** category.

STEP 5. Match the Response

If capacity-related (most common)

Try first:

- reduce sensory input
- simplify the task
- allow a pause or break
- repeat instructions calmly
- offer a different way to respond
- move the conversation to private

Avoid:

- public correction
- escalating consequences
- insisting on immediate compliance

If boundaries are needed (less common)

Still apply **low-threat communication**:

- calm tone
- private conversation

- clear expectations
- predictable consequences

Boundaries work best **after regulation**, not during overload.

STEP 6. What to Say (Scripts)

Capacity-based language

- "This looks like it might be a lot right now."
- "Let's reduce the load and reset."
- "You're not in trouble… let's figure out what helps."

Avoid

- "You know better."
- "You're choosing this."
- "If you don't behave…"

Language determines whether the nervous system escalates or settles.

STEP 7. Reflect (Later, Not in the Moment)

Ask:

- What load was present before this happened?
- Were there early signs I missed?
- What adjustment might prevent this next time?
- Is this pattern showing up elsewhere?

Use reflection to **improve access**, not assign blame.

Why this tool matters

Misreading overload as behaviour leads to:

- shame and disengagement
- repeated escalation
- exclusion and burnout
- loss of trust
- worsening outcomes

Correctly identifying capacity issues leads to:

- earlier support
- fewer incidents
- better learning access
- stronger relationships

Gentle reminders for educators

- Regulation comes before reasoning
- Students don't choose to overload
- Behaviour is often communication
- Reducing load is not "giving in"
- Access is not advantage

Bottom line

Before asking:

"Why are they behaving like this?"

Ask:

"What might be overwhelming their system right now?"

That single shift changes how students are supported…
and how outcomes unfold.