Little
Brains & Bodies

The Five Domains Guide

What this guide is for

Some days our kids can handle everything.
Other days, the same routine falls apart.
Nothing obvious has changed, but now it feels a little more...temperamental.

This guide offers a way to organize what you're already noticing. Not to diagnose or fix, but to see pattern where things currently feel random.

At Little Brains & Bodies, we use five overlapping brain and body domains to make sense of how children experience the world. These domains help explain why the same child can look calm in one moment and overwhelmed in another.

This isn't a checklist. It's a map. And sometimes having a map is enough to stop holding everything at once.

Why a map helps

Without a way to organize observation, every moment can feel like new information with nowhere to land. A map lets you notice patterns without over-interpreting them, understand why support that works in one situation doesn't help in another, and separate moment-to-moment variation from something more consistent.

The five domains don't explain everything. They help you see where different kinds of support tend to matter—and where shifts in one area might be coming from somewhere else entirely.

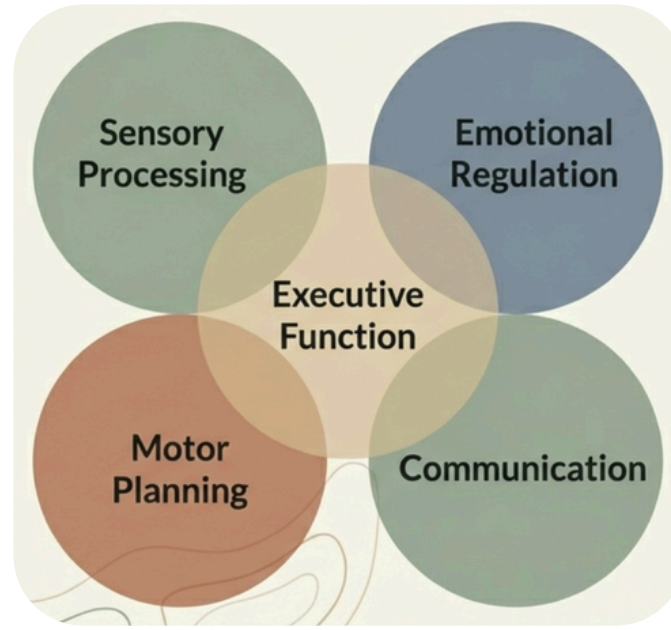
The Five Brain and Body Domains

These five domains come from decades of research on how children's nervous systems develop and respond to their environments. They're not categories we invented—they reflect how the brain and body actually organize experience.

We focus on these five because they're the systems that most directly shape daily life: how a child takes in the world, manages feelings, plans action, moves through space, and expresses what they need.

The domains overlap and interact. A child is never operating in just one.

They describe systems, not traits, meaning they shift with context, not personality.



Sensory Processing

How the brain receives and organizes input from the body and environment

This is about how your child **experiences sound, light, touch, movement, temperature, and internal body signals** like hunger or fatigue.

When sensory input matches what their nervous system needs, they can stay engaged and steady. When sensory load is too high—or the input doesn't match—stress increases quickly.

This often shows up when certain sounds, textures, or lights cause distress, when movement or pressure helps them settle, or when environments feel manageable one day and overwhelming the next.
Sensory needs shift with fatigue, stress, time of day, and what's already happened. A response that looks "unexpected" may actually be predictable in context.

Emotional Regulation

How the nervous system manages feelings, stress, and recovery

This is about **experiencing feelings without becoming overwhelmed and returning to baseline afterward**. Emotional responses are closely linked to sensory and environmental load. When the system is already stretched, reactions can be bigger, faster, or harder to recover from.

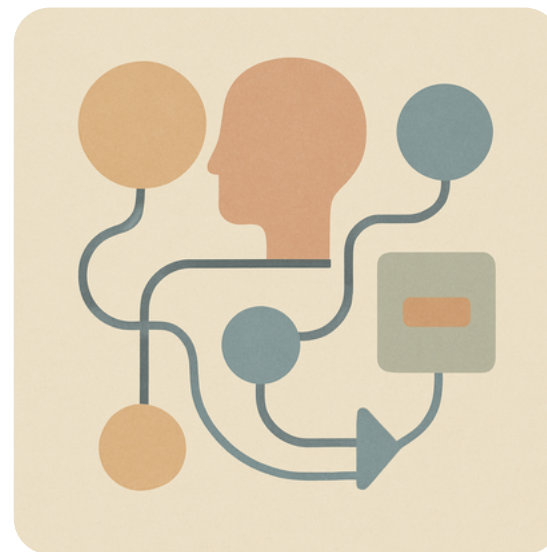
This often shows up when feelings escalate quickly, recovery takes longer than expected, or small events carry big emotional weight.

Strong emotions don't mean your child lacks skill. **They often reflect how much the system is carrying in that moment.**

Executive Function

How the brain plans, organizes, initiates, and shifts between tasks

This includes **planning what comes next, holding information in mind, thinking flexibly, and starting and stopping task**s. These capacities develop gradually and fluctuate with stress, fatigue, and interest.



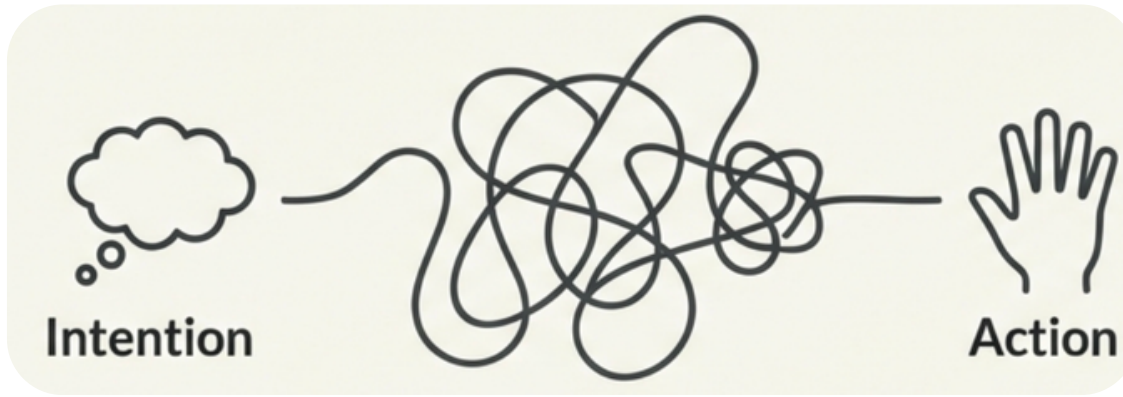
This often shows up when transitions are hard, steps are forgotten, your child gets "stuck" between tasks, or verbal reminders don't seem to help.

Executive function is highly sensitive to timing and load. A child may show strong capacity later in the day and struggle earlier, or do well in calm environments but not busy ones.

Motor Planning

How the brain organizes and carries out movement

This is about **turning intention into coordinated action**—from large movements like running to small ones like writing or buttoning.

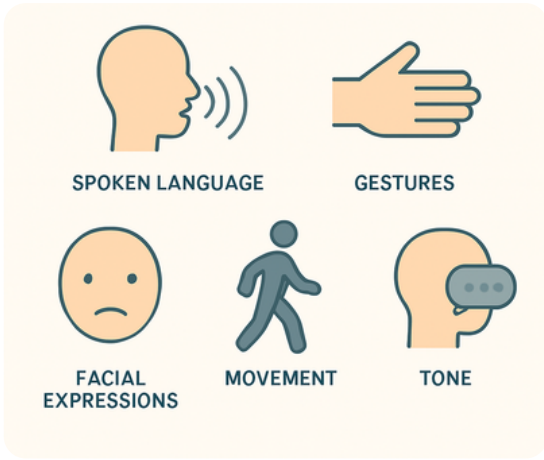


When motor planning is taxed, children may avoid certain tasks, appear hesitant or slow to start, move awkwardly, or need more time and repetition to learn new movements.

Motor planning often interacts with sensory processing. A body that feels disorganized has a harder time executing precise movement.

Communication

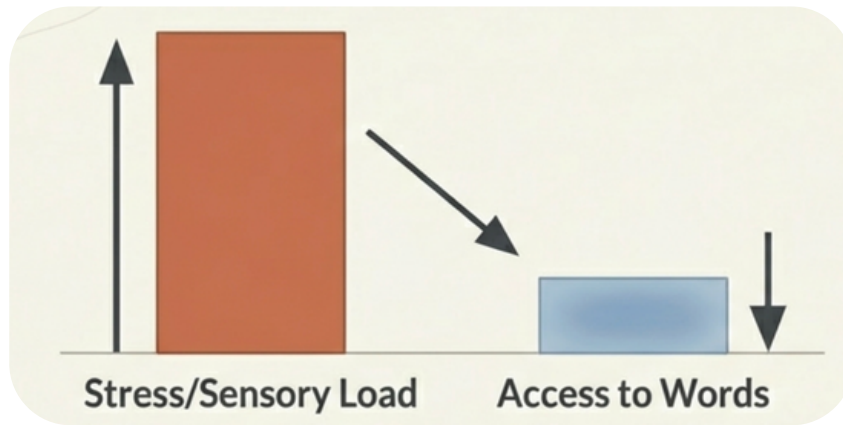
How thoughts, needs, and experiences are expressed



Communication includes spoken language—but also gestures, behavior, facial expression, movement, and tone.

Access to communication changes with stress, sensory load, and emotional state. Words may disappear under pressure. Behavior may communicate more than language. Expression may shift across settings.

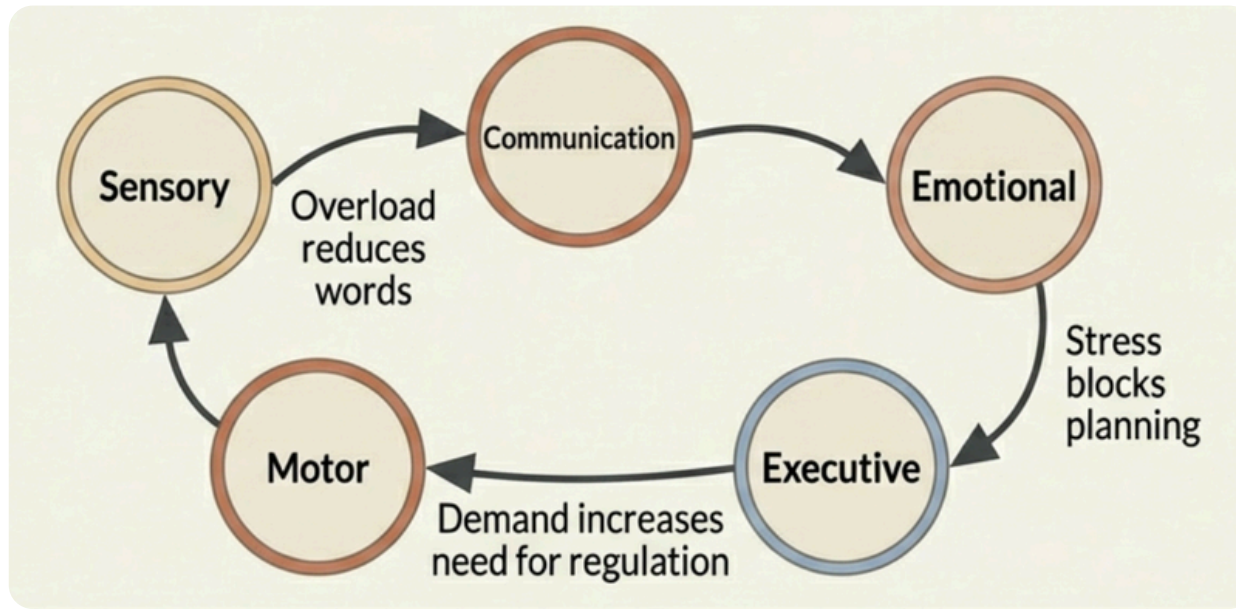
A change in communication often reflects what other systems are doing, not a loss of ability.



How the domains interact

The domains don't operate independently.

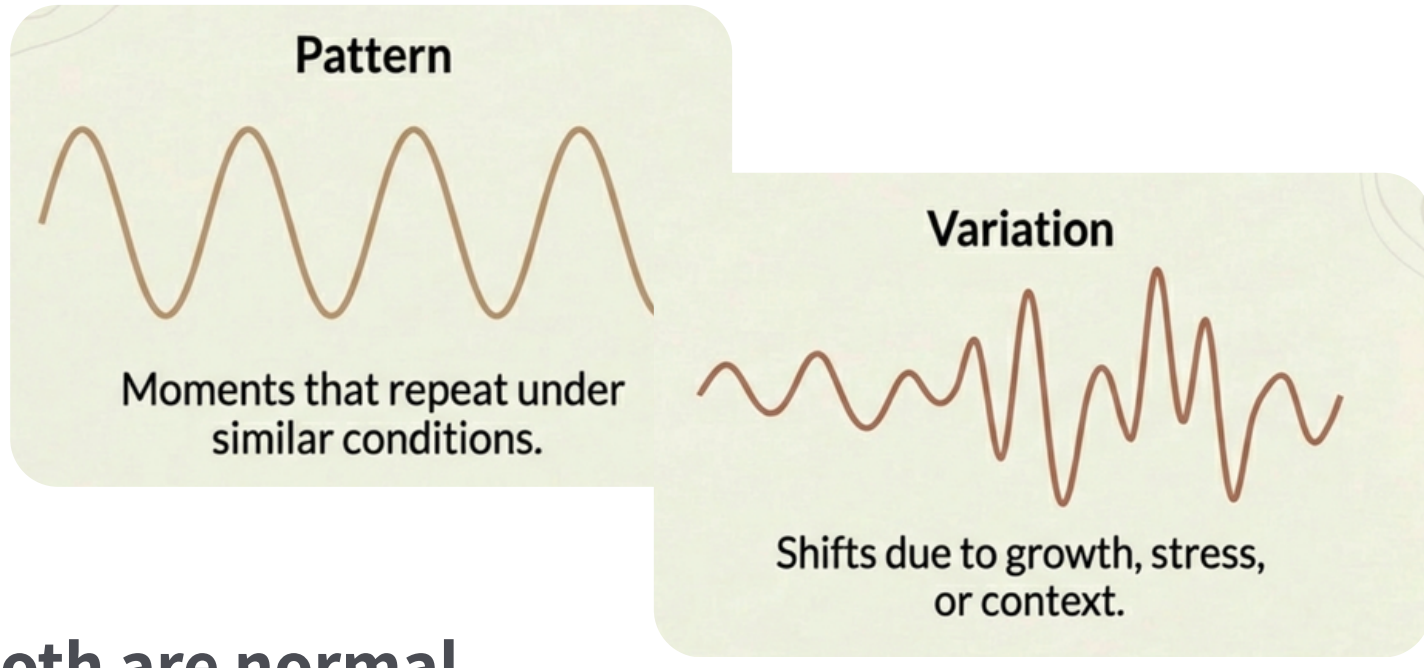
Sensory overload can reduce access to language. Emotional stress can interfere with planning. Motor demands can increase the need for regulation.



This is why the same request can land differently depending on the moment. It's also why support in one domain can improve function in another.

Patterns vs. Variation

As you notice across domains, you'll start to see patterns—moments that repeat under similar conditions—and variation, which reflects growth, stress, or context.



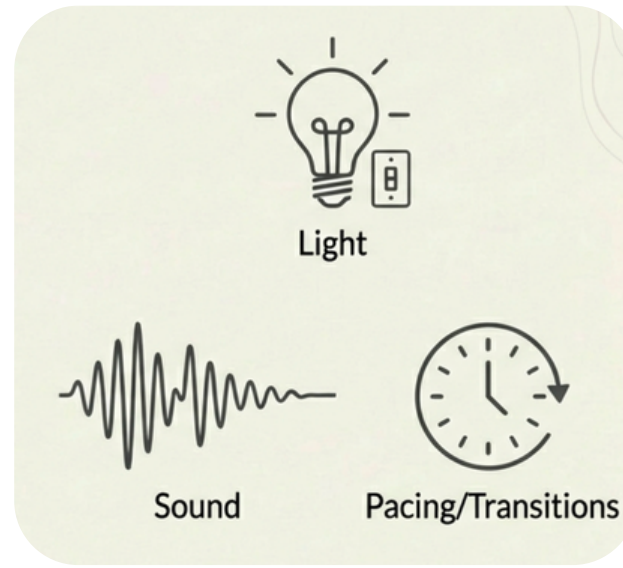
Both are normal.

This guide isn't meant to help you decide what needs intervention. It helps you recognize shape and context so nothing feels random or personal.

A note about environment

Environment quietly shapes how all five domains function.

Changes in sound, light, movement, pacing, or transitions can make a noticeable difference, often without changing expectations or demands.



Many families find that once they understand which domains are most active, **environmental adjustments feel more intuitive and less reactive**.

How this guide connects to next steps

For many families, simply having a way to organize observation brings immediate relief.

As you spend more time noticing across the five domains, **you may find that certain moments repeat under similar conditions, some environments consistently help or hinder, or particular domains feel more active during specific parts of the day**.

When that happens, some parents choose to hold observations outside their head so patterns are easier to see over time, focus on one moment or routine and reduce environmental load there, or use tools that support decision-making without rushing to act.

Understanding is the starting point.
What comes next can unfold at your pace.

As always, this resource is meant to support understanding, not diagnosis or treatment. It offers a way to organize observation and make sense of patterns you may be noticing. It's not a substitute for professional care, and it's not meant to evaluate or label your child.