

When Words Feel Hard — Supporting Communication During Stress

What This Article Is About

Language networks live in the prefrontal cortex — the “top floor” of the brain. Under stress, the top floor partly shuts down, and survival systems take over. This makes words disappear, even in very verbal kids. Understanding this shift helps you respond with empathy instead of frustration.

What You Might Notice

- Early stress: slower responses, shorter sentences
- Shutdown: “I don’t know,” silence, covering face, withdrawal
- Overflow: jumbled words, rapid talking, mismatched outbursts
- Long recovery times before words return

Quick Strategies

- **Reduce Pressure:** Fewer questions, quiet presence, “We can talk later.”
- **Offer Nonverbal Tools:** Drawing, movement, visuals. “Want to show me instead of tell me?”
- **Regulate First:** Dim lights, deep pressure, co-regulated breathing before talking.
- **Practice Advocacy When Calm:** Simple scripts like “I need quiet” or “I’m not ready to talk yet.”

Parent Takeaway

When words disappear, your child isn’t being difficult — their brain is protecting them. Support the body first, allow nonverbal expression, and language will return when the nervous system feels safe again.