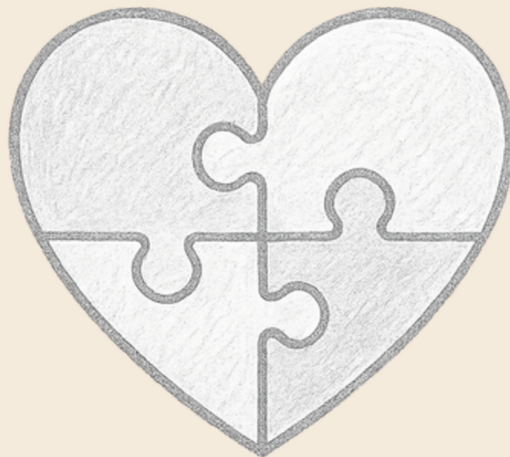


# When Support Means Punishment: What to Know If Your ADHD Child Is Struggling at School

An NZ-Based Plain-English Guide for Parents (That May Help  
You, Too, Wherever You Are)

By **Rewriting Normal**



*Rewriting*  
→  
**NORMAL**

# Introduction: This Isn't Just Behaviour

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Your child isn't broken. And you're not imagining it, some schools really are failing our kids. When a child with ADHD has repeated meltdowns or becomes aggressive, it's almost never "out of nowhere." It's usually the result of being overwhelmed, under-supported, or actively provoked. And when that child is then punished (instead of supported) the system isn't just missing the point. It's making things worse.

This guide is for when you're being told your child is "too much," "violent," or "not responding." When you've been blamed, when your gut says something isn't right, or when you're being made to believe that medication is the only answer. Maybe your child is being isolated, or threatened with exclusion, or coming home shut down. Maybe you're crying in the car after drop-off.

You deserve backup. So here's what schools should be doing. What you're legally allowed to ask for. And what you can do if they aren't doing it.

This version is written for Aotearoa New Zealand, but much of it applies wherever schools are failing to support neurodivergent kids. Local systems may differ, but the core principle remains: kids who struggle need scaffolding, not shame.



# Section 1: What Schools Should Be Doing (in NZ)

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If your child is having meltdowns, refusing school, getting into fights, or being sent to the “time-out room” daily, something's not working.

Here's what schools can and should be doing:

## 1. Requesting an RTLB Referral

RTLB = Resource Teacher: Learning & Behaviour. This is a trained expert who works across schools to support kids with behavioural and learning needs.

Ask: “Has an RTLB referral been made?”

You can request this as a parent, don't wait for the school to offer it.

## 2. Involving the Ministry of Education Learning Support Team

If your child is at risk of exclusion or has serious behavioural needs, the Ministry's Learning Support team should be involved. They can assess whether additional help (like teacher aide hours or specialist input) is needed.

Ask: “Has anyone from MOE Learning Support observed or been involved in my child's case?”

If not, request it in writing.

## 3. Developing a Written Behaviour Support Plan

A formal plan (sometimes called an IEP or IBP) outlines:

- What your child needs to feel safe and regulated
- Known triggers and calming strategies
- Staff responsibilities
- Agreed consequences (that don't involve shame or isolation)
- This plan must be created with you.
- Ask: “Can I please see the current written support plan? When was it last reviewed?”

## 4. Providing a Safe, Regulating Space

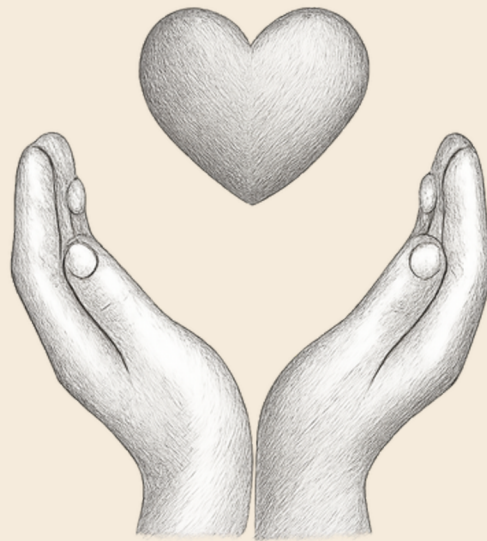
If your child is regularly dysregulated, they need somewhere safe and calming, not punitive.

- Locking a child in a room alone is not regulation, it's crisis management.
- This could be a sensory room, a quiet corner, or access to a trusted adult.
- Ask: "What space is available when my child needs to regulate safely? Is it supervised?"

## 5. Providing Teacher Aide (TA) Support

Your child may qualify for in-class support through:

- ORS (Ongoing Resourcing Scheme)
- High Health Needs Fund
- Short-term TA hours funded by the school or MOE
- Ask: "What TA or additional staffing support is currently in place for my child?"



"It shouldn't be this hard—but change needs a voice, and right now, that voice is ours.  
We do it because our children shouldn't have to."



# Section 2: What's Not Okay (Even if It's Common)

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## ✗ Using Seclusion or Lock-In Rooms

If your child is being locked alone in a room or left to “calm down” unsupervised:

### **You can say in a meeting or email:**

“I’d like to clarify: is my child ever left alone in that space? If so, how long for, and who supervises? I understand that seclusion is not permitted in NZ schools, and I want to ensure any calm-down spaces are safe, supported, and trauma-informed.”

### **If the teacher says:**

“Well, xhe needed space, and we didn’t want to restrain her...”

### **You can reply:**

“I completely understand the desire to keep everyone safe. I’d like us to work on a plan where she’s never alone in distress. A calm space is great, but it needs adult support and clear strategies.”

## ✗ Ignoring Peer Provocation

If another child is regularly triggering your child, but the focus is only on your child’s reaction:

### **You can say:**

“I’m concerned that this is becoming a pattern. If there’s a known dynamic between the kids, I’d like us to put a plan in place for both of them, not just mine. Has that been considered?”

### **If the school says:**

“Your child’s response is still not okay, regardless of what the other student does...”

### **You can reply:**

“Absolutely. But if the same pattern keeps happening, it tells me the environment is still unsafe or unbalanced. What supports are being offered to help both kids succeed?”

## ✗ **Blaming the Child for the Environment**

If your child thrives at home, in clubs, or with familiar adults, but breaks down at school:

### **You can say:**

“That tells me it’s not just about his capacity, it’s about the current demands being too much. I’m not saying school should remove all expectations, but we do need to reduce pressure and increase co-regulation.”

### **If the teacher says:**

“What works for him at home that we could try?”

### **You can reply:**

“At home, we give warnings before transitions, use visual cues, and offer choices where we can. But the biggest thing is trust, he knows he can take a break without getting in trouble. Could we try building that in here too?”

### **Optional if you're feeling unsure:**

“To be honest, I’m not a trained educator. I can tell you what helps at home, but I’d really appreciate input from RTLB or Learning Support about school-based strategies. Can we request that together?”

## ✗ **Withholding Access to Learning or Social Time**

If your child is being repeatedly removed from learning or isolated from others:

### **You can say:**

“I know things are challenging, but exclusion can be incredibly damaging long term. I’d like us to explore inclusive alternatives, even if that means part-time attendance or extra support during breaks.”

### **If the school says:**

“We don’t think he’s safe to attend that trip/event yet...”

### **You can reply:**

“Could we instead plan for him to attend with specific conditions, like a support person, a shorter visit, or a pre-event social story? I’d rather we scaffold access than remove it altogether.”

## ✗ Delaying Support Due to Funding

### **You can say:**

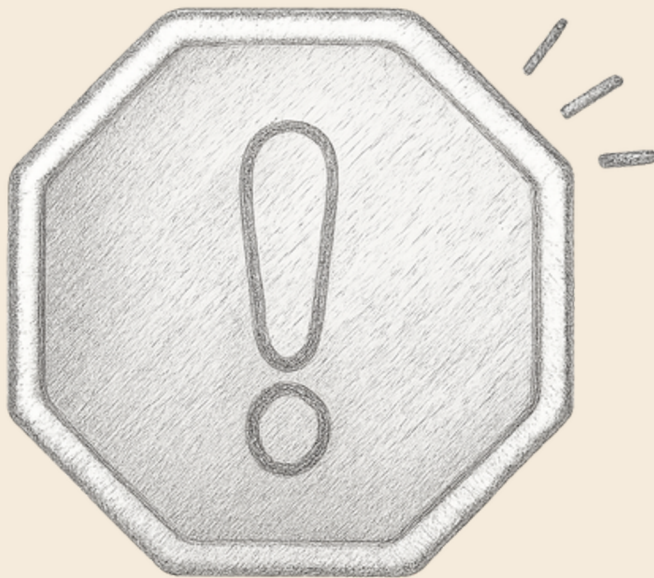
“I know formal funding takes time, but many supports don’t require approval. Could we look at what can be done now, like visual tools, seating changes, or structured breaks, while we wait?”

### **If the teacher says:**

“We’d love to help, but we don’t have capacity right now...”

### **You can reply:**

“That’s really hard to hear. I understand you’re stretched, but if this were a medical condition or physical need, we’d be finding a way. ADHD and emotional regulation challenges are no less real.”



"It's hard work, and it's often thankless—but we advocate because every child deserves a school that sees and supports them."

# Section 3: What to Say in Meetings or Emails

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You don't need to be an expert to ask for help. But when you're in a meeting where your child is being described only by what they've done wrong, it helps to have language that brings the conversation back to what matters: support, not shame. This section gives you real words you can use, whether you're asking for a plan, explaining what ADHD actually means, or gently reminding the team that your child belongs in school, just as they are.

## **Tone Tips for Meetings**

Stay grounded. You don't have to agree to anything right away.

Bring notes, and take your time. It's okay to say:

- "I'd like to pause and reflect before I respond to that."
- "Can I get back to you on that after I've had time to think it through?"
- Ask for things in writing. Even if it's informal.
- "Would you mind putting that in an email so I can follow up?"

## **✗ When the Behaviour Plan Is One-Sided**

If the school's version of a "support plan" is mostly a list of what will happen after your child loses control, it's not a support plan. It's a punishment list.

### **You can say:**

"For kids with ADHD, consequences and punishments often don't have the effect people expect. These aren't calculated choices, they're dysregulated brain responses. What helps is prevention and co-regulation, not just discipline."

"I'm absolutely on board with boundaries. But the plan also needs scaffolding, things that reduce overwhelm before it builds. Otherwise we're just punishing him for something he's not able to control in the moment."

"As Ross Greene puts it: 'Kids do well if they can.' So let's start by assuming he wants to succeed, and work backwards from what's getting in the way."

## **When the System Is the Problem**

You might feel pressure to “fix” your child, or like the school expects you to. But here’s the truth:

Schools weren’t designed for neurodivergent kids. That’s not your child’s fault. And it doesn’t mean they don’t belong.

### **You can say:**

“My child has the right to attend school, and the right to attend with accommodations that reflect how his brain actually works.”

“She’s already working harder than most kids just to hold it together. When she melts down, that’s not a failure, it’s a sign that the environment is too much.”

“If we only focus on what she did wrong, we’re ignoring what the system is doing to her. She’s absorbing messages that she’s ‘bad,’ or ‘too much.’ I don’t want her to grow up thinking she’s broken, I want her to know she’s supported.”

## **Other Helpful Phrases**

### **When You Need a Plan:**

“Can we create a written support plan that focuses on what helps her before things escalate, not just what happens after?”

### **When You’re Asked What You Want:**

“What I want is for her to feel safe enough to try again, and supported enough not to fall apart. That means co-regulation, consistent strategies, and understanding.”

### **When They Say ‘We Treat Everyone the Same’:**

“Equal isn’t always fair. Treating every child the same doesn’t work when some kids have different needs. Support doesn’t mean special treatment, it means access.”

## Email Template: Requesting a Meeting

Subject: Request for Support Plan Review

Kia ora [Name],

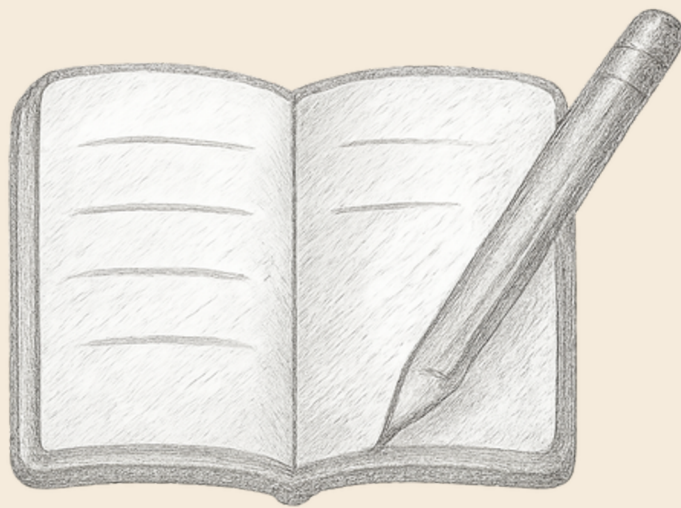
I'd like to request a meeting to review the current supports in place for [Child's Name].

I believe we need a written plan that focuses on emotional regulation and preventative strategies, not just consequences.

I'd also like to discuss whether a referral to RTLB or Ministry Learning Support might be appropriate at this stage.

Please let me know some available times, and who from the team may be attending.

Ngā mihi,  
[Your Name]



"If we stay silent, nothing shifts. Advocacy is exhausting, but our children deserve better—and that's why we keep going."



# Section 4: What to Do If They Refuse Help

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Sometimes, even after you ask clearly, schools still delay, minimise, or avoid putting proper support in place. You might hear things like:

- “We’re doing all we can.”
- “He just needs to learn.”
- “We don’t have the resources.”
- “We’re not trained for that.”
- “We need more time.”
- “Other kids cope with the same rules.”

But if your child is still melting down, excluded, or blamed, that’s not enough. Here’s what you can do next.

## 1. Know Your Child’s Rights (NZ)

Children have a legal right to attend school and to access learning. If your child is being excluded, isolated, or denied support because of a disability or neurodivergence, this may breach the Education and Training Act 2020 and NZ Human Rights Act.

ADHD counts as a disability under these protections, even if it’s not “officially” recognised by the school.

### **You can say in writing or in a meeting:**

“My understanding is that under NZ law, children with ADHD are entitled to equitable access to education. I’d like to make sure we’re not unintentionally breaching those rights by delaying or denying support.”

## 2. Put Everything in Writing

Even if the school prefers phone calls or verbal chats, follow up in writing. This creates a paper trail that helps:

- Keep everyone accountable
- Document your requests
- Support future action if needed

### **You can write:**

“Thanks for meeting with me. I just want to confirm in writing what was discussed and what actions we agreed to. Please let me know if I’ve misunderstood anything.”

### 3. Escalate Inside the School First


If classroom teachers aren't responding:

- Speak with the SENCO (Special Education Needs Coordinator)
- Then escalate to the Principal
- If still unresolved, request a meeting with the Board of Trustees
- "I'd like to request a formal meeting with the Board. I have ongoing concerns about access and support that I'd like recorded and addressed."


### 4. Get Outside Support

You don't have to do this alone. There are free services in Aotearoa that can help advocate for your child:


YouthLaw Aotearoa (for legal help with school discrimination or exclusion)

 [www.youthlaw.co.nz](http://www.youthlaw.co.nz) | 0800 884 529


IHC Advocacy Service (for disability-related education support)

 [www.ihc.org.nz/advocacy](http://www.ihc.org.nz/advocacy)

Altogether Autism (for information, resources, and referrals)

 [www.altogetherautism.org.nz](http://www.altogetherautism.org.nz)

Parent to Parent NZ (for connecting with others who've been through this)

 [www.parent2parent.org.nz](http://www.parent2parent.org.nz)

### 5. If They Try to Push You Toward Withdrawal

If the school suggests:

- "Maybe this isn't the right place for your child."
- "Have you considered homeschooling?"
- "Perhaps a different setting would be better."
- That's a red flag, not a plan.

#### **You can say:**

"I'm open to what's best for my child, but I also know that schools have a legal obligation to support neurodivergent learners. Let's first make sure all reasonable supports have been tried before we talk about whether he belongs here."

#### **You might also add:**

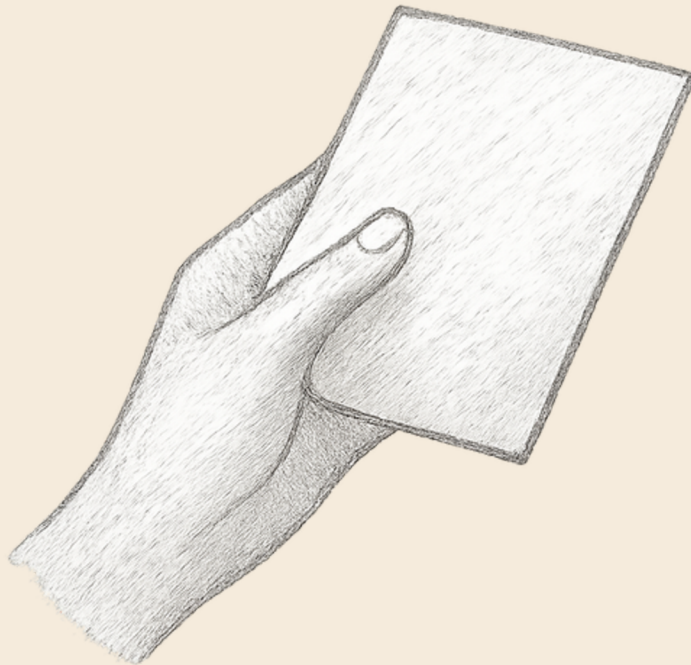
"This isn't about finding a 'perfect fit', it's about making the current environment accessible."

## 6. If You Feel Defeated

You are not failing. You're being asked to do too much, in a system that expects calm behaviour without providing calm environments.

Your child isn't failing either. They're showing you what happens when the world becomes too loud, fast, unpredictable, or overwhelming for their nervous system to manage.

Support isn't optional. It's not a bonus for the "well-behaved." It's the baseline that lets your child show up in the first place.



"Change doesn't happen on its own. It's tiring, it's relentless—but we speak up because our kids need us to."

# Section 5: What This Means If You're Outside New Zealand

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This guide was written using New Zealand's education system and legal protections—but if you're reading from somewhere else, the core message still holds:

- If your ADHD child is being punished instead of supported,
- blamed instead of scaffolded,
- excluded instead of understood
- then the system is failing them, not the other way around.

Here's how to translate these ideas to your own context:

## 1. Find Out What Support Plans Exist Where You Live

Look for terms like:

- IEP (Individual Education Plan)
- 504 Plan (in the U.S.)
- SEN Support (in the UK)
- ILP / Behaviour Support Plans / Learning Profiles
- Ask whether your country uses terms like “reasonable accommodations” or “disability-related supports.”
- Even if the name is different, the idea is the same: children with additional needs are entitled to support, not just discipline.

## 2. Learn What the Law Says About Disability and Education

Your country may have education rights legislation, such as:

- IDEA or ADA in the United States
- Equality Act in the UK
- UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ratified by most countries)

**Ask:**

- “What legal protections exist for neurodivergent students in mainstream education?”
- “What’s considered a reasonable adjustment or accommodation in this system?”

You don't need to be a lawyer. You just need to know your child is not the problem.

### 3. Find Advocacy or Parent Support Groups

#### Search for:

- Local ADHD foundations or non-profits
- Disability advocacy groups
- Legal clinics or education lawyers
- Peer support networks for parents
- Many countries have underfunded systems, but even in stretched environments, being informed and connected makes a difference.



### 4. Adapt the Scripts in This Guide

The phrases in this guide were written for a New Zealand context, but you can adapt them.

#### Instead of:

“Can we make a referral to RTLB or Ministry Learning Support?”

#### You might say:

- “Can we involve your school psychologist or a specialist behaviour team?”
- “Is there a formal process for accessing accommodations here?”
- “Who in this system helps develop learning or regulation plans?”

### 5. Keep the Core Principles

No matter where you are, this stays true:

- Support should happen before escalation, not only after
- ADHD is not a moral failure, it’s a regulatory challenge
- Your child deserves access, inclusion, and dignity
- You are allowed to ask for help. You are allowed to say no to shame.

If you’re reading this far from Aotearoa New Zealand, know that you are not alone.

Neurodivergent kids around the world are asking for the same thing: not to be punished for having different brains.

# Before We Close

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## When a Teacher Just Gets It

Sometimes, you'll have a year where things finally click.



A teacher sees your child, not just their behaviour. They anticipate the hard moments. They set clear boundaries with warmth, not shame. Maybe they print out their own visuals. Maybe they create a quiet corner with their own money. Maybe they don't always get it right, but they try, and your child feels safe enough to try too.

When that happens, take a moment to say thank you. Not because it's rare (though it often is). But because seeing your child as worthy of support should never go unnoticed.

And yet, let's be honest. The fact that some teachers feel they have to reach into their own pockets to support our kids is not okay. That's not sustainable. That's not equity. That's not a solution.

Which brings us to one last truth:

## Support Is Not a Zero-Sum Game



You might hear that the school is underfunded. Or that other kids need help too. Or that "we can't do everything."

And it's true, schools are under pressure. But your child's support is not cancelling out someone else's. It's not selfish to advocate. It's not entitled to ask.

A child's need for help doesn't go away just because the system is struggling.

And their right to support doesn't depend on whether someone else is more "deserving."

We don't need to fight over scraps, we need systems that recognise that every child deserves access, dignity, and a real chance to thrive.



# Final Thoughts: You're Not Asking Too Much

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If you're reading this after a meeting that left you in tears, or after another phone call from school that made your stomach drop, please hear this:

- You are not dramatic.
- You are not overprotective.
- You are not making excuses.
- You are asking for what should already be there.

Your child deserves support before they're in crisis. They deserve an education that works with their brain, not against it. And you deserve to be seen as a partner, not a problem.

This guide was written for those of us navigating a system that often isn't built with our kids in mind. But we're building something else: clarity, calm advocacy, and hope that's rooted in reality, not wishful thinking.

You're not alone in this. And you never were.



"No one's coming to fix it for us. We push for change because our kids deserve support, not survival mode."