S9E1- Why January Feels Harder Than It Should

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Hello and welcome back to The Resilient Kid Podcast . I'm Ashley Costello. Happy New Year.

It's lovely to be back. We had a bit of a break in December from recording, and I'm so excited because we've planned out the whole year's podcast. We're doing things a little differently this year, and I can't wait to share the new format with you.

Today, we're talking about January — and specifically why January often feels heavier, harder, and more emotional than we expect it to.

Have you noticed more tears, more arguments, more tiredness? Have you had moments where you think, this feels too hard, I just can't be bothered ? If you have, you're not alone. And more importantly, nothing has gone wrong.

January isn't failing you. You are not failing January. And you are not failing your kids.

January is a perfect storm for nervous systems — for everybody, including your own.

As I talk about kids and teens, I want you to think about yourself too. I want to explain why January feels harder, based on what we know about the brain, behaviour, and development.

The Myth of the Fresh Start

There's a strong social message around January: New year, fresh start, back to routines, back on track.

Here's the problem with that.

Nervous systems don't reset on January 1st — even though we wish they did. Kids and teens don't experience January as a fresh start. They experience it as a sudden and shocking gear change.

Think about December:

- Later nights
- School events, parties, concerts, plays
- Disrupted routines
- Mealtimes all over the place
- Lots of stimulation
- Emotional highs and lows
- More social interaction

Even if you've had a lovely Christmas, it's still a lot for the brain and body to process.

So when school starts again — whether that's formal schooling or home education — the expectation is often right, let's get going . But biologically, many kids (and I mean all ages, right up to university students) are still recovering.

The mismatch between expectation and capacity is where January struggles begin.

What's Happening in the Brain in January

Children's and teens' brains are still developing. The part responsible for emotional regulation, impulse control, planning, organisation, and stress management — the prefrontal cortex — is under construction well into the twenties. Recent research even suggests into the thirties.

Meanwhile, the amygdala — what we often call the guard dog with younger kids — the brain's alarm system, is fully online much earlier.

There are three main reasons January feels especially hard.

1. Stress hormones increase Going back to school increases cortisol levels, even for children who like school. Cortisol isn't bad on its own, but too much for too long makes emotions louder and thinking quieter. Focus and concentration become harder.

2. The thinking brain is tired Weeks of change deplete the prefrontal cortex. This shows up as:

- Less patience
- Less flexibility
- Less ability to hold things together

And let's be honest — parents feel this too.

3. The alarm system is more reactive The amygdala becomes quicker to interpret things as threatening, overwhelming, or unfair. Small things — a comment, a request, a change in plan — can trigger big reactions.

That's why in January we see:

- More emotional outbursts
- Anxiety spikes
- Behaviour changes

Kids who were coping well can suddenly look like they're struggling — not because they've gone backwards, but because their capacity is lower .

Why January Is Especially Hard for Teens

Teen brains experience emotions more intensely, feel social stress more deeply, and their sleep cycles are already misaligned with school schedules. Realistically, teens shouldn't be starting school until 10 or 11am.

Over Christmas, sleep gets even more disrupted — late nights, sleeping in — and then suddenly January hits. It can feel like walking through treacle.

Add in:

- Dark mornings
- Academic pressure (mocks, deadlines)
- Less freedom
- Social comparison
- January wellbeing messages about weight, fitness, and productivity
- Research shows:
- Sleep deprivation increases emotional reactivity
- Lack of daylight affects mood and motivation
- Chronic stress reduces concentration and resilience

So when teens seem withdrawn, irritable, unmotivated, or flat, it's often not defiance or laziness. It's a nervous system saying, this is a lot .

Why Behaviour Changes Before Words

Kids don't say, I'm overwhelmed and struggling to regulate . They show it through behaviour.

We often overestimate their ability to recognise and explain what's going on internally — unless they've already developed that language through therapy or support.

In January, behaviour can look like:

- Clinginess
- Anger
- Refusal
- Shutdown
- Isolation
- Tears over things that seem small to us

Underneath is often:

- Emotional fatigue
- Loss of safety after the holidays
- Pressure to perform before they're ready

This is why consequences often don't work well in January. Behaviour isn't coming from choice — it's coming from overload.

What Actually Helps in January

What helps isn't perfection, stricter routines, or more pressure.

What helps is regulation, predictability, and compassion — including for yourself.

1. Connection before correction When behaviour wobbles, start with calm reassurance. Fewer words, more presence. A settled nervous system behaves better.
2. Gentler routines Keep routines simpler and slower. Ease back into after-school activities. Lower expectations temporarily.
3. Predictable rhythms Knowing what's coming next helps kids feel safe — visual routines, consistent mornings and evenings, talking through the week ahead.
4. Co-regulation Kids borrow calm from adults. When we slow our voice, movements, and reactions, their nervous system follows.

A Word for Parents

If January has made you feel less patient, more tired, or more doubtful — this makes sense.

Parental stress and child stress feed off each other. January stretches us all. We don't need to fix it — we just need to be aware of it.

Remember: We only need to get it right 30% of the time , as long as we repair and restore the other 70%.

Repair matters more than perfection.

January will pass. Be gentle with yourself and with your kids.

This isn't failure or regression. It's biology and development.

When we respond with understanding rather than urgency, January becomes something we move through — not something we battle.

If this resonated, please share it with a parent or educator who might need it. You can message us on social media or email me at ashley@theresilientkid.co.uk .

Good luck with January. Join us next week as we talk about calmer mornings and bedtimes.

Take care, and sending lots of love from all of us here at The Resilient Kid . Bye for now. 💛