S9E2- Resilient Mornings & Calmer Bedtimes After the Holidays

Hello and welcome back to The Resilient Kid Podcast with me, Ashley Costello , psychotherapist.

So, how is January treating you? Back into it, back into the routine. I've had quite a few parents reach out — some teachers as well — who've said, "Ashley, this is really difficult."

That's why today we're talking about mornings and bedtimes , because if things feel wobbly right now, chances are it's those two pressure points.

You might be noticing:

- harder mornings
- slower starts
- more resistance
- battles around bedtime
- big emotions, just when everyone is tired

Last week on the podcast, we talked about why January is particularly hard. And after the questions we've had, I thought: let's look at this in relation to fitting back into routine in January.

If you're thinking, why is it so hard? They were fine before the holidays. I felt like I'd just got into the routine… don't worry. Nothing is broken. We're just seeing the nervous system recalibrating after huge change.

December is all about change — routines get disrupted. And change doesn't make us feel safe. We don't like change, generally.

So I want to explain why that happens, what's going on in the brain for our kids and teens, and most importantly, what helps. Stick around to the end where we go through practical strategies that are really going to help you.

The Brain After the Holidays: Why Transitions Are Hard

Let's start with the brain.

Children, teens — all of us — thrive on predictability and rhythm. Holidays, even lovely ones, disrupt both of those.

During time off we often see:

- later bedtimes (for us too)
- irregular mornings
- overstimulation: new sights, new sounds (airports, travel, decorations, songs)
- less structure and routine

- emotional highs and lows

And that includes us as parents and educators, because we're trying to balance all of that.

When routines disappear, the brain relies more heavily on the stress response system to cope with unpredictability. We talked about this last week — it's centred around the amygdala (our alarm system, our "guard dog") and the autonomic nervous system: fight, flight, freeze .

So when school starts again, when we go back into the routines of work and school, the brain doesn't go, "Right, back to normal." It says, "Hold on — change again."

That's why kids' and teens' behaviour often spikes before it improves . It's not because they're pushing boundaries on purpose. It's because their thinking brain has less capacity. They're already tired.

Why Mornings Are So Hard

Mornings are a perfect storm from a brain and behaviour perspective.

Mornings require:

- organisation
- time awareness
- emotional regulation
- cooperation and flexibility

And let's be honest — lots of kids and teens don't naturally have those skills yet. (And when I say "kids", I mean right up into their twenties.)

All of these skills sit in the prefrontal cortex — the front part of the brain — which develops very slowly (we're talking into the thirties now). It's easily disrupted by stress, and it works less well when we're tired or rushed.

After a holiday, that system is under-resourced.

Think of it like this: in a work situation, you've got 20 staff and only 10 show up in January. Slowly, the rest come back in dribs and drabs, and by the end of January you're back to a full workforce. That's what it feels like for the brain.

So what we often see is:

- refusal
- distraction
- tears
- anger
- isolation
- disruption
- shutdown

It isn't manipulation. It's often a child or teen whose capacity — whose "workforce" — hasn't caught up with demand yet.

How We Build Calmer, Resilient Mornings

Not perfect — calmer .

1) Start with regulation

Before giving direction, help the nervous system settle:

- calm voice
- gentle check-in
- physical connection (pat on the back, hug, sit close)

Regulated brains are more cooperative. Kids pick up our nervous system — if we're calm, they're more likely to be calm.

Food can help too. The brain often perceives threat where there isn't one — but eating reduces that perceived threat. If we were in the savannah, we wouldn't eat if a tiger was coming. Eating tells the body: we are safe.

2) Reduce decisions

Decision-making drains the prefrontal cortex.

So:

- clothes ready the night before
- bags at the door
- limit breakfast options

In my household, we do a cooked breakfast two to three times a week — not a full English, nothing major. Scrambled eggs and toast, beans on toast. Sometimes sausages cooked the night before and microwaved.

The point is: protein helps focus and concentration through the morning.

And on those mornings, there's no choice. That's what we're having.

If you do cereal, absolutely fine — just be aware of sugar content. High-sugar cereals can spike insulin and lead to a crash in concentration within the first hour of school. If we do something like granola, we'll add Greek yoghurt and fruit to increase protein.

Don't run a buffet. Don't have 55 cereals. It's this or this.

For younger ones or neurodiverse kids: visual routines work better than verbal ones. It reduces nagging and helps them know what comes next.

A big tip: get them ready before they come down for breakfast — shoes, everything. We worked with a family where mornings were full of meltdowns. The kids were eating breakfast in front of the TV, then going upstairs to get ready and getting distracted. We flipped it: ready first, then breakfast, then TV if there's time. It worked really well.

In our house, we don't do screens in the morning — radio is on — because it's so hard to pull them away from screens.

We're not lowering expectations. We're making it calmer by removing unnecessary cognitive load.

3) Build in buffer time

A rushed nervous system triggers stress. Even an extra five or ten minutes reduces shouting, tears, and power struggles. Think of it as emotional insurance.

4) Use connection scripts

- Simple, steady language helps kids feel safe:
- "We'll do it together."
- "You don't have to rush."
- "I'm here to help you with the steps."
- "What do you need next?"
- "What can I do to help you?"

One of the biggest shifts for mornings is making sure your stuff is done before they're up . I get up earlier, I'm ready, my bag is at the door. Because if I'm rushing and stressed, I pass that on. And we all do.

Why Bedtimes Fall Apart After the Holidays

Bedtime is often where everything spills out — and that makes sense.

By evening:

- coping resources are used up
- stress hormones are higher
- thinking brain is fatigued

For many children and teens (especially anxious or sensitive ones), bedtime is when worry surfaces, emotions rise, and resistance appears. They're also often seeking connection.

And after holiday disruption and shifted sleep patterns, the nervous system struggles to downshift.

Sleep isn't just about tiredness — it's about feeling safe enough to let go. Bedtime can be the only time some kids feel safe enough to let it all out.

If you've got a teen who goes to bed around the same time as you, make sure you've left space to chat before you disappear to bed.

How to Create Calmer Bedtimes (Without the Battles)1) Protect wind-down time

The brain starts picking up sleep signals long before bedtime.

Aim for:

- dim lights
- slower pace
- predictable routine
- reduced stimulation
- fewer screens

In our lounge we don't have the "big light" on at night — we use lamps. Dinner, tidy up, then PJs, then maybe a short programme together. For younger ones: bath, story, bed — keep the steps consistent.

Consistency matters more than clock time. Even when we travelled, the bedtime routine always looked the same. We even did it on night flights — pyjamas, teddy, milk, bed — and they slept quickly.

2) Keep conversations light

When we're tired, we can't problem-solve well — especially teens.

If worries come up:

- acknowledge them
- reassure
- don't fix it right then

Say: "Let's talk about this tomorrow." Or: "That sounds really important — let's write it down and talk over breakfast."

And then follow through in the morning.

3) Use body-based calming

The nervous system loves physical cues:

- warm bath/shower
- deep-pressure hugs
- weighted blanket
- slow breathing with long exhales

If a teen is getting anxious, I'll exaggerate my calm breathing while listening — not dramatically — but enough that they naturally start to match it.

4) Reduce pressure to sleep

Anxious kids and teens often try too hard to sleep.

Reframe it: “Your job is to rest. Sleep will come when it’s ready.”

Reading, gentle music, rest — remove the performance anxiety of “I can’t sleep.”

A Note for Parents and Carers

January might be stretching you. Your own nervous system is tired, patience is thinner, and self-doubt creeps in.

So check in with yourself:

- How am I doing?
- How’s my sleep?
- How are my mornings?
- Do I feel organised or overwhelmed?

Self-doubt undermines all the good work you do.

Remember:

- behaviour is information
- progress isn’t linear
- “Tonight was better than last night.”
- “This morning was better than yesterday.”

And don’t forget: we only have to get it right 30% of the time and they still turn out okay. Repair matters more than perfection. It’s not about winning mornings or winning evenings — it’s about supporting their nervous system through the transition.

We’ve come from a busy December into January. Give yourself a break.

What builds resilience isn’t pressure or perfection — it’s predictable rhythms, emotional safety, and support through the hard times.

After the holidays, mornings and bedtimes are where resilience is quietly rebuilt — one calm interaction at a time.

Thank you for listening to The Resilient Kid Podcast. If this helped, please share it with a parent, carer, or educator who’s finding mornings or bedtimes tough right now.

Remember: you’re supporting a developing brain, and that’s meaningful work — and it’s hard work. So well done.

If you want to get in touch, put forward a suggestion, or sign up for the newsletter, check us out at theresilientkid.co.uk or email me at ashley@theresilientkid.co.uk .

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