Our brains are continuously processing sensory information – sound, touch, smell, sight and taste – and connecting this information to a specific state of arousal – a continuum from calm through to terror.

Our body’s alarm system is triggered by this sensory information causing our bodies to react in what’s commonly referred to as the ‘Fight, Flight or Freeze’ response. The more threatened we feel the further we shift along this continuum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Threat response continuum</th>
<th>Calm</th>
<th>Vigilance</th>
<th>Alarm</th>
<th>Fear</th>
<th>Terror</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Children who have experienced abuse or neglect typically live in a state of constant fear and danger. This causes their brain to become hyper-vigilant where it remains in a constant state of alertness (Alarm, Fear and Terror on the threat response continuum). This state significantly impacts how the child thinks and acts.

A child’s behaviour can indicate to case managers and carers where the child is on the continuum, and that they may not be feeling safe at a particular point in time. This knowledge can inform strategies when working with children to help them cope with their trauma.

**Fight and flight responses**

Both Fight and Flight sit on the hyperarousal continuum.

**Fight behaviours include:**
- > crying
- > clenching fists with the desire to punch or cause destruction
- > clenching jaw, grinding teeth, snarling, flaring nostrils
- > raising voice in an aggressive tone
- > stomping or kicking
- > feelings of anger, rage, knotted stomach (nausea or heartburn).

**Flight behaviours include:**
- > restless legs, fidgeting or shaking
- > shallow breathing
- > big, darting eyes
- > hiding or running away
- > feelings of being trapped or tense.

**Freeze response**

The Freeze response sits on the hypoarousal (dissociative) continuum.

**Freeze behaviours include:**
- > shutting down
- > feeling cold, frozen, numb, pale skin
- > limp body
- > sense of stiffness or heaviness
- > holding or restricted breathing
- > sense of dread, heart pounding
- > decreased heart rate
- > orientation to threat
- > feelings of being removed from an event, watching it unfold from a distance.

For all three, the intensity of the response can vary depending on the degree of the perceived or actual threat.

**Note:** The terms ‘child’ and ‘children’ also refer to ‘young person’ and ‘young people’.

Sources:
- Trauma Recovery - Fight, Flight, Freeze Responses: www.trauma-recovery.ca/impact-effects-of-trauma/fight-flight-freeze-responses