

# Managing Meltdowns

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## Escalation and Meltdown

Have you had the experience of a child having big emotions (really sad, angry or frightened) and then their behavior starts escalating upwards, getting more and more challenging, and then they just seem to explode? They're screaming, flailing, struggling to get out of your arms, totally out of control? The more you try to intervene, the bigger the meltdown.

Meltdowns happen when a brain gets overloaded. Too much stimulation or too many demands or too many big feelings. It can manifest as fight, flight or freeze: Some children may hit, kick or throw things. Others run or hide. Some curl up in a ball and cry.

## The Downstairs Brain

Neuropsychiatrist Daniel Siegel uses an analogy for understanding the brain. The downstairs brain (brain stem, limbic system) is responsible for survival and emotions. It's fully developed in a toddler. The upstairs brain (parietal lobe, frontal lobe, prefrontal cortex) is responsible for advanced functions like language, decision-making, impulse control and empathy. These take *years* to develop – into adolescence and beyond. When a person of *any age* is very upset, emotions block their ability to use their upstairs brain. They regress to the downstairs primitive brain. They "flip their lid" and become a bundle of emotions, without any advanced thinking.

When they're in this state, they can't "use their words" or even hear yours. They can't make good decisions, they can't be reasoned with and they can't "just calm down".

## Managing a meltdown

- Stay calm. Co-regulate. A child in meltdown is overwhelmed by their own emotions and needs you to be regulated and model emotional stability to help re-ground them.
- Get down low, use a low voice and move slowly so you don't trigger fight/flight.
- Stay close by. That helps a child feel safer – they know you'll be there when they're ready for comfort. But don't crowd them – this provokes fight reflex – they'll yell 'go away' or hit.
- Don't ask questions or try to talk the child down with a lot of words. If you need to speak to change your child's behavior, or move them to a safer place, give very simple commands.
- Often "something little" triggers a huge meltdown. That little thing was just the last straw on top of other stress. Fixing it won't fix a meltdown because it's not the real reason for it.
- Reduce stimulation – go somewhere quieter or turn off the lights. Reduce the demands. Try calming tools like a weighted blanket, noise canceling headphones, music, plushies to hug.
- Don't let your child hurt themselves, other people or things. At times, you might need to gently restrain them to keep things safe. (Be sure that you're calm enough to do this gently.)
- After the meltdown blows over, comfort. Name and validate emotions they were feeling.
- Sometimes after your child has calmed down, *you* are still full of tension and stress. Use self-care to help you release tension – take deep breaths, a short break, or get support.
- Later, when everyone is calm, talk about the meltdown and how to avoid future meltdowns.

## Prevent or Reduce Meltdowns

- Meet physical needs: A child is less likely to melt down if rested, fed, and comfortable.
- Set expectations: Tell them ahead of time what to expect. (And if things change from what was expected, show empathy that it can be hard when things don't go as promised.)
- Watch for early cues in body language, expressions or voice: Notice when your child is reaching the end of their rope. If you can notice the escalation when it's starting (when a child is starting to get over-excited, or angry, or upset), you may be able to ward off a meltdown by stepping in to soothe at that time.
- Emotional Literacy: Teach ways to express / manage feelings *before* they become too big.
- Talk about meltdowns when they're NOT having one. Practice coping skills and try calm down tools when they don't *need* them. Praise them when they can calm themselves down.
- Be aware of triggers that upset your child. You may have to be a detective to figure this out. Start tracking meltdowns and seeing what the situations have in common – too much noise? Bright lights? Scratchy clothes? Too many people? Too many decisions? Pressure to accomplish something? Before lunch? Before bed? Transitions? Changes in routine?

## Is it a Meltdown or is it a Tantrum?

When you see a child throw themselves to the ground, or scream, sob, flail or hit, there are two very different things that may be happening. Understanding which it is guides your response.

<b>Tantrum</b>	<b>Meltdown</b>
A behavior choice – upstairs brain decision	Emotional reaction – downstairs brain hijacks
Goal-Oriented: they're using it to get something	Overload of emotions, stimulation, demands
A performance for an audience; manipulation	Continues whether or not someone is watching
Tantrum stops as soon as they get their way	Out of control – won't stop even if you give in

A *tantrum* is a discipline issue. If that's what you think is happening, don't give in! Kids who learn they can get you to change the rules by throwing a temper tantrum will do it a lot! Try to guide them away from choosing this behavior, and toward positive ways of achieving their goals. You *can* empathize with their feelings but restate the limit. When they discover tantrum-ing doesn't gain them anything, they give up on it and the tantrum ends. So at times, the best response to a tantrum is saying something like "I hear you really want \_\_\_\_ and you're upset I'm saying no. But our rule is \_\_\_\_." And then walking away.

A *meltdown* is not a choice. It's an emotional response to a brain on total overload. Meltdowns are more common for neurodiverse children, including autistic kids, kids with anxiety and sensory processing disorders. But *any child* can have one given enough stressors. Meltdowns are not a behavior choice, so trying to reason with your child, or use rewards or punishment to stop a meltdown won't work. They need a compassionate approach focused on helping them get back to calm and get their upstairs brain back online.