

# Managing Meltdowns

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## Tantrum vs. Meltdown

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.

Tantrum	Meltdown
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 – can't stop even if you fix trigger

A *tantrum* is a discipline issue. You want to guide them away from choosing this behavior, and toward positive ways of achieving their goals. If they tantrum to manipulate, don't give a lot of attention, and don't give in. Kids who learn they can get you to change the rules if they temper tantrum will do it a lot! You *can* empathize with the feelings but restate the limit. "I hear you really want \_\_\_ and you're upset I'm saying no. But our rule is \_\_\_." When they discover this behavior doesn't gain them anything, they give up on it and the tantrum ends.

A *meltdown* is not a choice. It's an emotional response to a brain on overload. Too much stimulation or too many demands or too many big feelings overload them. It can manifest as a fight or flight reaction – some children may hit, kick, bite or throw things. Others may run, hide, curl up in a ball, cover their eyes or ears. Some may shut down completely. (Freeze.)

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 the meltdowns won't work. They need a different approach.

## 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 – 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 brain. They "flip their lid." 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. A child in meltdown is overwhelmed by the strength of their own emotions and needs you to 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. Being nearby helps a child feel safer – they know you're there when they're ready for comfort. But don't crowd them – this provokes anger – they'll yell 'go away'.
- 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. It's the last straw on top of a lot of other stress. Fixing it or explaining it won't fix the meltdown because it's not the real reason.
- 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 physically restrain them to keep things safe. (Be sure that you're calm enough to do this gently.) They will resist for a bit, then often shift from anger to sadness in your arms.
- After the meltdown blows over, comfort. Name and validate emotions they were feeling. If appropriate, work on a solution for the issue that triggered the meltdown.
- Sometimes after your child has calmed down, you are still full of tension and stress. Use self-care to help you release tension – deep breaths, a short break, or get support.
- Talk about the meltdown later when everyone's calm.
- Talk about how you might work together to prevent meltdowns in the future.

## 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. If things change from what was expected, know that can be a trigger for a meltdown, so be supportive about the change.
- Emotional Literacy: Talk about emotions. Teach and model positive ways to express and manage feelings *before* they become too big and unmanageable.
- Be aware of triggers - things you know upset your child. Sometimes you have to be a detective to figure this out – start tracking their meltdowns and seeing what the situations have in common – is it too much noise? Smells? Scratchy clothes? Heat? Too many people? Too many decisions? Pressure to accomplish something? Transitions? Changes in routine?
- Choose your battles. On a good day, your child can take on new challenges or do hard things. Some days that's just too much and it's compassionate to go easy on them.
- Watch for early cues: Notice when your child is reaching the end of their rope. If you can notice the escalation (when a child is starting to get over-excited, or angry, or upset) when it's starting, you may be able to ward off a meltdown by stepping in to soothe them.
- 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.