

Managing Meltdowns

Supporting your child with additional needs

What is a meltdown?

- In everyday use, 'meltdown' describes how someone is acting when they are under pressure or stress and have reached a point where they can no longer cope. Some people might use the phrase 'they have snapped' and we might see them become angry, tearful or over react in an emotional meltdown.



- The term 'meltdown' can also be used to describe the extreme actions of children on the autistic spectrum, when their behaviours are intense and 'out of control'. Whilst these outward explosive meltdowns are probably the most common, some children experience the 'meltdown' internally and it is more like an implosion.



Visible signs of meltdown may include withdrawing from communication, hiding, aggressive or self-injurious behaviour, curling up in a ball, rocking intensely and making sounds to drown out the world around them.

Remember...

Meltdowns are best understood as an emotional response. This is not a battle to be lost or won, but more a '**crisis**' to manage. You are the child's emotional brakes. Your response to the 'meltdown' can make a huge difference to the outcome. Try to separate your relationship with the child from the behaviour.

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What causes a meltdown?

At the most basic level, a meltdown is caused by a feeling of being overwhelmed and a sense of loss of control. The child feels they are no longer able to cope and the resulting behaviours are an attempt by the child to regain some control over themselves, those around them, their environment or a combination of these. It is most helpful if meltdowns are understood as a response to their emotions, rather than wilfully defiant tantrums.



Triggers

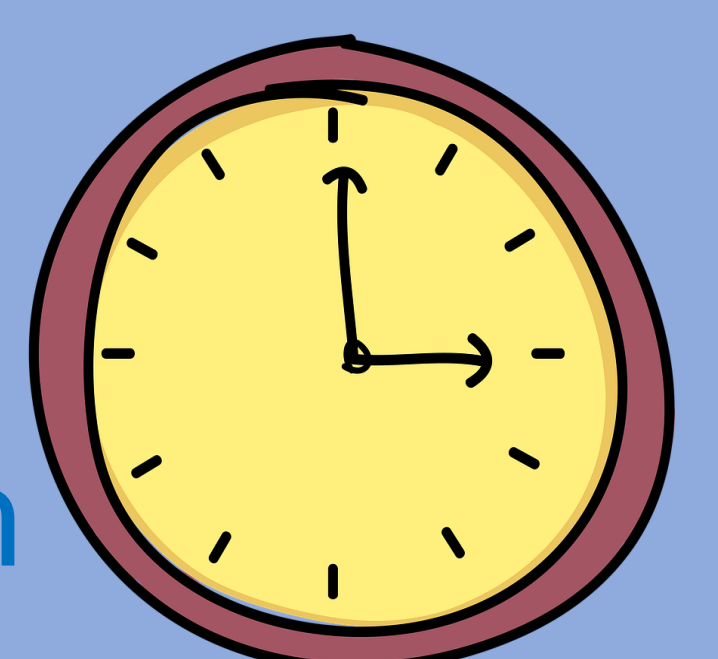
Triggers might not always be obvious and could be internal. Frequently they are a result of a build-up of anxieties or an accumulation of factors leading to overload.

These could include sensory issues, communication and social problems, a general sense of not coping or being overwhelmed.



Duration

Meltdowns usually last for lengthy periods of time and might only end through exhaustion. When in meltdown, a child is often unaware of those around them and unable to consider what others might think of their behaviour and react to it.



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Emergency rules apply

Children with ASD can respond well to rules. You could introduce the following anger rules:

- Don't hurt yourself
- Don't hurt other people
- Don't hurt property



Remember that things broken in a meltdown can be replaced or mended, so prioritise safety.

Drop traditional discipline

Traditional discipline is largely ineffective for meltdowns, as the child is not able to access the part of their brain that enables them to learn.

Wait for it to pass

It is very difficult to stop a meltdown once it has started, and sometimes trying to intervene can just make it last longer. Try to stay calm, take a step back and let the meltdown run its course.



Give space

Give your child **emotional and physical space**.

Encourage your child to **exit to a safer place**. This may be their bedroom or the garden.

For children who run away during a meltdown, if there are no safety concerns, **following at a distance** can work better than chasing them.

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Communication

Try to **reduce language** to a minimum. This will avoid overwhelming your child further. Keep any instructions **short and simple**.

Drop any demands to avoid further escalation.

Suggest a **positive behaviour** rather than asking your child to stop a negative behaviour e.g. Say "stand still" rather than "stop running".

Give **choices** to allow your child a sense of control.

Avoid threatening sanctions or punishments as this may increase anxiety rather than acting as an incentive to stop the behaviour.

Consider reinforcing **the 'rules' which apply to everyone**. This gives the message that they are out of your control and removes the personal element from the situation. e.g. "I'm sorry, but it's a health and safety requirement..."



After a meltdown

After a meltdown, your child may feel **ashamed, embarrassed and/or exhausted**.

Giving your child a **drink and a snack** may help them to recover.

Reassure your child that it's all over. They might need to hear that you still love them. Some children may seek physical affection.

Some children find it **helpful to talk about the incident**. Talking about what happened can provide insight into triggers and causes. However, for many children this can be too stressful and may trigger another meltdown, particularly if tried too soon afterwards.

