



Meltdowns: autistic children and teenagers

Meltdowns happen when autistic children and teenagers feel completely overwhelmed, lose control of their behaviour, and find it very hard to calm themselves. They might include behaviour like yelling, rocking, crying, hitting or withdrawing.

Autistic children and teenagers who have meltdowns say the experience includes physical sensations like tension, difficulty breathing, heat and blurry vision.

Meltdowns are a sign of distress, often after stress has built up over time.

Meltdowns can make it hard for autistic children and teenagers to take part in everyday activities.

Avoiding meltdowns:

To avoid meltdowns, autistic children and teenagers need support to learn:

- what situations they find difficult
- what being overwhelmed feels like
- what to do in these situations.

The ideas below might help your autistic child avoid, manage and recover from meltdowns.

Identify difficult situations

This is about your child knowing what situations lead to them feeling overwhelmed and moving into meltdown.

You and your child could make or draw a list of difficult situations. These might be things like:

- changes in routine – for example, taking a different route to school
- sensory overstimulation – for example, sudden loud noises like announcements on the train, or noise and jostling in change rooms
- social occasions – for example, parties
- times when your child has difficulty communicating.

Meltdowns can also be triggered by a build-up of many small but stressful events. You could keep a diary to record what happens before meltdowns and look for patterns.

Notice early warning signs

This is about helping your child to recognise signs that they're feeling uncomfortable or that a meltdown might be coming. For example, you and your child could practise recognising emotions like anxiety. Or you could help your child describe how their body feels before a meltdown – for example, racing heartbeat, churning stomach or difficulty breathing.

Develop coping strategies

This is about your child knowing what helps them feel comfortable and calm in difficult situations. Options for coping in difficult situations might include:

- breathing exercises, muscle relaxation techniques or simple things like taking a break and listening to music
- practical actions like leaving classes a few minutes early to avoid noisy, crowded corridors
- sensory aids like headphones to deal with triggering noises or favourite fragrances to deal with triggering smells
- activities your child enjoys, like listening to a favourite podcast or playing with their pet
- physical activities, like kicking a soccer ball or jumping on the trampoline.

Practise coping strategies

Encourage your child to practise their coping strategies when they feel calm. This will make it easier for your child to remember and use the strategies when they feel stressed or overwhelmed.

For example, you could make daily breathing exercises part of your child's routine, or your child could practise using headphones when it gets noisy at home. Or you and your child could talk to their teachers about your child regularly leaving class 5 minutes early.

There are 5 key steps to calming down for children – notice the emotion, name the emotion, pause, support your child, and address the issue that sparked the emotion. You can adapt these steps for younger autistic children and some older autistic children too.

Leading up to a meltdown: what to do

Sometimes you might know that your child is in a difficult situation or that they're getting agitated or overwhelmed.

Here are ideas and strategies that might help your child manage their emotions and calm down:

- **Recognise signs that your child is getting frustrated, angry or anxious.** For example, your child might screech, run away, put their hands over their ears, squeeze into a tight space, rub things, rock, pace, withdraw or hurt themselves.
- **Check whether there's anything you can change in the environment to help your child feel more comfortable.** For example, you might be able to close a door, turn down lighting or music, or move to a quieter space.
- **Give your child two or three structured choices to redirect them towards something positive.** For example, your child could choose a different activity, go for a walk, choose a toy from their sensory box, or suck on a piece of ice. At school, your child could go on an errand for the teacher or have a drink break. You could tell your child the choices or use pictures.

- **Remind your child to use their relaxation techniques, sensory aids or other options.** You could use visual cues like pictures of headphones or a quiet place.
- **Try not to say too much and avoid telling your child to calm down, which can cause even more stress.** Instead use pictures or written words to guide your child to a safe, quiet place and suggest calming strategies.
- **Give your child space and don't touch them unless they ask you to.**
- **Stay calm yourself and offer to do a breathing exercise with your child.**

During a meltdown: what to do

Sometimes you can't avoid a meltdown. When a meltdown happens, these steps can help:

1. Guide your child to a safe place, if possible.
2. Give your child space, don't touch them, and keep other people away.
3. Turn down lights and keep things quiet or give your child noise-cancelling headphones.
4. Let one person speak to your child, but don't say too much.
5. Stay calm and wait.

After a meltdown: what to do

Immediately after a meltdown, your child might feel embarrassed or exhausted. Time, space and a calming and familiar activity can help your child recover.

For example, your child could read a book, touch a sensory object, spend some time with the family pet or play their favourite music.

Later, if your child has the language and developmental ability, it can help to talk with your child about what happened. Try to do this when you're both feeling calm. It might be at least 30 minutes before your child can talk about the meltdown.

It's also good to work out whether there were new triggers or a combination of triggers that caused your child's meltdown. If there were, you can develop a plan for avoiding a meltdown in a similar situation next time.

Getting professional support

If your child often has meltdowns and you're struggling to manage them, a good first step is talking with your child's GP, paediatrician, psychologist or other health professionals. They can suggest therapies and supports that can help your child build skills to manage emotions. They can also help you support your child's emotional development.

Looking after yourself

Looking after yourself physically, mentally and emotionally gives you the energy you need to support your child.

You can look after yourself by:

- eating well and doing some physical activity
- trying to get enough rest or sleep
- making time for things you enjoy
- practising self-compassion.

Even when you look after yourself, it's natural to find your child's behaviour challenging sometimes. And sometimes other people's reactions to your child's behaviour might make you feel uncomfortable, judged or embarrassed. Getting support can help. You can try talking about your feelings with someone you trust, like your partner, a friend, your GP or a psychologist. Or you could call a parenting helpline in your state or territory.