

The Meltdown

The meltdown is a common autistic characteristic often feared and dreaded by both caregivers and autistics. Not to be confused with a temper tantrum. There are differences that are easy to spot if you are looking.

1. During a meltdown, a child with autism does not look or care, if those around him are reacting to his behaviour. (A child having a tantrum will look to see if their behaviour is getting a reaction.)
2. A child in the middle of a meltdown does not consider their own or others safety. (A child in the middle of a tantrum takes care to be sure they won't get hurt.)
3. A child in the meltdown mode has no interest or involvement in the social situation. (A child who throws a tantrum will use the social situation to their benefit.)
4. Meltdowns seem to move along under their own power and wind down slowly. (With a tantrum, it will end suddenly when the situation is resolved.)
5. A melt down gives the feeling that no one is in control. (A tantrum will give you the feeling that the child is in control, although they are pretending they are not.)
6. The meltdown usually begins when a specific want has not been permitted and after a point, nothing can satisfy the child until the meltdown has run its course. (A tantrum is thrown to achieve a specific goal and once the goal is met, things return to normal.)

The Tantrum

A tantrum is nothing more than a power play by a person not mature enough to play a tactful game of internal politics. You get a definite feeling of being manipulated. A temper tantrum in a child who is not autistic is simple to handle. Hold your ground and remember who is in charge. Usually it is best to simply ignore the behaviour and refuse to give in to their demands. Tantrums usually result when a child wants to have or do something that is being denied. Upon hearing the "no," the tantrum is a last-ditch effort to get their way.

Temper tantrums vary from child to child depending on their style. Some will throw themselves on the floor, screaming and kicking. Some will hold their breath, thinking that caregivers will surely grant them their wishes to keep them from dying.

Luckily the body's natural reactions foils this attempt even with the most determined children.

Some children take the vocal route and yell as loudly as possible, "I hate you," for the world to hear. Other more subtle attempts include bribery or blackmail. Though this is not as noisy, it is still considered tantrums. Some of the most amusing are the children who pull out all the stops and use all the methods in a tantrum.

As a parent, whether a child has autism or not, realize that you are in control, not the child. **It is not a popularity contest.** You are not there to wait on your child and indulge all their whims. Buying every toy that is requested isn't going to make them any happier in the long run than if you say no. When you choose the battle, there is no easy way out. Sometimes you just have to ride out the storm and let the tantrum roar.

The Meltdown Characteristics

There is nothing amusing about the meltdown. It is every known form of manipulation, anger, and loss of control that a person can muster up to display. It is loud, risky at times, frustrating, and exhausting. It is scary. **The best definition is a total loss of behavioural control.**

The problem is that the loss of control overtakes the child. They need their caregiver to recognise this behaviour and help return them to control as they are unable to do so. A child with autism in the middle of the meltdown desperately needs help to regain composure.

As a caregiver of a child on the autism spectrum, you need to help the child learn to recognise when the meltdown is imminent. In this way, you can both work to avoid a meltdown. Remember the scary part mentioned above, think about an adult going out of control in a similar manner. The child needs to learn to recognise and learn to defuse this type of unacceptable behaviour before they reach adulthood and are able to do more damage.

Carefully observe your child if they are experiencing meltdowns. Does the meltdown have a brief period before onset where your child spaces out? Do they get totally uninvolved with their environment prior to a meltdown? What are the signals?

What to do!

When your child launches into the meltdown, remove them from any areas that could harm them or they could harm. Glass shelving and doors may become the target of an angry foot. Try to avoid having objects at hand to throw at people. Try to separate them from other people. Avoiding injury is the top priority during the meltdown.

Don't try to reason with them. They aren't listening and too much talking just adds to their sensory overload. There will be plenty of time to discuss it after they calm down. Remember, they aren't like a puppy and their behaviour doesn't have to be dealt with immediately. There are times you will have to physically restrain your child until the extreme violent feelings pass - for fear of them hurting himself or others. Wrapping your arms around them, while they are fighting to get away often works.

Handling a Meltdown in Public

Any parent who is raising a child with autism will tell you that meltdowns are very common in public places. Stores, shopping malls, fairs, the circus, wild birthday parties—anywhere there are a lot of people, activity, and noise increases the odds of a meltdown. Some activities cannot be avoided. Going on a grocery shopping trip can be an ordeal. There is always something spotted that will be a 'must have' in their mind.

For some reason, in public, many people feel it is their duty to point out (sometimes subtly and sometimes loudly) the mistakes you are making in raising your child. This is a common occurrence for parents of challenged children and especially if the child "expert" has no children! Just remember, stay calm and handle the situation in a manner to best fit your child's needs regardless of the disapproving looks or comments. You can't change the world but you can affect your child's feelings and learning experiences which is far more important than being concerned about those outside your circle of influence.

Parents of kids with special needs will have more peace of mind if they can develop a thicker skin. But regardless of how thick-skinned you are, an insult to your child cuts, and cuts deeply. Keep in mind that some people are receptive to learning and you may have a chance to educate someone about autism. You can lightly apologise for the disturbance and politely offer a brief explanation of "he is disabled," and drop it.

Defusing a Meltdown

About the only good way to handle a melt-down is to defuse it in its early stages. Sometimes that is much easier said than done, but it comes down to choosing your battles wisely.

Children on the autism spectrum, once they reach the age (which of course varies considerably!) where they understand their irritation and anger can lead to a meltdown, do not want that meltdown.

Things will irritate them and anger them; just like everyone else in the world has their triggers (autistics may have a couple more!). Unfortunately, they will not be able to control it once it reaches a certain point. Just remember, if your child is of average intelligence, you are dealing with someone who has the ability to stop the behaviour if it is caught in time. Everyone in regular contact with the child should learn the signals and be able to assist the child in their selected defusing techniques. The child needs to be taught techniques (they will not pick them up naturally) and practice them in calm situations. The goal is to not reach the point of no return. The person who can learn to recognize the early stages the soonest - is the autistic person themselves!.

Not only does the child need to be taught defusing techniques, they need to be taught how to recognize the early stages. The following items are ideas to try:

1. Recognize the signs that a meltdown is impending.
2. Usually there is a trigger before the meltdown—determine what the trigger is. (Although the trigger can and will change – frequently!)
3. Choose your battles wisely. If the trigger is fairly insignificant, you might seriously give them what they think they need. Don't go to war over a 'bag of peanuts' so to speak. Peanuts are small price to pay for avoiding a meltdown.
4. If the trigger is something that is not reasonable to resolve, try to distract the child or divert their attention. This may or may not work. They just may move their obsession to something new.
5. Always try to keep a new toy or puzzle with you for outings to restaurants, doctors' offices, church, etc. A handheld puzzle, can work well.
6. As you are working to distract your child, speak softly to them about their behaviour and let them know that it needs to stop. If you have done your homework during calm times and taught the child about acceptable and non-acceptable behaviour, use the same words you did earlier. Stay calm and try to limit the length of your lecture.
7. With a very young child or one who does not understand they need to help defuse a meltdown, it is more challenging. Distraction is still your best tool, reason will not work and probably only confuse the child more. Always remember, these children are already in sensory overload mode. Remaining calm is extremely important.

You will not always be successful in helping a child defuse. If the cycle progresses and he reaches the point-of-no-return, you have two options. You can ride it out or you can remove the child from the environment triggering the discomfort.

Even if you have gone through the steps above, the child may well choose to continue to meltdown of their own free will!

Sometimes it's a learning experience to ride it out. It is not the easiest thing to do, but keep the ultimate goal in mind. The goal is to help your child acquire long-term acceptable behaviour patterns.

Discipline

As a caregiver of a child on the autism spectrum, getting to know your child and their triggers is vital. It's a steep learning curve for both. Children must be guided into the proper way to behave. Discipline does not need to be an angry or negative experience. If handled properly, it can be positive and a learning experience for everyone.

- Positive reinforcement is much more effective than negative.
- Make the discipline fit the severity of the behaviour.
- Agree in advance on what behaviours are to be disciplined and what is to be overlooked.
- Parents must have a policy on smacking/spanking, understanding that to a child with autism it is just more violence and will further enhance a meltdown.
- Verbal and physical abuse is not an option. EVER.

It is a good idea for parents to have a talk about how they feel about discipline. If a child throws a tantrum or enters the meltdown mode and these decisions have not been made, it can be difficult to know how to handle it. When a child is in the middle of the meltdown, it is not the optimum time to be discussing child-rearing philosophies. The meltdown can be very different than what most people would consider a temper tantrum. They are caused by the same sort of things, but they may happen more easily, or for a much more unusual stimulus. In addition, it may not be that the child particularly wants something, so much as that the world has become too much, and they are simply lashing out against it.

Persistence, practice, patience, and consistency are the ingredients to succeed in teaching your autistic child acceptable social behaviours. When a child starts being able to head off their own meltdowns – What a relief!

Not that they will never happen anymore but it WILL happen less and less!

(Courtesy of <http://www.autism-causes.com>)

