

Sheffield Autism team



Managing Meltdowns

in children with ASD



Meltdown

What is a meltdown?

Often Meltdowns can be misunderstood as a tantrum.

Tantrum

When a child has a tantrum they are very aware of their surroundings and behave in way to attract attention and a reaction from others for personal gain.

Children will often shout, scream, throw themselves on the floor and name call.



Meltdown

When a child has a Meltdown they become very self absorbed and are very unaware or uninterested in others reactions.

Meltdowns can last much longer than a tantrum and have a greater physical effect on the child.

Once the Meltdown has progressed past a certain point there will be no reasoning with the child until they have completely calmed and regained control.

Often children will experience a Meltdown as a result of the situation, an inability to cope or lack of understand a request or desired outcome.

What causes a Meltdown?

Finding what triggers a child's Meltdown is vital in order to reduce if not avoid such situations reoccurring.

- * Sensory overloads -flashing lights
 - loud noises
 - bright lights
- * Inability to cope with new challenges/situations
- * Inability to communicate needs with others
- * Physical need - tired
 - hungry
- * Change in routine
- * Anxiety
- * Loss of control
- * Transitions
- * Inability to read social situations
- * Taking direction
- * Poor problem solving skills
- * Confrontation
- * Feeling embarrassed
- * Feeling overwhelmed
- * Sense of failure

Every child is individual as will be their triggers so it is important to monitor and record when your child is experiencing times of difficulty so hot spots can be identified.

Signs of an imminent Meltdown-Rumbling

Some symptoms can be very obvious where as some can be more subtle but will all play an important part in identifying that your child is struggling, and at this stage needs some help. Again individual to

- * clearing throat
- * biting lips/fingers
- * lowering voice

What can be learnt from a Meltdown?

As staff review the situation, look at what the triggers were, who was involved what was the outcome, could the Meltdown have been avoided, did staff respond accordingly.

When a plan has been agreed all staff involved with the child need to be aware of any changes to ensure continuity.

If the Meltdown has been a result of the child's lack of understanding or skills then these can be explored and taught at a separate time in the appropriate way to aid the child in the future.

For older children work can be carried out to help the child recognise and acknowledge their anxiety and stress levels and learn a variety of strategies and coping techniques so they can have more control and avoid such situations reoccurring.



- * Tensing muscles
- * Tapping feet
- * Grimacing
- * Complaining of feeling unwell
- * Withdrawing
- * Lashing out physically - hitting, kicking etc
- * Shouting, screaming
- * Threatening others



How to diffuse a Meltdown

Once you have identified the signs that your child is becoming distressed then it is at this point that you must intervene to try and diffuse the situation.

If your child is left for too long then their distress will progress into a full Meltdown which will have to run its course.

When a child is in a Meltdown it is very difficult if not impossible as any type of intervention will result in escalating the situation and the child's upset.

At this time it is essential that you work with what your child likes, is motivated by or interested in and to be aware of things that cause upset or anxiety as this will have an impact on the success of the distraction.

The distraction has to be strong enough to distract the child from what they are thinking, feeling at that time.



* **Remove** - distract by taking your child with you to run an errand, passing on a message, collecting resources any thing to remove the child from the environment for long enough for them to calm



* **Approach** - a member of staff may need to provide support by standing close to the child, their presence may be enough to reduce stress or anxiety (this may not work for all children, some children become more anxious if people become too close)



* **Use signals** - non verbal gestures can be used so that your child's anxiety or upset is acknowledged, they know you know they are struggling, this can be reassuring to the child. For older children a secret signal between adult and child can be established. Also this can be accompanied by a quick seat distresser such as a stress ball so the child is able to stay in their environment at their desk but reduce their anxiety.



* **Use routine** - Use your child's visual strategies to alleviate their concerns. You can use their timetable or a 'first and then' strip to break down and show clearly what will happen, also by using the symbols you can adapt the situation so that they can have access to a reward or preferred task also gain a sense of control



* **Walk and talk** - the aim is to remove the child from the situation in a controlled manner and give them opportunity to alleviate any stress or anxiety they have. While walking the child can chat all they want but the adult is to stay quiet, at this stage any attempt to converse will escalate the situation.

This strategy can be taught and supported by the use of visuals so the child becomes familiar with the strategy and finds it useful for them



* **Redirect** - Lead your child's attention and focus on to something different, adapt the task, desired outcome to make it more motivating, use their interests, preferences, strengths and skills.

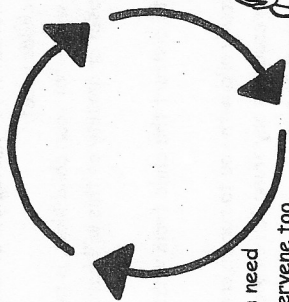


* **Provide a base** - Provide somewhere both at home or school which can be used as a place for your child to escape to if needed, a quiet environment which can contain a few things that will be specific to your child that help them to calm

If not diffused the child will increase become upset and anxious, during this stage children may become disinhibited, acting impulsively and emotional. These behaviours can be expressed externally - screaming, kicking, biting, hitting or internally where the child becomes withdrawn and unresponsive



Rumbling - Your child will start exhibiting signs of stress or anxiety



Recovery - Children need time to calm if you intervene too soon they will become anxious again. Children can be very tired after a Meltdown



Meltdown - At this stage your child will be consumed and your role now is to keep themselves and others safe and wait for the episode to subside



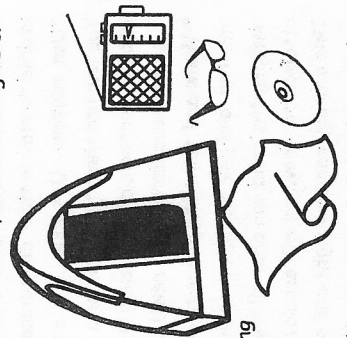
Intervention is needed at this stage

Useful equipment and resources

Each child is an individual and what they like and dislike are unique to them. Just as children have triggers which are personal each child will have specific strategies or activities which help to calm.

These may be useful

- * Trampoline
- * Body sock
- * Heated pad
- * Massage
- * Weighted blanket
- * Beanbag
- * Tent
- * Sunglasses
- * Ear deffender
- * Videos, DVD
- * Music
- * Books
- * Rocking, swinging, sliding, climbing



What does a Meltdown look like?

Your child can appear very distressed at this stage and although you may want to intervene this will now only aggravate and cause your child more stress.

During a Meltdown your child will go into a 'fight or flight' mode which will have an impact on how they behave. This can be demonstrated as

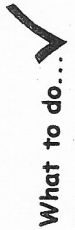
- * hitting
- * kicking
- * spitting
- * desire to run or leave
- * avoiding eye contact
- * covering ears/eyes
- * crying
- * screaming

What to do during a Meltdown?

This can be a very upsetting time for the child and adults involved.

It is essential to keep the child, peers and adults safe.

Often Meltdowns will happen in the classroom, children can be very aware after their Meltdown or their behaviour and feel embarrassed or extra sensitive during the recovery stage. It is advisable if possible to remove the child, if not possible have a system where the other children can go to a safe environment.



What to do...

- * Be aware, recognise and know the child's triggers
- * Have a knowledge of what calms the child
- * Remain calm
- * Inform the child of what you are doing in a low, quiet, non-confrontational way
- * Have a clear concise plan for when Meltdowns occur (this will need to be tailored to each individual child)



What not to do....

- * Use affection, this may upset a child further
- * Use raised voice
- * Use sarcasm
- * Use physical restraint, this will upset a child further
- * Ask questions
- * Ask for an apology
- * Confront

Recovery form a Meltdown

After a Meltdown children may be sullen, withdrawn, or exhausted. During this stage intervention is needed, to help them move on. Children are usually not ready for demanding tasks but need reintegrating back into class and their environment.

It is usually more successful if the child is given a choice so they gain a sense of being in control. Also the activity or task needs to be highly motivating (individual to each child) so the child will want to engage.

