



## What Causes Meltdowns?

### 1. Sensory Overload

Some individuals are affected by noise, others by smells, textures, or even lights. It can be any number of things; too much input leads to meltdowns. Screaming, rage and yelling in public – it can all happen when the senses get into a kind of traffic jam.

### 2. Social Challenges

Individuals on the autism spectrum meet with stressful social encounters on a regular basis. Of course, each person is unique, so they may experience more or less of this social confusion, but the stress can take its toll over the course of the day. Too much stress, and the boiling point can be reached.

### 3. Long Term Stress

Combine long term stressors of sensory overload and social challenges, along with all the regular hassles that make up daily living, it's not surprising that individuals on the spectrum may "lose it" over seemingly small situations.



## Quick Tips for Dealing with Meltdowns

### In the moment:

#### 1. Prevent Triggers

With time, it will become easier to identify what triggers your child's meltdowns. Once you have identified what triggers the meltdown, avoid them completely if possible.

#### 2. Create a Diversion

Divert your child's attention elsewhere! Sing a song, take a walk, or make a funny face – anything that will make your child laugh or distract him or her from the current situation.

#### 3. Remain Calm

You don't want to deal with another meltdown, so keep yourself calm. Seek a relaxing environment to encourage de-escalation.

#### 4. Provide Positive Reinforcements

As your child begins to calm down, provide positive verbal reinforcements. This will continue to encourage your child to relax and mellow out.

### Tools to help calm your child:

#### 1. Deep Pressure

Massages and weighted blankets can be used to ease your child back into a calm state. Therapeutic blankets are weighted to provide proprioceptive (awareness of one's body position in space) input to the body. To purchase an affordable weighted blanket, go here:

<http://www.sensacalm.com/weighted-blanket-therapy/>

#### 2. Alone Time

A pop-up tent can be effective in easing your child by providing alone time. You can also have soothing objects inside such as a bean-bag, soft blanket, a favorite book, etc. To purchase an affordable pop-up-tent, go here:

<http://alleviateautism.com/effective-products/>

#### 3. Quiet

Noise cancelling headphones eliminate auditory input and prevent sensory overload, which can exacerbate your child's meltdown. To evaluate brands of noise-cancelling headphones, go here:

<http://www.friendshipcircle.org/blog/2012/03/21/8-headphones->

### For future meltdowns:

#### 1. Do Research

Some triggers are more difficult to identify. When triggers not so obvious, your best option is to look for factors that resulted in your child's meltdown.

Make a list of things going on before your child's behavior took a turn for the worse and see if you can detect a pattern.

#### 2. Consider Diet

A Gluten-Free/Casein-Free diet and various biomedical treatments over time may result in a lessening of meltdown tendencies. To learn more about a Gluten-Free/Casein-Free Diet, go

<http://www.webmd.com/brain/autism/gluten-free-casein-free-diets-for-autism>

#### 3. Limit Sugar

If you believe a gluten-free/casein-free diet is too extreme for your child, still consider limiting the amount of sugar in his or her diet. Sugar and carbohydrates seem to increase anxiety if a child is on the autism spectrum.

#### 4. Be Prepared

- Be ready to remove your child from a situation whenever necessary. This is the best way to cope with a child who has become completely overwhelmed.

- Bring a few familiar toys, gadgets, or calming objects your child is comfortable with.
- If your child has sensory issues, bring along a weighted blanket or vest.

## Sensory Meltdown Toolkit

A sensory meltdown occurs when there is some type of discordance in at least one of the senses: smell, taste, sight (light or color), sound (either too much noise or an irritating type of noise), touch (texture or temperature), balance or spatial awareness. When a meltdown starts, it is very necessary to remove a person from the intolerable sensory input and to replace that with calming sensory input.

AT HOME	AWAY FROM HOME
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Sunglasses</b></li> <li>• <b>Baseball cap or wide-brimmed hat</b></li> <li>• <b>Ice-cold water bottle with a sport cap for sucking</b> (or an ice-cold juice box with a straw)</li> <li>• <b>Chewy snack, such as beef jerky, raisins or granola bar</b></li> <li>• <b>Hand lotion or lip balm</b></li> <li>• <b>A piece of soft fabric such as velour for rubbing on hands, or a stuffed animal</b></li> <li>• <b>Squeeze ball or koosh ball</b></li> <li>• <b>Soundproof headphones</b> (tip: you can purchase these for \$10 at WalMart)</li> <li>• <b>Change of clothes</b> (a long-sleeved t-shirt or sweatshirt and long sweatpants may be needed for tactile input)</li> <li>• <b>Carrier for child under 40 pounds such as Ergo or Beco carriers</b> (ergonomically designed to distribute child's weight to parent's hips)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Mini-trampoline</b></li> <li>• <b>Body Sock</b></li> <li>• <b>Silly putty, play dough or play slime</b></li> <li>• <b>Weighted blanket or vest</b></li> <li>• <b>Heating pad</b> (very calming when placed on the back of the neck)</li> <li>• <b>Back rub or massage seat</b></li> <li>• <b>Ear, hand or foot massage</b></li> <li>• <b>Rocking chair, swing, slide or climbing structure</b></li> <li>• <b>Handheld massage ball</b></li> <li>• <b>Wooden foot massager</b> (tip: keep by the dining room table to encourage sitting during dinner)</li> <li>• <b>Giant exercise ball for sitting and bouncing</b></li> <li>• <b>A favorite video or song</b> (works best for under-sensitive people, tip: highly recommended – the video, Biocursion, for its abstract images and music)</li> <li>• <b>Lavender essential oil or chamomile essential oil</b> (one drop behind the ears)</li> <li>• <b>Chamomile tea</b> (tip: mix in honey for taste)</li> <li>• <b>Massage jet for the bathtub</b> (Pick one up on Amazon.com)</li> <li>• <b>Deep hugs or sandwiching between two body pillows</b></li> </ul>

# How to Respond Effectively to Shorten an Autistic Child's Meltdown

How you handle each meltdown an autistic child has pretty much depends on the child and the surroundings. There are basics which can help you defuse autistic meltdowns quickly and much calmer, if you know them by heart. Methods used to calm down an autistic child during a meltdown can be used in schools, daycares, in the community, and at home.

## 1. Stay calm near the autistic child:

This autistic child may see YOU as a threat and respond in kind. So talk quietly and move slowly towards the autistic child. Never throw him to the ground for any reason as he will continue struggling for hours against you which could harm him and others. Any kind of assault on the autistic child will mean much longer times to get the child to trust you again. Once something negative has happened, you can bet the child with autism is going to be in fight or flee response mode.

## 2. Always say what you are going to do to the autistic child:

Never grab at the autistic child for any reason except to save his life from being hit by a car, etc. Grabbing at an autistic child will not only cause distrust but also can cause him to slam his head into the ground trying to escape your grasp. Instead walk slowly up to him and tell him that you need to hold his hand for safety. If you need the autistic child to go with you, tell him where you are going and why.

## 3. Allow the meltdown to happen in a safe location:

If a child with autism is in meltdown mode and is not harming himself or others, let him alone. It is good to have a safe place for the child with autism to let off steam and be loud. Have a corner with soft bedding and pillows so the child can thrash around. Tell the autistic child that this is where he can go when things get tough at school or home. This will stop many aggressive moments if you just let the autistic child go there, on his own, to hit a pillow or scream.

## 4. Help an autistic child calm down:

This information is especially helpful in crowded malls and out in the community. If your autistic child starts having a meltdown, gather him gently in your arms. Face him away from your body, his back to your stomach. This way when he is flinging his body around, he won't be able to scratch at your face, kick your legs, or hit you. To help him calm down, give him a tight, but not too tight, hug. Don't hurt him or it will only prolong the meltdown. Talk softly to him and let him know that as soon as he can calm down and let you know what is wrong, you can help. If the meltdown goes on for long, you can carry him in this position to the car. At night, when your autistic child is having trouble falling asleep, this hold lying in bed with your child will help him feel secure and safe. Your autistic child should have no red marks on his skin if you are doing the hold right. It is a gentle, secure hug, not a forceful, harsh hold.

## 5. Understand that the autistic child may not be able to speak during a meltdown:

You need to wait until the child has calmed down before he can tell you what is wrong. Autistic children may not be able to speak at all or have limited communication skills. But certainly they can't tell you during a meltdown. If you know the child well, look for things that normally set him off. Loud sounds, ticking from the clock, loud voices, harsh tones of voice, scary looking people, stern people, children screaming, babies crying, crowded conditions, bright lights, flashing lights, or many of these things together can cause a child

with autism to meltdown. Only you know your child best, what sets him off? Too many people touching him in a day? A certain person or stranger touching him unexpectedly?

Learn the signs of an upcoming meltdown like covering the face or ears and you can remove the child with autism away from whatever is upsetting to him before a meltdown starts. Understand that a child with autism may not be able to have fun at typical kid activities like a circus, zoo, or park. A birthday party may not be the best idea for an autistic child who is super-sensitive to sounds, lights, and commotion. Respond in a calm, gentle way to the autistic child's meltdowns and you will help him overcome them quicker.