

MELTDOWN

MANAGMENT





A Crash Course in Meltdown Management

Introduction

Meltdowns can possess an almost mythological quality: it's hard to believe that they even exist unless you've seen or experienced one firsthand. I used to call my son "Baby Hercules" because of his superhuman strength, speed and endurance during epic meltdowns.

But I knew he wasn't Hercules - he was a tiny, vulnerable child who needed my help. Desperately.

Behavior is communication, and every meltdown happens for a reason. Sometimes the stimulus is external, such as a change in routine or environment, and sometimes internal, such as physical or emotional discomfort. It can take quite a bit of detective work to uncover the cause for a meltdown, especially when a person is nonverbal or has limited use of language.

Carefully observing my little Hercules, I saw that he reacted to different situations in different ways for different reasons. I had to lead him back to the developmental and coping skills that he should have learned in infancy. Through trial and error, I figured out how to manage his sensory environment so that the world became more bearable for him.

Misinformation about meltdowns is plentiful, but with practice, meltdowns can become less frequent, less intense and shorter in duration. The chapters collected in this e-book represent the research and personal experience that I've gathered over the years in my efforts to help my son.

It's not possible to eliminate meltdowns completely, of course. I've even seen adults under stress go into meltdown! By encouraging self-regulation and preventing situations from escalating, we can make life more livable together.



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What Is Self-Regulation?

Self-regulation is one of those odd things that most people are unable to define, but **EVERYONE** notices when it's missing.

A person may be unable to self-regulate if:

- He prevents himself from falling asleep by slapping his own face or thrashing his limbs around even when he can barely keep his eyes open.
- She giggles to herself, which escalates into uncontrollable laughter or crying for a long period of time in an inappropriate situation, and cannot stop herself.
- He doesn't understand the difference between feeling hungry or full. He doesn't recognize the feeling of needing to use the bathroom until it's almost too late.
- Mild stressors, such as temporarily misplacing a toy, send her into a panic.

Does any of that sound familiar to you?

Oh, I've got colorful stories to tell about each one of those symptoms – but I digress.



So...what is Self-Regulation?

In his book [*The Developing Mind*](#), Daniel Siegel defines self-regulation as “the way the mind organizes its own functioning...fundamentally related to the modulation of emotion...Emotion regulation is initially developed from within interpersonal experiences in a process that establishes self-organizational abilities.”

See? Clear as mud.

I'll break it down for you:

1. Self-regulation is a cognitive process that begins in infancy.

Every time a caregiver responds appropriately to an infant's cries, vocalizations, gestures, eye contact or other nonverbal communication, the infant is learning cause and effect. The infant learns to modify his or her own behavior so that basic needs are met.

2. Self-regulation is an “executive function” of the brain.

Individuals with neurological conditions such as [ADHD](#), [autism](#), seizure disorders, traumatic brain injury, and even those undiagnosable folks who aren't quite neurotypical may find difficulty with self-regulation.

3. Self-regulation is intertwined with emotional development.

We all feel satisfaction when our needs are met, and some level of distress when we are not fulfilled. Most people learn how to soothe themselves during times of distress. Most people also learn when it is appropriate to express or suppress different types of emotion.

4. Self-regulation is intertwined with social development.

This means that every time a person interacts with another person, new social cues are absorbed, and behavior subtly adapts to new people and situations. The psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who was one of the first researchers to study self-regulation, wrote, “Through others we become ourselves.”



Regulation-Dysregulation-Regulation

What can you do if someone whom you love is in a constant state of dysregulation?

Remember: this is a learned behavior, and no one learns it alone.

The pattern for learning self-regulation is always the same, and always has been for the history of humanity. We start in a state of equilibrium with another person: some type of interaction, movement or a quiet state. Then a challenge is introduced, and we become imbalanced. Finally, we find our way back to a state of regulation.

Here's a beginner's list of ways to teach self-regulation:

1. Play a game that involves starting out slow, going faster and faster, then slowing down again, such as patty-cake or singing nursery rhymes. Fingerplays like "The Itsy Bitsy Spider" also work well at changing speeds.
2. If your child will walk with you, make it a game for the child to match your pace. Give the child plenty of time to adjust to your speed. Start off walking slowly, then walk quickly, jog and walk slowly again. My husband just reminded me that we used to surprise our son by stopping suddenly and waiting for him to notice – our son thought this was hilarious.
3. Using chalk outdoors or masking tape indoors, write instructions on the ground for different types of movement to do with your child. For example, write "Walk," then 8-10 feet later write "Hop," then "Crawl," then "Run," then "Skip," and finally "Walk" again. Even better if there's a happy surprise at the end of the walk: I prefer to end this game with the instruction, "Kiss."
4. Many traditional kids' games are based on self-regulation, such as "Simon Says," "Red Rover," "Red Light, Green Light" and "Mother May I?"
5. Board games or simple collaborative games also provide an opportunity for self-regulation, by requiring turn-taking and careful observation of other players' movements.
6. Community-based outings are another great way to teach self-regulation. This is one of the reasons my family loves to go to amusement parks: a certain type of behavior is expected while waiting in line, then we get to experience the excitement of a ride together, and we calm ourselves as we choose another ride and go wait in line for it.



7. Taking a break from a preferred activity and doing something different, such as Brain Gym or Bal-A-Vis-X exercises, then returning to the preferred activity, is excellent practice for self-regulation.

8. The book [Relationship Development Intervention with Young Children](#) by Steven Gutstein and Rachelle Sheely has a chapter full of self-regulation exercises for children with special needs.

When my first son was little, the only way he could fall asleep and remain asleep was to press his ear right up to my heartbeat. Unable to self-soothe, he depended on the external regulation of my heartbeat to calm himself. I often woke up with the shape of his tiny ear perfectly imprinted on my chest.

Eventually, as his receptive language progressed, I was able to teach him how to fall asleep on his own by describing the feeling of relaxing muscles in the simplest language possible. Through repeated interaction over many years, he learned how to slow himself down enough to feel tired and to recognize the feeling of drowsiness.

But his ear is still stamped upon my heart, a memory of the lesson he taught me about our shared humanity.



How to Manage and Prevent a Temper Tantrum

A few weeks ago, I asked another Friendship Circle parent if she could suggest some writing topics for me. She responded without hesitating, “I’d love the following article: **How to handle meltdowns on play dates and not scare away the other kid or parent forever.**” I smiled, because I myself have been in that situation many times. And the answer is:

It’s complicated.

I don’t have any academic degrees in psychology or biology. I’m the mother of a child with autism. I’ve tried countless approaches to managing the outbursts, and I’m still trying new approaches at every opportunity. I try to be patient, but I am only human. I get upset, too.



Happily, I've found many techniques that work for my child – even on playdates! – And they may work for other children, too. Over the years I've collected my research and experiences to create my own crash course in meltdown management.

Rule #1: It's not about you.

This is about helping your child. The purpose of managing a child's meltdowns is to reduce their frequency, duration and severity by modeling respect and empathy.

Rule #2: Determine the motivation for the meltdowns.

I have observed three basic types in my child, although I know that there are other varieties out there — for example, I do not have experience with rages. My three categories are: temper tantrums, sensory meltdowns and panic attacks. Each type has different causes and requires different treatment.

Causes for Temper Tantrums

Temper tantrums are caused by feelings of powerlessness and loss of control. No one, not even an influential adult, can control everything all the time; but it's a tough lesson for a small person with no authority over his or her environment. I have noticed that temper tantrums occur most frequently during the month before a child makes a significant developmental leap of some kind, such as learning to walk or speak in sentences or dress herself or read sight words.

Some children are able to turn their tears on and off at will during tantrums, which can be infuriating for parents. Most pediatricians recommend leaving a child alone in a safe place such as a crib or playpen during a tantrum, then talking to the child about it afterwards.

However, I found this method to be counterproductive and dangerous for my child. It was counterproductive because it diminished my son's trust in me – he felt betrayed and abandoned, which escalated and prolonged the tantrums. The tantrums also



became more frequent. It was dangerous because once my child got an adrenaline rush, the fight or flight instinct took over, and no crib, playpen or closed door could contain him. He was in danger of injuring himself.

An Emotional Sneeze

My eyes were opened to the developmental necessity of temper tantrums when I read the article [“Cry For Connection”](#) by Patty Wipfler in the November/December 2002 issue of [Mothering magazine](#). Here the author compares a tantrum to “an emotional sneeze — a natural reaction meant to clear out foreign matter.” She proposes witnessing and validating the child’s feelings while keeping the child safe from harming himself. She suggests moving the child to a quiet place, not as a punishment, but for privacy and dignity, with the parent remaining close at all times.

Temper Tantrums in Public

In a public place, this usually means going back to your car or to a quiet side of a building outdoors. At a playdate, it would mean going home or asking your friends to come back on another day. Self-confidence is the trick to not frightening away friends or strangers in this situation. At home, the best place for a tantrum is in a bedroom where a child can pound and stomp on a mattress.

But, wait! Isn’t this the fast track to spoiling my child and teaching him to manipulate me?

In her book [Discipline Without Distress](#), Judy Arnall writes, “Tantrums are not misbehavior, nor are they abnormal or in need of correction. Children punished for temper tantrums learn not to express feelings. They learn how to suppress them, which is not healthy for the body or mind.” She advises parents to “stay with your no,” gently and firmly.

Write a Story

I have taken this idea further by helping my autistic son write about his tantrums, starting when he was 2 years old (his hyperlexia gave him the ability to spell and type out words as a toddler). His emotion stories are in the style of social stories, written in the first person using simple language. Each story starts with the problem and ends with the resolution. This was his first story:



Once upon a time, I was crying. I was sad.
Mommy gave me a hug, a kiss and a snuggle.
Mommy sang a song.
I became happy again.

We read and re-read that story day after day. We kept adding more stories to the collection over the years as my son recalled the details of more temper tantrums. The stories became his autobiography, and he began to develop empathy for others through his stories. My son's temper tantrums had real meaning to him, and were crucial to his progress in language and social skills.

Rule #3: Breathe.

Take a few minutes to calm yourself and fulfill your emotional needs. Then re-schedule that playdate.



Sensory meltdown at my cousin's wedding in 2004

26 Sensory Integration Tools for Meltdown Management

Sensory meltdowns are usually associated with autism and other neurological conditions, but anyone can become over stimulated in certain conditions. Like classic tantrums, sensory meltdowns can be managed by modeling respect and empathy, and searching for the cause of the meltdown. But different types of meltdowns require different treatments. In my experience, sensory meltdowns are the easiest type to prevent, but only if a person is equipped with the right tools at the right moment.



Sensory Meltdowns

I love to attend wedding ceremonies, but I have always hated wedding receptions – even my own wedding reception. At my cousin’s wedding reception in 2006, I was the guest who asked the DJ to turn down the volume on the amplifiers. At another cousin’s wedding in 2004, my family didn’t even get inside the reception hall because of the noise level — we had to leave immediately after the family photos were taken outdoors.

I am highly sensitive to sound, light, taste and movement, but my son is even more sensitive. I know that if my ears are buzzing and my head is hurting, then my son is experiencing even more pain than I am. After the pain come nausea, dizziness, confusion, trembling and panic. That’s meltdown territory.

The Role of Self-Regulation

Both sensory-seeking and sensory-avoidant individuals may spiral into a sensory meltdown due to difficulty with [self-regulation](#). Co-authors Karen Smith and Gouze reflect on the role of self-regulation in their book [The Sensory Sensitive Child:](#) “Impaired processing produces impaired output...Difficulties with emotion regulation and self-calming only exacerbate the dysfunctional patterns of information processing, **making it less and less likely that the child will be able to correct the problem himself.**” The good news is that a person can learn how to work through and divert sensory meltdowns *with loving support*.

Sensory Integration Toolkits

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. I also include meltdowns caused by low blood sugar levels in this category, because the lowered blood sugar heightens all sensitivities.

When a meltdown starts, it is necessary to remove a person from the intolerable sensory input and to replace that with calming sensory input.



Away from Home

I suggest carrying a portable sensory toolkit for situations that may be stressful. Depending on an individual's unique sensitivities, some items in the kit may include:

1. Sunglasses
2. Baseball cap or wide-brimmed hat
3. Ice-cold water bottle with a sport cap for sucking (or an ice-cold juice box with a straw)
4. Chewy snack, such as beef jerky, raisins or granola bar
5. Hand lotion or lip balm
6. A piece of soft fabric such as velour for rubbing on hands, or a stuffed animal
7. Squeeze ball or koosh ball
8. Soundproof headphones (we bought ours for \$10 in the gun section at Wal-Mart)
9. Change of clothes (a long-sleeved t-shirt or sweatshirt and long sweatpants may be needed for tactile input)
10. Carrier for child under 40 pounds such as Ergo or Beco carriers (ergonomically designed to distribute child's weight to parent's hips – when my son was 4 years old, he said it felt like a big hug from me every time he rode in it)

At Home

When my son has a sensory meltdown at home, usually at the end of a busy day, I bring out the heavy artillery:

1. Mini-trampoline
2. Body Sock
3. Silly putty, play dough or play slime
4. Weighted blanket (ours is 8 pounds with a soft flannel backing) or vest
5. Heating pad (very calming when placed on the back of the neck)
6. Back rub or massage seat
7. Ear, hand or foot massage
8. Rocking chair, swing, slide or climbing structure
9. Handheld massage ball



10. Wooden foot massager (we keep ours under the dining room table to encourage sitting during dinner)
11. Giant exercise ball for sitting and bouncing
12. A favorite video or song (works best for under-sensitive people – I recommend the video [Biocursion](#) for its abstract images and music)
13. Lavender essential oil or chamomile essential oil (one drop behind the ears)
14. Chamomile tea (I mix in a drop of honey for my son)
15. Massage jet for the bathtub (Pick one up on [Amazon.com](#))
16. Deep hugs or sandwiching between two body pillows

At Playdates and in School

Many of these items can be incorporated into playdates or even a school classroom to prevent meltdowns. A caregiver must explain to the child during a calm moment why these tools are necessary and how to request them. Different tools will work on different days as the sensory needs change.

Over time, the child will learn how to use the tools when needed. A person is successfully self-regulating when he or she is able to choose the correct tools for sensory integration. As sensory integration develops, a person will be able to tolerate increased sensory input. My son usually calms down when I have him lie on the sofa with a weighted blanket, heating pad for his neck/back and an ice-cold water bottle to drink.



Sensory-smart at Cedar Point in 2011

What about Sensitive Adults?

Teens and adults may reject some of these tools for being too childish. Many adults take up sensory-based hobbies such as old-fashioned bread-making or yoga classes to manage their sensory needs. Some adults give and receive massages with trusted friends - I've found that just massaging hands and feet is usually enough to avert a meltdown.



Teenagers often choose music for sensory integration, and it's common to see teens walking around with their iPods. As for myself, you will find me on almost any day of the year snacking on dried cherries and wearing a velour sweat suit with dark sunglasses.

Exquisitely Sensitive

In his book [Empowered Autism Parenting](#), William Stillman writes, “The phrase ‘inherently gentle and exquisitely sensitive’ may best describe the autistic experience.” I know that this is an excellent description of my own son. It reminds me of a duet titled “[Sensitive](#)” recorded by actor-musician Jack Black for the [Miracle Project](#) in 2009. This song playfully captures the urgency of a sensory meltdown, the need for compassion and the exquisite sensitivity of the human mind. Working through a sensory meltdown is always a duet for the caregiver and the person who needs support.



How to manage and prevent a panic attack

This morning someone asked me if I was excited about decorating my family's new home for the holidays. I shrugged and answered, "I'm not into decorating. I'm into kids not crying."

Holidays are prime time for meltdowns. I think that different types of meltdowns look and sound different from each other. If you look at the photos accompanying each chapter in the *Crash Course in Meltdown Management*, you'll see what I mean.



Classic temper tantrum

A classic temper tantrum is caused by a feeling of powerlessness. Big tears come cascading down in an explosion of frustration, sadness and anger amid cries of “NO!”

Sensory Meltdown

A sensory meltdown happens when the human brain has difficulty processing one or more types of sensory input. I hear whining and pained cries, and I see my son’s physical reactions such as covering his ears, hiding his eyes, recoiling from touch or gagging on a food’s texture. He often starts speaking in metaphors or saying things that don’t make logical sense during a sensory meltdown.

Panic Attack

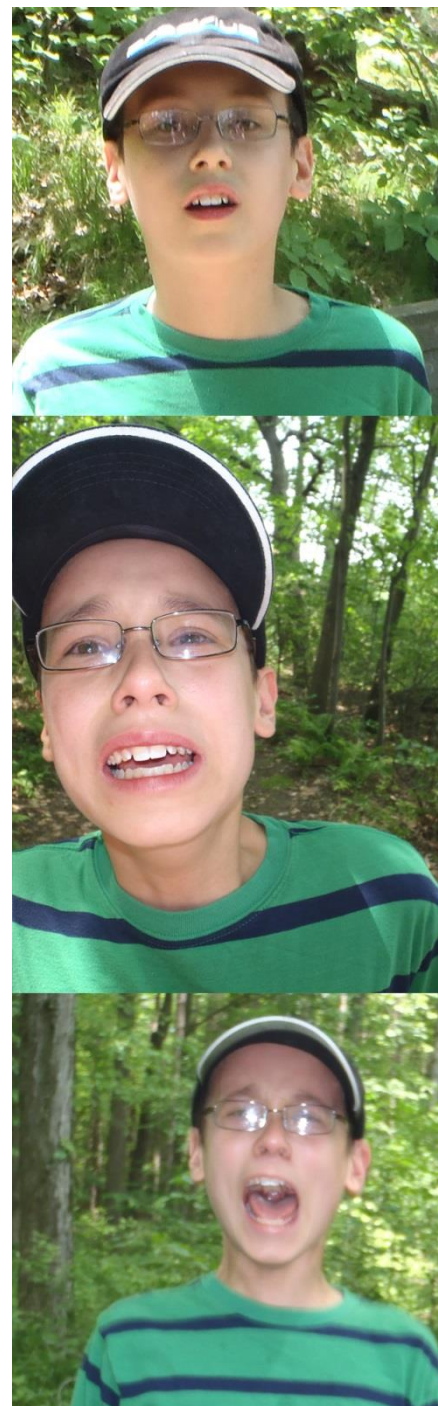
When my son has a panic attack, he seems to be incapable of speech and his scream is high-pitched and sharp, like in a horror movie. His eyes are wide with fear. He starts hyperventilating and trembling right away. He will either try to run away or fight.

Here I will define the characteristics of panic attacks, and propose at-home treatments that have been successful for my family.

Panic Attacks

If you or someone you love has a history of panic attacks, I first want to reach out to you in compassion and peace. You will need inner strength to face this issue. I know that the tendency among family, friends and even some professionals is to minimize this emotional experience or to blame the caregiver.

Eventually you will have to seek professional guidance to overcome the chronic anxiety and phobias that lead to panic attacks; the purpose of this article is to provide basic tools for relieving the anxiety enough so that you can seek the outside help that your family needs.



From Calm to Gone!



My Son's First Evaluation

My son had his first evaluation with an early intervention team when he was 19 months old. The school building had a confusing polygonal layout and weird orange fluorescent lights, both of which made my son nervous. We had to wait in the hallway for several minutes before the evaluation, which only increased his anxiety. When I finally carried him into the evaluation room, I quickly scanned the unfamiliar faces and surroundings.

Before any introductions were made, I said, "Block the door." I sat down on the floor with my son. He immediately vomited, then ran screaming to the door. He slipped right past the physical therapist, opened the door by himself, and ran down the hallway before I could catch him. When I carried him back to the room, I told the physical therapist, "You didn't block the door."

I held my son tightly and pressed my face to his as I whispered his favorite prayer over and over, since this was the best way to calm him. The team leader gently asked me if this was typical behavior for my son. I almost choked on the word "Yes." My son qualified for all of the services offered by the early intervention team, except for physical therapy. But it's not possible to deliver services to a child who has a panic attack at every therapy session; the anxiety must be addressed in a secure environment before moving on to therapeutic services.

Agoraphobia

In my son's episode, he experienced a panic attack caused by [agoraphobia](#). Agoraphobia is a common phobia, defined as the fear of being in a situation from which escape is difficult (such as an open public space or a crowded place), or the fear of having a panic attack in such a situation.

A panic attack is an episode of intense fear with a sudden onset, and its symptoms peak within 10 minutes of the start. The episode usually tapers off after about 30 minutes. A panic attack may be caused by a phobia or a build-up of generalized anxiety, or it may come without warning.

In her book *The Way I See It*, autism advocate Temple Grandin reports being awakened from sleep by panic attacks. The [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual](#) (DSM-IV), a standard reference for physicians and psychologists in the USA, identifies the following symptoms for panic attacks:

1. Palpitations, pounding heart, or accelerated heart rate



2. Sweating
3. Trembling or shaking
4. Sensations of shortness of breath or smothering
5. Feeling of choking
6. Chest pain or discomfort
7. Nausea or abdominal distress
8. Feeling dizzy, unsteady, lightheaded, or faint
9. Feelings of unreality or being detached from oneself
10. Fear of losing control or going crazy
11. Fear of dying
12. Numbness or tingling sensations
13. Chills or hot flushes

The onset of a Panic Attack

I can always tell when my son is about to have a panic attack, because the top of his head will suddenly become very hot. This is caused by the release of the stress hormone [norepinephrine](#) into his bloodstream as a direct result of the “fight or flight” response. This response is an instinct that allows an animal to save its life when danger is perceived; but in a panic attack, danger is misinterpreted by the brain, and the “fight or flight” instinct takes over when there is no obvious threat.

Treatments for Panic Attacks

Panic attacks may occur at any age; but according to the [Mayo Clinic](#), they often start in late adolescence or early adulthood, and are more common in women than in men. Panic attacks are associated with increased risk of depression, substance abuse, self-injury or suicide if untreated. That is why it is important to seek medical help as soon as possible.

There are many treatments for panic attacks, including:

- prescription medication
- nutritional supplements



- family counseling
- individual psychotherapy
- relaxation training
- cognitive-behavioral therapy

Cognitive-behavioral therapy

Cognitive-behavioral therapy is the type that I've seen most widely recommended by physicians. It addresses the thought processes behind the emotions and teaches adaptability in the face of adversity. The book [Your Anxious Child](#) by John Dacey and Lisa Fiore offers a practical, flexible method based on cognitive-behavioral therapy.

Here I will summarize the co-authors' four-step approach with some of my own variations:

1. Calm the nervous system

Practice your favorite calming method until it comes automatically to you. Then the method will be available to you in your moment of need.

- Learn how to relax using breathing techniques such as [Diaphragmatic Breathing](#) or yoga breathing exercises.
- Use [sensory integration](#) to soothe the nervous system.
- Get plenty of aerobic exercise. I'm not talking about doing 10 sit-ups before breakfast. Work your way up to an intensive 30 or 45 minute workout four times per week. I love to tell the story of the day my son and I completed a 5K run/walk, and as soon as we arrived home, my son headed straight for our mini-trampoline for several minutes of vigorous jumping. The 5K was not enough to burn off his excess adrenaline!
- Massage therapy
- Take turns with your child to imagine the worst anxiety-provoking situations. Let the hypothetical situations become as silly as possible.
- Journal about fear and anxiety. See [this article](#) for some creative writing ideas.
- Visualization of positive imagery works best with children over the age of 3 or adults. Maureen Garth's books [Starbright](#), [Moonbeam](#) and [Earthlight](#) are packed with simple, beautiful visualizations for children.



- Meditation, prayer, chanting and singing are all well-documented methods for calming the nervous system. My son used to request long, repetitive prayers whenever he was upset.

2. Create an imaginative plan

- Recognize other points of view and look at the problem from a different perspective. When my son had a phobia of bells, I bought him several different types of bells to play with. He was able to handle these without fear on his own terms and to control their sound or lack of sound. This casual exploration of another perspective was what helped him overcome that phobia.
- Be honest with yourself about your abilities and limitations.
- Push yourself to try new experiences to gain new insights, even if it is frightening. My son developed a phobia of school buildings after a negative preschool experience. I started taking him to various school playgrounds on days when the schools were closed. I took him to help me vote in every local election, because the neighborhood elementary school was our polling place. When we enrolled him at a different preschool, I started him in school for only 10 minutes on the first day while I stood just outside the classroom door where he could see me. I added 5 minutes to the length of time he spent in preschool every day, and I gradually removed myself. I was providing him with emotional security while he faced his fears — and it worked! No tears were shed.
- Develop family rituals to relieve anxiety. A ritual is any procedure that is deliberately and regularly performed, such as mealtimes, birthdays or Saturday morning routines. The whole family will benefit.

3. Persist in the face of obstacles and failure

The biggest obstacle in overcoming anxiety is that it usually gets worse before it gets better. Dacey and Fiore affirm that our creative imaginations will triumph if we persist.

4. Evaluate and adjust the plan

Keep track of emotions during the treatment process. If something is not working, find another way.

My son is twelve years old now, and he still struggles with some types of anxiety. But he has worked through all of his phobias, except for his fear of dogs, and he rarely has panic attacks now. He's included in general education classes, and he's a fun-loving,



hard-working, deeply spiritual child. He doesn't realize that he is an inspiration to those who know and love him. The point of treating panic attacks is to increase a person's quality of life and ability to function in everyday life. In this respect my son is a success. I pray that others may know this success, too.

Prevention Summary

Preventing meltdowns is a heck of a lot easier than trying to stop one after it starts.

Preventing Temper Tantrums

To prevent temper tantrums, give some control over small matters to the child. For example, my younger son used to resist putting on pajamas at bedtime. I discovered that if I allowed him to choose his own pajamas, he was much more cooperative. He often selects deliberately mismatched pajama shirts and pants, which is fine with me! Stating expectations and family rules at the beginning of the day is another way to prevent tantrums. After all, everyone needs limits. Because temper tantrums are an important part of emotional development, writing personalized "emotion stories" about tantrums – and reading those stories often! – can be another prevention method.

Preventing Sensory Meltdowns

Sensory meltdowns can be prevented by creating a sensory-friendly environment at home, and carrying a sensory toolkit whenever you are away from home. This will help a sensitive person develop tolerance for new types of sensory input and learn how to self-regulate.

Preventing Panic Attacks

Panic attacks can be prevented by identifying the triggers for anxiety as well as helpful lifestyle changes, such as habitual exercise or creative expression: visual or performing arts, woodwork or metalwork, jewelry making, music, writing poetry or fiction. Creativity is an antidote for the rigidity in personal habits that often accompanies anxiety. Calming routines, such as diaphragmatic breathing, prayer, guided imagery or exercise, can be built into everyday life so that they are available when a panic attack is imminent. Review and adapt your strategy as necessary.

Behavior is communication, and communication is a two-way street. Being responsive to all communication attempts is the only way to maintain a constant flow of feedback. Therefore, communication is a type of prevention. Prevention is the key to meltdown management.



What Parents Do During a Meltdown

“Just calm down.”

“Snap out of it!”

“Stop screaming!”

“What is wrong with you? Are you high on something?”

“Focus.”

“Pull yourself together!”

“Serenity now!”

“Act normal for a change!”

We all know the wrong things to say during a loved one's meltdown. But what's the right thing to say or do – or is it better to say and do nothing during a meltdown?



This has been on my mind ever since my 6 year old son told me to remain quiet and calm during his older brother's meltdown. "Talking makes him more upset, Mom."

What to do during a meltdown

But I have the urge to **DO** something, *anything*, to help my child when he is deeply distressed. So I reflected upon [what has worked for my family over the years](#), and then I asked other families what they do during meltdowns.

Some of the common threads of these discussions are:

- find a safe location
- maintain a calm presence near the person who is having a meltdown
- allow enough time for the meltdown to run its course

Here's what other parents had to say:

Amelia W.: I feel like we're still trying to figure it out. For the most part he does not want to be touched and will sometimes bury himself under his cushions in the playroom. Tonight however, we played our new game. We go upstairs where we sleep-two queens pushed together on the floor- and throw or push pillows and blankets at each other. I also toss him on the bed and squish him. So essentially we practice heavy work and deep pressure.

Natalia E.: Do we know what initiated the tantrum? Where are we? What do we know from experience – or what can we observe going forward- that helps **our** child? I benefited hugely from reading [“How to Talk So Your Kids Will Listen and Listen So Your Kids Will Talk.”](#) I'm sure nothing works for every child and in every situation, but I had great response when I was able to figure out what had instigated the tantrum and acknowledged it without trying to fix it. "It looks like you're sad that your brother got on the bus and you have to stay home." Less talking is more.

Let the child correct you if they can/wish, if you get the "reason" wrong. Don't try to fix anything in the moment. Don't worry about what people around you think. All easier said than done in the early days.

Two more book suggestions, both by [Judith Simon Prager](#): [Owie Cadabra 's Verbal First Aid For Kids](#) and [Verbal First Aid: Help Your Kids Heal From Fear and Pain – And Come Out Strong](#). Great scripts for when a person is injured, which can be modified for other situations.



You asked about what to say, but I have to mention that what helped us most is homeopathy. Once we found the right one, I could give a dose of remedy and a tantrum would stop instantly. With long-term homeopathic treatment, the meltdowns vanished. Certainly, part of it was growth and maturity, but the effect of the remedy was too prompt and dramatic to discount.

Susan L.: For me....staying calm myself and silently praying helps tremendously...I also use an essential oil blend (spruce, rosewood, blue tansy and frankincense) on my son.

Marla B.: Hardest thing to do is stay calm yourself when your kid melts down. But they feed off your energy. I try to go into efficient emergency crisis mode and turn off my stress emotions and go on autopilot. For Liza, although rare, this includes letting her know I'm physically in charge. Holding her arms firmly but not aggressively, so she can't bite herself or me! And saying calming things for both get and me. For example, "Liza, we can do this. We can get through this together. Try to calm down. Take deep breaths."

Amy S.: Washing hands in warm water or a bath when possible with Pascalite Clay, firm hugs with downward back rubs, singing and rocking while gently running my fingers along his face, jumping, high protein snacks as soon as a small upset occurs and every two hours regularly throughout the day, a cooler room (often heat adds to meltdowns), quiet places (so many times we've sat in the car for hours to just calm down), nature walks, looking at relaxing pictures, and harp music.

Lynn F.: We can be upset at home and have time to calm down in a separate room or next to me. The hardest part for us is getting so upset that we want to 'lash out' at those around us for how we feel.

Jacklyn B.: My 2 year old says the same statements over and over. I find holding her close and repeating what she's saying, letting her know I hear her, really helps her to calm down a bit. There are definitely times when she makes it clear that she does not want to be held or consoled, and I try to stay close by and available for when she is. For me, the hardest part is keeping myself centered and cool when her meltdowns are exceedingly long.

Ann Marie D.: I just tell George that I am walking away. If we're in public, I do the best I can.

Vera S.: For my daughter it's cold water with a straw. It's like magic! It doesn't really help with regular ol' crying, but she can very easily go from crying to hyperventilate-y. A



cold drink of water sort of resets her breathing and physically cools down her sweaty self. The straw is just because it's hard for her not to spill when she's upset.

Jay P.: I suggest dancing in a group setting will make a world of a difference. In our case, it always works.

Kay Z.: Knowing what started the meltdown can help calm it fairly quickly. What works for me is validating how the child feels. Offer validation by always acknowledging what the child says. For example, if he is upset because of a toy he might want, and it not the best time to give, I would say, "I'm upset because I really really want that toy and I can't have it now." My verbal and non-verbal are in sync as well. When I do this, I am usually able to achieve eye contact with Seth. I then use this opportunity to offer a hug (not too tight), some water, we could sing a song that he likes (usually an action to occupy his hands and feet, this would help him to avoid biting himself and me). If we're at home, I would play calming music and rub his back gently, I would also rock him very gently. I try to avoid giving a lot of verbal input, since this can help to upset Seth again. I just follow his lead once I have gained some sort of engagement. Sometimes he would go off in a corner by himself, I would follow (but not too closely behind) and sit there a short distance away. Or he would get his favorite toy, I would sit and play a nice little game with him. Whatever he decides to do at the time, I would just join him and I find that helps a bit.

Maureen L.: For us, there is no one thing that always helps or always works. I listen to my gut in the midst of a meltdown and just try various things. Sometimes going outside in the cold in winter helps (or feeling the cold air from the freezer in summer), sometimes reflecting his feelings helps ("you are really upset because you wanted to put the straw in your cup!"), but sometimes redirecting him away from his feelings helps ("whoa! it rained earlier; there are some big puddles outside waiting for us!").

Sometimes deep pressure helps, but often I can't get close enough to him to offer that pressure (he'll fight me off). We try classical music, and if it's summer, putting him in sand usually helps (sensory input). We've tried baths, but he fights us too much. Usually for us, it's a matter of just waiting for him to calm down a little, offering loving words while he's going through it, and then when he's calmed down a bit, we can then offer more help like deep pressure, massages, baths, feeling slime, spinning, swinging, etc., in order to help him calm down fully.



7 Tips for Planning a Sensory-Friendly Birthday Party



7 Tips for Planning a Sensory-Friendly Birthday Party

Here I am planning a birthday party for my son who has special needs, and the blogger Autism Daddy just posted about the [joy of attending an autism-only birthday party](#).

That got me thinking about what makes a birthday party sensory-friendly. Etiquette and tradition may be bent, broken or flushed down the toilet at an sensory-friendly party.



How to plan a Sensory-Friendly Birthday Party

1. A theme your child likes

The theme at most sensory-friendly parties is “have fun without having a meltdown.” I have never personally planned a theme-based party, but it can be very comforting to focus on the birthday person’s special interest, such as [Legos](#), [trains](#) or [horses](#).

2. Think about your guests

My kids usually ask for a small low-key party with just the four of us: my husband, our two sons and me. We can spread out gifts and family activities over the course of a week so that the birthday is not overwhelming at any time.

Autism Daddy likes the idea of inviting only families from his local autism community. This allows parents and children to relax and be themselves.

My son receives a lot of support from typical peers at school, so this year he asked to invite his [Circle of Friends](#) in addition to a few of his buddies from group speech therapy. All of the guests should be people who will be very understanding and compassionate when the birthday person needs to take a break — even if the birthday person needs to stop the party abruptly and send everyone home.

3. Find a familiar location

A birthday party is not a good time to introduce a new environment to the birthday person. For this reason, home is usually the best location for an sensory-friendly party. In my son’s case, I knew that he would run away from guests and hide in his room if the party was at home, so I suggested having the party at a place that he already knew and enjoyed. He chose the local bowling alley.

Other fun places for a party are a [science museum](#), [Build-A-Bear shop](#), [craft studio](#) or local park.

4. Choose favorite activities

Stick with birthday activities that are already familiar and enjoyable. This is the right time for everyone to indulge in all of the birthday person’s preferred activities. My son chose the bowling alley for his party because he likes the structure of the game. My son enjoys cooking, and he had a great time making pizzas at a friend’s house. One time at our house, we mixed up a big bowl of orange [play slime](#) and let the kids get messy.



5. An alternative to treats

Some parents notice behavior changes when their children consume certain types of foods. I do my best to steer my kids away from high-sugar foods with artificial food coloring, even at parties. I offer carrot sticks and fruit before the cake comes out. Back when my son couldn't eat cake due to texture issues, we substituted an ice cream cup or Italian ice instead of cake.

I'm careful to offer food only after a physical activity has been completed, because I also know what happens when a child with a full stomach and low muscle tone exerts himself. Sometimes food allergies and intolerances are so severe that it is best not to serve any food at the party.

I send the partygoers home with a treat bag full of non-food items, such as bubbles, stickers and temporary tattoos. I've also been known to give out autism awareness bracelets and jump ropes. I once made the mistake of giving out noisemakers – I won't do that again.

6. Accepting Gifts

Gifts can be the most emotional part of a birthday party. Some families prefer not to open gifts at the party, and bring everything home to be opened later. My kids do not like being the center of attention and do not like the "performance" aspect of opening gifts. My older son will cry and have a meltdown from the pressure of opening too many gifts. My younger son will simply shut down.

So I violate the Miss Manners guidelines for parties by requesting that all guests bring a non-perishable food item for a local emergency food bank instead of a gift. This is successful for my sons, because they get to enjoy their parties, and they enjoy delivering the donations to the food bank. At another birthday party, we were asked to bring a picture book to be donated to a local homeless shelter.

For many years, my son didn't really understand what a birthday was. He didn't know his own birthdate, even though we repeatedly showed him on the calendar. He just knew that some events were too much for him. But he also knows how to have fun. This year he was excitedly anticipating his birthday and telling us exactly how he envisioned it. That's why we're celebrating.



7. Celebrate without a party

Many families choose to bypass the birthday party and substitute another type of celebration:

- A family trip to a place chosen by the birthday person
- Using the money that would have been spent on the party for a special interest, such as a new Lego kit
- Family birthday traditions spread out over a week, for example, special decorations for the house on one morning, then balloons in a favorite color on the next morning, then a favorite breakfast on the following morning, a family birthday dance to a favorite song on the next day and a favorite movie on the following evening.