

Use this resource as a guide to identify what a meltdown looks like, how they can be avoided, and how you should and should not respond if a meltdown occurs.

What is a Meltdown?

- A temporary loss of control of his or her actions and behaviors. This can happen when a person is completely overwhelmed.
- Sometimes this can look like screaming, crying, kicking, lashing out, biting, engaging in self-injury, or running away.
- This is not the same thing as misbehaving or having a temper tantrum.



How to Avoid Meltdowns:

- Try to identify triggers, or the target reason as to why the person is becoming overwhelmed. It would be helpful to make a note of particular times, places, or activities that are likely to bring on stress. While in a calm state, ask the person who has a history of meltdowns the following questions:
 - Do you know ahead of time when you are close to experiencing a meltdown?
 - When a meltdown is beginning, do you have any ideas as to how I can help and support you? Are there signs of having a meltdown that I can look out for?
 - Can we come up with a signal so that you can let me know when you are feeling overwhelmed?
- Then, do your best to minimize those known triggers, such as overwhelming environments and changes in routine. However, totally avoiding triggers is not suggested, as that will prevent the person from learning how to problem-solve in these situations.
- Prepare for the meltdown with the individual ahead of time. You can try reminding them of one or two simple strategies that have typically worked for them in the past.

Other Resources to Reference:

Visual Schedules: paautism.org/resource/visual-schedules/

Supporting Individuals with Anxiety and Autism: paautism.org/resource/be-well-anxiety-autism/

How to Respond When Meltdowns Occur:



- Try to redirect attention ahead of time if you happen to notice any warning signs or triggers present. Are you able to distract them with a calming activity such as a preferred hobby or game, a fidget toy, listening to calming music, or taking deep breaths?
- Reduce environmental noise by turning off music/TV, turning off overhead lights, and clearing out other people.
- Give them space and time.
- Allow space for the individual to pace, jump, rock, or be alone.

How NOT to Respond when Meltdowns Occur:

- Do not ask a lot of questions.
- Do not ask how he/she is feeling or why he/she is feeling this way. But you can help them understand by acknowledging their stress by saying, “I can see that you are upset.”
- Do not tell the person he/she needs to “calm down,” “relax,” or “just breathe.” Even typically developing individuals can rarely calm down on command, and such statements can frustrate the individual, which results in escalating the situation even further. Instead, try to model calming strategies, such as “Let’s breathe together.”
- Do not demand eye contact during a meltdown.
- Do not try to talk him/her out of a repetitive behavior/routine. Sometimes, familiar rituals can serve a calming purpose or restore a sense of self-control.
- Avoid getting into a debate.
- Avoid placing additional demands or insisting on completing difficult tasks during clear signs of increased stress.
- Be careful about allowing meltdowns or behavior to lead to getting out of activities that they do not prefer to do, or the behavior can become a learned response. Instead, try to reintroduce the task at a later time, when supports are in place.



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