



Dr Joanne Ltd.

THE CALMING GUIDE TO MANAGING YOUR CHILD'S MELTDOWNS

Helping parents
(and carers) go
from feeling
overwhelmed and
stressed to calm
and connected,
when it comes to
meltdowns.



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Hello there!

I wrote this guide for parents and adults just like you – those who want to know how to manage their child's meltdowns using an informed and positive approach, to help bring about more calm and less chaos.

As well as being an Educational Psychologist and qualified school teacher, I am neurodivergent myself and parent to a neurodivergent child – so I come at this topic with both professional knowledge and insider real-life experience (both as the parent and the child). I know first hand how stressful your child's meltdowns can be, and I wanted to share my 5 top tips that have massively brought about more calm in my own home, so you can adapt these to have the same impact for your young person.



I wanted to finish by saying you are undoubtedly the expert on your child – I am here to share Psychology, my professional experience, and what works in my family, so you can use that information to inform your unique approach for your unique family.

I hope you enjoy the guide!

Joanne

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Tip 1 – Understand what a meltdown is

Many of us know how to recognise a meltdown in our children – often meltdowns involve lots of tears, anger, shouting, physical aggression and an inability to be reasoned with. But how many of us truly understand what a meltdown is? Once we really understand a meltdown, we are far more likely to respond with empathy, which in itself massively improves the situation for both the adult and child.

A meltdown is a stress response that happens when the child's coping capacity has been overwhelmed, and they have been triggered into 'fight or flight'. This is not a choice the child is making and it is not a tantrum. All children (and adults) can experience meltdowns, but these are experienced more often and more intensely by neurodivergent individuals (such as autistic or ADHD individuals). When in a meltdown state, we are not able to properly use the part of our brain responsible for reason and planning (this is why we find our child can't be reasoned with at this point), and instead we are using the more primitive part of our brain involved in impulses and keeping us alive (which is why our child can appear more impulsive in a meltdown).





Tip 2 – Keep yourself calm

There is no way around it, being with a young person in a meltdown is stressful! Hopefully understanding that a meltdown is not a choice from tip 1, helps us come at the situation with empathy. However, despite this situation being potentially stressful for us as adults, we need to try and really calm ourselves during a meltdown. This is so we can co-regulate our child (put simply, so they can 'borrow our calm'). Studies have shown there are parts of our brain (mirror neurons) that imitate the emotions of those around us. So if we can keep calm, there is more chance of us calming our child.



I am not naturally a 'zen parent' and I have sensory sensitivities myself to my child's noise during a meltdown, so this is something I have really had to practise. As soon as I can see my child is in a meltdown, I am careful to have positive self-talk (my go-to phrase in my head to myself is "This will pass") and I breath deeply and slowly (this helps keep me grounded and out of fight or flight mode myself, but hearing those deep breaths helps my child's mirror neurons know I am calm). I then calmly show my empathy by saying slowly and quietly "Mummy's here" repeatedly. If your child is lashing out, move yourself away from harm and calmly block any direct aggression.





Tip 3 – Alter the sensory environment

When children are in meltdown, they are super sensitive to sensory input such as loud noises and busyness (particularly those children who have sensory processing differences) and to others' stress. If your child starts to have a meltdown, try and think of how you can turn down the dial on sensory input. If your child agrees, this may involve moving them to a quieter area. Other things to try include not speaking too much yourself, encouraging siblings to engage in an activity in another room, dimming down the lights, and turning down the volume on the tv.

Some children also seek certain sensory input in a meltdown. This is unique to the individual, so often involves discussions at another time with your child or some trial and error, to see what is helpful. Common useful strategies to try, include offering hugs, placing fidget toys nearby, and distraction with quiet tv or a story book.

Some children want to be left alone in a meltdown. Respect this and stay available and close by, so that co-regulation in tip 2 can happen if they change their mind later.





Tip 4 – Don't discuss the meltdown immediately after or give consequences

For a significant period after a meltdown (sometimes hours) our child's brain is sensitive to going back into 'fight or flight' and restarting a meltdown. Talking about the meltdown too soon after the meltdown is likely to trigger it back off.

A meltdown is part of a survival mechanism that is hardwired into the brain. So giving your child a consequence is going to have little impact on the likelihood of it happening again. What could happen is that your child masks their emotional distress in the future and hides it, but this is actually more damaging to their mental health. Therefore, my advice is not to give consequences for meltdowns.

If there was unsafe or inappropriate behaviour in the meltdown, then after significant time has passed to calm your child back down, problem-solve (ideally with them if they are able to) how to avoid these behaviours in the future.

Instead afterwards, it is better to focus on helping our child rest and recover after a meltdown (offer snuggles, snack, drink, their preferred activities), and later support relationship repair. For example, helping them apologise to a sibling they were hurtful to during the meltdown.



Tip 5 – Help your child understand what is happening during a meltdown



Meltdowns are often difficult for the whole family. They are particularly difficult for the child experiencing them, who can experience confusion, shame, and embarrassment after.

Therefore, it is really useful during a calm time to give some explanation about meltdowns to your child (in Psychology we call this 'Psychoeducation'). This helps normalise the experience and reduce shame.

- You might discuss with your child things both you and them notice can sometimes trigger a meltdown.
- You might want to label the term 'meltdown' with your child and explain that other people experience meltdowns too, to normalise the experience.
- You might want to explain that during a meltdown it is hard to think carefully because of changes in our brain, which is why during a meltdown we can find it hard to plan what to do carefully.
- You might want to reassure your child that meltdowns do always end.
- Together, you could come up with a plan of things that are helpful in a meltdown and other things that your child would like to try out to see if they are helpful.





Thank you!

Want to keep in touch?
Sign up for my newsletter by
popping onto my website or
find me on Facebook
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I hope you now feel more equipped to make informed choices about how to respond to your child's meltdowns in a positive way, that promotes calmness and protects everyone's mental health. I have been using these tips with success in my own family, as have my clients (both other families and teaching staff in schools and nurseries).

If you are interested in my parenting approach I have developed the Differently Parenting Programme for families just like ours. I developed this programme when I realised that conventional parenting strategies didn't work in my family... and to be honest neither did the strategies from traditional parenting courses about neurodivergent children. What I wanted were approaches from someone who truly 'gets it' who is also using both latest affirming practices and research to inform the approach, to transform families from chaos to calm. So I created my own programme! Information about the course can be found under 'Events' on my website.

I also offer CPD to teaching staff and other psychologists on all topics related to Neurodiversity, and carry out Educational Psychology assessments of young people's strengths and difficulties. Please get in touch if you have an idea of how we can work together.

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