

How to Calm a Child With Autism

Techniques for avoiding and managing meltdowns

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Children with autism can have a tough time managing their behavior. Even high functioning children can "[melt down](#)" in situations that would be only mildly challenging to a typical peer. Children with more severe symptoms can get very upset on a daily basis. Meltdowns and anxiety can make it very hard to participate in typical activities or, in some extreme cases, to even leave the house.

It's not always easy to calm a child with autism, but there are techniques that can often be successful. Some require a bit of extra equipment that offers sensory comfort. Some of these items can be used in settings like school or community venues. If they work well, they're worth their weight in gold.

Causes of Anxiety and Meltdowns

Unlike their typical peers, few autistic children "throw fits" in order to garner more attention or to get a desired outcome (a new toy, a favorite food, etc.). In most cases, autistic children react to physical or emotional stress without any particular agenda; they are simply [expressing feelings](#) of excitement, frustration, or anxiety or responding to "[sensory assaults](#)."

The reality is that children with autism, in general, may have less control over their emotions than their typical peers; as a result, emotional explosions are (in many cases) more common.

It's not always easy for a [neurotypical parent](#) to predict or even recognize situations likely to upset a child with autism. Ordinary [changes in a daily routine](#) such as a detour on the way to school can be terribly upsetting to some autistic children (though not to others). Odors such as the smell of fresh paint can be a sensory assault. Even the fluorescent lights at the grocery store can be overwhelming to certain individuals.

At the same time, however, any individual child may react differently to the same situation from day to day. An overwhelming stressor on Tuesday can be experienced as background noise on Thursday.

In general, it's possible to predict at least some stressors and minimize them. For example:

- Very loud noises such as the sound of fireworks are easy to predict and avoid or minimize
- Major changes in routine can be predicted, discussed, practiced, and planned for
- Unavoidable noise and smells (such as Thanksgiving at Grandma's) can be managed and planned for in advance

It can also be difficult to predict an autistic person's reaction to a social setting or situation. The same autistic person who fell apart at a crowded mall may have no problem being in a crowded movie theater (especially if the movie is one he's excited about). In addition, while typically developing children might have hurt feelings or even anger when excluded from a social event, a child with autism may not even notice the social slight. Alternatively, the same child who couldn't have cared less about being excluded from a party might get terribly upset over a friendly fist-bump, perceiving it as an assault.

Avoiding, managing, and planning for potentially challenging situations can only go so far. No one wants to live a life dedicated to accommodation, and such a life is extremely limiting for everyone involved. A better solution is to help the autistic child to calm his or her own emotions.

Related: [Tips for Understanding and Managing Your Autistic Child's Behavior](#)

How to Recognize Reactions

Just as it's challenging to predict the response of an autistic person, it can also be difficult to interpret autistic reactions to difficult emotions as these reactions may take different forms.

In some cases, reactions take the form of major temper tantrums, but other reactions can look very different. For example, they might take the form of:

- Screeching or other noise-making
- Bolting or eloping (running away)
- Intensive [self-stimulation](#) (fast, intense rocking, pacing, self-talk, etc.)
- Self-aggression (head-slapping or banging, pinching, etc.)
- Aggression toward others (in rare cases)
- Sensory avoidance (covering ears, covering eyes, retreating)
- Sensory seeking behavior (crashing against furniture, squeezing into small spaces, etc.)
- Refusal to engage
- Compulsive behaviors such as touching the same objects in the same order over and over again

Some of these behaviors are actually attempts to self-calm. Others are simply physical manifestations of internal upset.

How to Calm a Child With Autism

There are certain calming do's and don'ts that apply to most children with autism. These are based on the factors that autistic children have in common, specifically:

- Difficulty with understanding social norms and conventions
- Difficulty with [following or using spoken language](#)
- Difficulty with following or using non-verbal communication
- Unawareness of others' likely reactions to behaviors
- Sensory challenges that can get in the way of positive behaviors
- Lack of social motivation (desire for social acceptance)

Tips for Staying Calm

Of course, the best way to be calm is to stay calm to start with. That means teaching your child how to manage his or her own feelings.

There are some techniques which, while not failproof, can make a big positive difference. Many are related to sensory integration therapy—an approach which helps people with sensory dysfunction to manage challenging situations. These techniques include:

1. **Offer an "escape hatch."** If your child is easily overwhelmed, be sure you and your child know what he should do if anxiety or frustration starts rising. Can you go outside? Can you retreat to a bedroom and watch a favorite video? Just knowing there's an option can sometimes make all the difference.

2. **Provide your child with sensory toys that can help lower anxiety.** You can actually buy sensory toys, but easy options range from soft "squeezy" balls to plasticine (soft clay), buzzers (helpful for some children), and more.
3. **Consider purchasing indoor or outdoor swings and trampoline.** These are often great ways for kids with autism to get the sensory input they need to self-regulate. Small indoor versions are often available through toy stores; no need to buy a special "sensory" swing.
4. **Make or purchase a weighted vest and/or blanket.** For some children, these heavy items can provide a feeling of security, making it easier to manage the sensory assaults that go along with most school and community experiences.
5. **Consider buying "chewy" tops for pencils and pens.** For some children, being allowed to chew can make a big difference.
6. **Teach (and learn) meditation and guided meditation techniques.** Not all autistic children can use these tools, but many get a lot out of mindfulness and related techniques.
7. **Be sure your child gets enough physical exercise.** While most typical kids get plenty of time to run around and play (or participate in team sports), children with autism often spend their afterschool time in therapy. It's important for them, like everyone else, to get active.
8. **Teach simple methods for staying calm.** Depending on your child's abilities, options include counting to ten, walking away, deep breathing, meditation or (when appropriate) tuning in to a calming video or book.
9. **Add a pet to your family.** Pets have been shown to have a calming effect on children with autism; in fact, some autistic children have service or emotional support dogs whose primary job is to help the child manage his feelings.

Related: [Techniques to Helping Children With Autism Handle Their Emotions](#)

Tips and Techniques for Calming an Upset Child

While it's great to simply avoid getting upset, real-life can make it impossible. When that happens, these tips for calming may help.

1. Very often, children with autism show signs of distress before they "meltdown" or become very upset. Check to see if your child seems frustrated, angry, anxious, or just over-excited. If she can communicate effectively, she may be able to simply tell you what you need to know.
2. Look for environmental issues that could be causing your child's discomfort. If it's easy to do so, resolve any problems. For example, close a door, turn off a light, turn down music, etc.
3. Often, it's possible to simply leave the situation for a period of time, allowing your child time and space to calm down. Just walk out the door with your child, staying calm and ensuring his safety.
4. Have a "bag of tricks" handy to share with your child. Chewy or sensory toys, favorite books or videos can all defuse a potentially difficult situation. While it's never ideal to use [TV](#) as a babysitter, there are situations in which a favorite video on a smartphone can be a lifesaver.
5. Travel with a weighted vest or blanket. If your child does well with these calming tools, bring an extra in the car at all times.
6. If you don't have weighted items (or even if you do), you might want to consider rolling your child up in a blanket like a "burrito." For some autistic children, the pressure can be very calming.

Avoid These Pitfalls

In moments of stress, it can be hard to remember that autistic children are different from their neurotypical peers. It's very unlikely, for example, that an autistic child is being "naughty" to cause you embarrassment. It's also unlikely that he or she will react well to typical consequences such as time out or grounding—autistic children aren't motivated by social activities, so losing them is hardly a tragedy. It also probably goes without saying that spanking an autistic child for responding badly to a stressful situation is not likely to have positive consequences.

1. Don't attempt to shame or embarrass the child ("act your age!"). Not only is this a poor approach to discipline in general, but it will also have no impact on a child who doesn't connect with the idea of age-appropriate behavior or interests.
2. Avoid trying to reason or argue with your child if he is already melting down. Even a very bright child with autism will find it impossible to have a rational conversation in the middle of an emotional breakdown.
3. Avoid threatening consequences for bad behavior during a meltdown. Depending on the child, this will either be ignored or will escalate the situation.
4. Don't allow your child to leave the situation alone. Children with autism have a tough time understanding danger in the best of circumstances. While in the throes of a meltdown, they are very likely to run into the street or another dangerous situation.
5. Don't ask someone else to handle the situation. If an autistic child becomes upset at a coach, instructor, volunteer, grandparent, or another adult, it's easy to assume that a person will handle the problem. But the vast majority of adults have no clue how to manage a flailing child with autism. It's far better for everyone, including your child, to step in and take charge.

A Word From Verywell

It's not easy to parent a child with autism, but there are a number of steps you can take to smooth the path for yourself and your child. By following some of these tips, you can make life pleasanter and easier for yourself, your child, and the other people in your life. As your child learns to calm herself, it will also be much easier for her to engage in typical activities at school, in the community, and even at work.

Article Sources

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