

Taming Tantrums vs. Managing Meltdown

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Tantrums and meltdowns aren't the same thing.

Each type of outburst requires a different approach.

There are strategies that may prevent or reduce both types of behaviours.

Tantrums and meltdowns are different kinds of emotional outbursts, and there are different ways to deal with them. Here are some strategies for each.

WAYS TO TAME A TANTRUM

Tantrums are usually something kids have some control over. So there are many ways to try to avoid them—or stop them in their tracks.

1. **Agree on a frustration signal.** Work with your child to [come up with a signal](#) you can use when you see her getting frustrated. Practice the signal when she's calm. Talk about what she can do when she sees it.
2. **Create a calm space.** [Find a place in your house](#) that your child can use to calm down and feel safe. Explain this is a quiet space, not a punishment space. At first, you may need to help her remember to go there when she's upset.
3. **Identify the cause. Knowing the source of a tantrum makes it easier to defuse.** It can help you find an in-the-moment solution and help your child find better ways to deal with the situation next time.
4. **Have clear expectations and consequences.** Let your child know what you expect in certain situations. Explain what will happen if the expectations aren't met.

5. **Talk the situation through.** Your child may not be acting appropriately, but that doesn't mean her feelings aren't real. Acknowledge what's upsetting her and help her name the feelings. For example: "I know you're angry with me because I asked you to turn off the video game. I get mad, too, when I have to stop doing something fun."
6. **Ignore the tantrum behavior.** For some kids, the most effective reaction is no reaction. If your child's tantrum is fed by the negative attention she gets as you're trying to tame it, it may be better to give her some space and not respond at all.
7. **Reinforce self-control and positive behavior.** [Praise your child](#) when she's able to gain control and calm down. Let her know [specifically what she's doing well](#). For example, "I know you were really angry and it was hard for you to stop yelling. You did a nice job taking some time to cool down. Now we can talk about this calmly."

WAYS TO MANAGE A MELTDOWN

Meltdowns are more extreme than tantrums, and handling them is more complicated. Knowing the triggers for your child and the signs of escalation can help you avoid a total explosion. But even if you can't stop a meltdown, there are ways you can respond to help your child regain control.

Before the Meltdown

1. **Know your child's triggers.** They're not the same for every child. For some kids, it might be sensory or emotional overload. For others, it might be too many demands, unexpected

changes or pain and fear. If you know your child's triggers, you can try to avoid them.

2. **Watch for and take [note of patterns](#).** It can help you learn your child's triggers. You may notice that your child gets more anxious or has more trouble at a certain time of day. For instance, if meltdowns tend to happen close to mealtimes or bedtime, hunger or fatigue may be triggers. Or you may notice that where they happen have something in common, such as noise or crowds.

3. **Recognize the signs of escalation.** Your child may show warning signs that she's having trouble coping. If you can catch them early enough, you may be able to help her calm down before she becomes out of control. Common warning signs include:

- Trouble thinking clearly, making decisions or responding to questions
- Repeating thoughts or questions over and over
- Refusing to follow directions or cooperate
- Trying to shut out sensory input or attempting to run away or hide
- Increased movement, like fidgeting or pacing
- Complaining of physical issues like dizziness or heart pounding

4. **Try to redirect from the trigger.** For some kids, the escalation phase can be interrupted. See if it helps to try to distract her with something else to do or by redirecting her to another task or activity.

5. **Be patient.** Your instinct may be to try to stop an escalation quickly, but talking fast and loud can make it worse. Give your child more space and more time to process what you're saying. Use short, concrete sentences that take away your child's need to make decisions.

During the Meltdown

1. **Do a safety assessment.** When your child is screaming and throwing things, it may feel like an emergency. But that doesn't mean it is. The question to consider: Is anyone hurt or going to get hurt?

2. **Be reassuring.** It may take trial and error to know if your child prefers physical distance or a firm hug or touch during meltdown. But keeping your voice and body language calm is helpful in either case. Make sure your child knows you're there and you understand she may feel scared and out of control.

3. **Provide some space.** If you're out in public, try to help your child move to a quieter place. If you're at home, see if you can get your child to go to the part of your home that is her calming zone. If it's not possible to move your child, ask other people to give you both some space.

4. **Tone it down.** Turn down lights, keep things quiet and try not to crowd your child. If you're at home and your child isn't able or willing to move to her room, try standing off to the side. (Standing in the doorway can make your child feel blocked in.)

5. **Consider your post-meltdown plan.** Start thinking about how to reengage with your child after the meltdown without reigniting it. You may need to abandon your shopping trip. If the meltdown was triggered by an emotional conversation, you may need to back away from that topic and find a new way to approach it the next time you try to talk about it.

After the Meltdown

1. **Take time to recover.** Once your child starts to calm down, she may feel embarrassed or guilty about her outburst. She may also be physically exhausted. Give her time to collect herself.

2. **Find the right time to talk.** You may want to help your child make sense of what happened. Right afterward may not be the best time. But when you're both calm, here are some ways to approach it:

- Give your child a heads-up. Let your child know you're going to talk so she has some advance notice. Reassure her she's not in trouble.
- Be brief. Talking about a meltdown can make kids feel remorseful and defensive. Say what you need to say, but try to avoid going over the same information repeatedly.

- Check for understanding. Ask your child to tell you in her own words what you talked about. Answer any questions she may have. If you've decided on an action plan, see if she can summarize it for you.

Keep in mind that managing meltdowns and taming tantrums takes practice. Learning to recognize the signs and [teaching your child coping skills](#) can help you both find ways to respond more effectively in the future.

Key Take-Aways

- Knowing the triggers can help keep a meltdown from escalating.
- Ignoring a tantrum can sometimes stop it.
- Creating a “calm space” can help with both tantrums and meltdowns.

<https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/sensory-processing-issues/taming-tantrums-vs-managing-meltdowns>

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