

# Big Feelings & Overload

20 supportive responses for moments of intense distress — focused on safety, regulation, and connection.

When a child is overwhelmed, their brain is in survival mode. In the moment, the goal is not teaching — it's helping them feel safe enough to regulate.

1	<b>Safety first</b> Move hazards; give space if needed.	11	<b>Support communication</b> Offer choices, visuals, or yes/no.
2	<b>Lower stimulation</b> Dim lights, reduce noise, limit talking.	12	<b>Meet basic needs</b> Check hunger, thirst, sleep, pain.
3	<b>Use fewer words</b> Short, calm phrases. Pause often.	13	<b>Offer sensory tools</b> Pressure, movement, quiet — if wanted.
4	<b>Validate the feeling</b> "This is hard. I'm here."	14	<b>Limit audience</b> Fewer people can reduce stress.
5	<b>Offer a calm space</b> Quiet corner, car, or familiar room.	15	<b>Hold boundaries gently</b> Keep limits; drop extra demands.
6	<b>Stay neutral</b> Slow voice, relaxed body, gentle face.	16	<b>Name the next step</b> "First calm, then we decide."
7	<b>Don't demand eye contact</b> Focus on safety and connection.	17	<b>Repair afterward</b> Reconnect once everyone is calm.
8	<b>Give time</b> Regulation takes time.	18	<b>Debrief later</b> What helped? What made it harder?
9	<b>Avoid "why" questions</b> Save problem-solving for later.	19	<b>Look for patterns</b> Transitions, anxiety, sensory load, pain.
10	<b>Use a break card</b> A simple way to ask for space.	20	<b>Get extra support</b> If frequent/unsafe, seek support.

## Quick reminders

Many factors can increase distress: communication barriers, sensory stress, anxiety, and physical discomfort. • If you're worried about safety, seek urgent support from local services or your healthcare provider. • Teach coping skills during calm times; use them during stress only if they're already familiar.

## Autism Connections

Free family resources: [autismconnections.ca/resources](http://autismconnections.ca/resources)

This handout is for general information and does not replace professional advice.

Sources: National Autistic Society: Distressed behaviour - Distressed behaviour - a guide for all audiences; NICE guideline CG170: Autism - support and management (trigger assessment/prevention); CPS: Post-diagnostic management and follow-up care for autism spectrum disorder (2019)