

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

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)