



Helping Your Child Through a Meltdown

An explainer and parent co-regulation card · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)
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At a glance

- A meltdown is not bad behaviour. It's a child whose nervous system is overwhelmed.
- During a meltdown, a child can't reason. Safety and calm presence come first.
- Your calm helps their body calm down. This is co-regulation.

Meltdown or tantrum?

	Tantrum	Meltdown
What's happening	Often goal-directed (wanting something)	Overwhelm; the brain's alarm takes over
Can the child stop?	Sometimes, if the goal is met or ignored	Not easily, even if they want to
What helps	Calm, consistent limits	Safety, calm presence, less input
Common triggers	Being told no	Too much noise, tiredness, hunger, change, sensory overload

"Name it to tame it"

Dr. Daniel Siegel describes the emotional "downstairs brain" and the thinking "upstairs brain." During a meltdown, the downstairs brain is in charge. Lectures don't land. Connecting first, through calm words and presence, helps the upstairs brain come back online. Naming the feeling ("You're so upset") helps integrate the two.

What the research says

Integrating emotional and thinking parts of the brain through connection and naming feelings is a core idea in Siegel and Bryson's whole-brain parenting approach (Siegel & Bryson, 2011).

Parents who stay emotionally attuned and coach emotions help children develop stronger self-regulation over time (Gottman, Katz & Hooven, 1996).

Tool: My Meltdown Co-Regulation Card

DURING A MELTDOWN (keep handy)

1. **Breathe first.** Your calm is contagious.
2. **Safety.** Move hazards or move to a quieter spot.
3. **Fewer words.** Short, soft phrases: "I'm here." "You're safe."
4. **Lower the input.** Dim lights, reduce noise, give space if needed.
5. **Offer comfort, don't force it.** Some kids want a hug; some need distance.
6. **Wait.** Let the wave pass.
7. **Reconnect later.** When calm, talk about what happened and what might help next time.

Meltdown pattern tracker

Day	What happened before	Possible trigger (tired, hungry, noise, change)	What helped
Mon			
Tue			
Wed			
Thu			
Fri			
Sat			
Sun			

Strategies to try

- **Prevent where you can.** Watch for HALT: hungry, angry, lonely, tired.
- **Prepare for transitions.** Give warnings: "Five more minutes, then we leave."
- **Repair after.** If you lost your cool, apologize. It models repair.
- **Look after yourself.** Co-regulating takes energy. Your rest matters.

Strategies you may not have heard of

These less common, evidence-informed techniques go beyond the usual advice. Try one at a time and notice what works for you.

- **Go low and slow.** Get below your child's eye level and slow and lower your voice. A smaller, quieter presence feels less threatening to an alarmed nervous system.

- **Tell the story afterward.** When calm, retell what happened like a story: "You were having fun, then it was time to leave, and you felt so upset..." This helps children make sense of big feelings.
- **Use visual schedules.** Pictures showing the day's steps can reduce meltdowns around transitions.
- **Anchor yourself.** Place a hand on your own chest during a meltdown to stay grounded.

Journal prompts

Take your time with these. Write freely; there are no right answers.

What happens in my body when my child melts down?

What did I need as a child when I was overwhelmed?

What patterns am I noticing in my child's meltdowns?

What helps me recover after a hard parenting moment?

When to reach out for support

If meltdowns are very frequent, intense, or unsafe, or you're wondering about sensory needs, ADHD, autism, or anxiety, a therapist can help you understand your child and build a plan together.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

Gottman, J. M., Katz, L. F., & Hooven, C. (1996). Parental meta-emotion philosophy and the emotional life of families. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 10(3), 243–268.

Siegel, D. J., & Bryson, T. P. (2011). *The whole-brain child*. Delacorte Press.

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