

How to Respond to Meltdowns and Shutdowns



Have a plan in place, especially if meltdowns are common or potentially unsafe.

When it starts:

Identify a safe place to go during a meltdown or shutdown.

Keep a sensory friendly place where they can have time and space, and consider including objects like safety items, weighted blankets, sensory toys.

Reduce sensory overload in ways like turning off loud music TV, overhead lights, or asking others to temporarily leave the room

Maintain warm, neutral acceptance and remember: They are doing the best they can with the tools they currently have.

During

Sit quietly next to the person

Use few verbal instructions when possible

Use communication cards or visual signals to take a break or use the safe place.

When speaking: Remain calm and monitor your voice volume

Use the person's name when talking and use simple statements.

Use calming strategies

Facilitate an activity they like: like playing with fidget toys, listening to calming music, or participating in a preferred interest. Breathing is **not** typically helpful during extreme distress and can be invalidating

Simplify the task

"This seems really hard, let's do it one step at a time" or "Let's solve this problem together."

When it's over

Proceed slowly when re-engaging

Remember that the person may be continuing to process the situation, or may remain on "high alert," long after a meltdown has ended

How NOT to Respond



Do not use a lot of questions and avoid getting into a debate

Avoid asking the person to do anything except the essentials e.g not a good time to make them color if that is hard for them

Do not ask how he/she is feeling or what is wrong. Help them understand by describing for them with simple terms in mind: "I see you are having strong emotions"

Do not tell the person he/she needs to calm down, as no one can do this on command and saying this can escalate the situation

Do not tell the person to 'relax' or 'just breathe'

Instead, try planned calming strategies or do them yourself as an example (e.g. "let's walk together")

Do not expect the person to use a strategy they have never practiced before during a crisis.

Do not use punishment or reward to force "calming down"

(e.g., if you don't calm down, you can't do X")

This puts pressure on the situation and can make it harder for the person to calm.

Do not discuss or threaten consequences in the moment

This can be discussed afterwards

Do not demand eye contact or try to talk him/her out of a routine

Avoid physical contact unless known to be helpful to the child. This can be well intentioned but overstimulating to many