

Autism and meltdowns to miracles

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Meltdowns are something almost every parent of an autistic child is familiar with and although we all know that it will happen we never feel fully equipped to deal with it. The worst part, as your child grows and becomes stronger, meltdowns can become more and more challenging to tackle. Every family has a strategy around what to do to best navigate this situation and every child responds differently so there is no cookie cutter approach to helping a child through the meltdown. However, there are a few things that over time I've seen work for my child and I have a feeling, a lot of other parents might find it useful too.

- **Safety:** When having a meltdown, it's not unusual for the child to get physical, roll around, try to escape, or get aggressive. They don't really seem very aware of where they are and what they are doing and in such a situation it's very easy for them to hurt themselves or others around them. This makes safety the utmost consideration during a meltdown. We need to make sure there are no sharp objects around them, nothing that they can throw and hurt others or bang on and hurt themselves. Ensuring that they don't have easy access to run into oncoming traffic or toward a place that can be dangerous if gone unsupervised is also very important.

My son once had a meltdown on the beach and he rolled on the sand for what seemed like eternity. He threw sand all over himself and us, getting a lot of it in his eyes and mouth. He also tried running towards the ocean in a rage. You would need to determine, based on where you are, what safety means under those circumstances. For us, it was ensuring we keep his hands off of the sand and restrain him from running towards the ocean.

- **Quiet:** If it's possible, try moving your child to a calm area. This is something almost all parents know about. Sensory overload is one of the most common reasons for a meltdown so moving to a quiet place with less noise and harsh light might help them feel better- their calming room, their bed, accessible fitting rooms (if in a store), a relatively quiet corner of a mall (like the passage leading to restrooms or utility room) or maybe just going back to your car could be some of the options. However, if your child is big and this is not an option, moving them might upset them even more so you might not want to try this at all.

- **Stop talking:** This one I had a hard time accepting but this does work for my son and apparently a lot of other kids too. You need to stop talking. Stop asking them questions or giving them too many options or instructions. They are already overwhelmed and their brain is on an overdrive. You don't want to overwhelm them any further by asking too many questions about what they are feeling or what they want. It has always enraged my almost non-verbal son even more. The conversations can wait. Maybe after the meltdown you can show them picture cards, or talk to them to try and figure out what was going on but right in the middle of a meltdown might not be the best time to do that.

- **Sensory input:** My son likes deep pressure. He enjoys being hugged tight. So, during his meltdowns I like to just hold him tight and sit there while he tries to calm himself down. Sensory inputs can really help. Some of the most common sensory inputs that have helped are

- Deep pressure -hugs, weighted blankets or lap pads etc.

Soft lights

- Calming music - if they tolerate a headphone, preferably a noise cancelling one, it might be useful.

- Oral and tactile inputs - a soft toy, a favorite blanket, Velcro (yup, that's my son), stress balls, chewy tubes etc. A lot of the kids like cold so if you're in a grocery store, try going to the frozen section and hand him a bag of peas or something. I've heard it helps a few kids. My son seeks cold too but I've not personally tried that on him during a meltdown yet.

- A fidget toy - my son loves fidgeting with straws and offering that sometimes helps but whatever is your child's favorite fidget, I bet you already have that in your SOS stash- hand it to them. Just make sure it's not something they might hurt someone with if flung around.

- Movement -swing, spin, jump etc can be some of the sensory inputs that might help them calm down. However, I would be a little wary about using movement as a sensory input if your child is a little aggressive during the meltdown. I tried to put my son on an indoor swing when he was in the middle of a meltdown and he jumped right off. He didn't hurt himself but that could happen.

- **Wait:** Let your child learn to self calm while you help him through the process. This is going to take some time. Wait through it. Be patient. Be understanding. Be there for your child but don't try to rush him through it by asking him to stop. It's only

going to make things worse. Hold him close and wait for it to pass. They need you by their side while they struggle through what is creating havoc inside them.

- **Seek help:** If you feel you might need help, forget what people around you are thinking about the whole meltdown situation, go ahead, ask for help. My son once had a meltdown while I was unbuckling him from his car seat. He grabbed my hair and would not let it go. I noticed people gather around my car while I struggled to get off and calm him down. When after trying for several minutes I could not free myself off his grip, I gestured for help and someone came forward. It was a life saver! People sometimes are not sure what to do in situations like this and those with the best of intentions might be hesitant to approach. So, it's not a bad idea to request help if the need be. You and your child need to be safe and that is more important.

- **Understand:** I've heard a lot of parents complain that their autistic child starts throwing a tantrum "for no reason." That is not true. There is always a reason. Just because we don't understand does not mean there is none. It is absolutely essential that parents understand that meltdowns are not a way for their kids to go into a frenzy. It's their way of telling you that they are in pain, in some sort of emotion or physical overload that they have no control over. The more we understand this the better we can deal with meltdowns. If we don't get our children, how will we get through them?

- **Retrospect:** Once you are back to your normal routine, try looking back to the time your child had a meltdown. Think about what happened right before it, where were you, what was going on, what was your child doing, was he asking for something, saying something that you might have swept aside, what were they wearing (they might be uncomfortable), was there a disruption in routine, what time of the day it was, what season (allergies can make them uncomfortable, as it happened with my son which we discovered after almost a year), were they too tired, too confused, scared ? There can be a lot of things that can lead to a meltdown. Find a pattern if you can. It might help cut down a few meltdowns.

We have not been able to eliminate meltdowns from our lives. We probably won't. However, learning to manage and helping our children learn self regulation might really work to their advantage and improve their quality of life. Turning meltdowns to miracles -- that's what we plan to do.

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