



Preventing and Defusing Meltdowns

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Parents often struggle with children who engage in challenging behavior. Many children with autism live in a world that might not make sense to them and isn't always set up for their needs. When parents and caregivers understand their children's needs and find supports that work best for those needs, they are able to create an environment that makes sense to the child. Making small changes to a child's environment will increase positive and appropriate behavior.

A behavior is more or less likely to occur again in the future depending on what is present or absent in the environment. Setting up the environment in a particular way is crucial for a child's behavior and skill development. When environmental supports are missing, negative behavior can be reinforced by something positive. In other words, a negative behavior is more likely to occur in the future if it is reinforced by something the child likes or wants. A lack of environmental supports could also mean a child has limited communication with no effective communication system, and an environment where a child's sensory needs are not being met. In addition, it could mean a child shows heightened anxiety and is easily overwhelmed, which can be difficult to manage.

Proactively Preventing Challenging Behaviors

Behaviors are shaped and maintained by one's environment. This is true for everyone's behavior, not just for children with autism. The following are proactive strategies that parents and caregivers can put into place to help prevent challenging behaviors in the future. The key with these strategies is to teach them and put them in place **before** the behavior occurs. It's always beneficial to be proactive instead of reactive.

ESTABLISH STRUCTURE AND ROUTINE

Most individuals with autism thrive on structure and routine. When I work with parents, this is where I start. Caregivers can easily provide structure and routine by creating and implementing a daily visual schedule.

CREATE A VISUAL-RICH ENVIRONMENT

Most children with autism favor visual processing. Use that strength by incorporating visual supports into your child's daily routine. For example, label commonly used items, create a visual schedule, create a reward system, implement a communication system, and/or use a task analysis. These visual supports will create a visual-rich environment to help your child thrive.

INCREASE POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

It is natural to repeat a behavior when it is reinforced by something pleasurable. If the outcome is positive, it is more likely that the same behavior will occur again in the future. Make it worthwhile for your child to engage in positive behaviors. Reinforce any and all positive and appropriate behaviors with verbal and physical praise, like a high five or a hug. A token board is also a great resource to use for positive reinforcement.

PUT A COMMUNICATION SYSTEM IN PLACE

Children who are non-verbal and don't have a communication system in place most likely rely on negative behaviors to communicate their wants and needs. When caregivers implement an effective communication system, they usually see a decrease in challenging behaviors. Examples of different communication systems that can be used include the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), a communication board, an augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) device, and sign language.

ADDRESS SENSORY REGULATION

When children have a sensory system that is not regulated, they often don't feel or act their best. It is hard to give your best if you don't feel well. Building sensory movement breaks into children's daily schedule will help address their sensory differences and help them feel regulated. Parents likely know what activities their child needs to feel regulated. If not, they should seek help from a physical therapist and ask for activities they can do at home.

LET YOUR CHILD EXPERIENCE MORE SUCCESS

The best way to motivate children is to let them experience success and show them that they are doing a great job at something. Start by using positive reinforcement to point out those things they are already doing well. It is important for them to know that their hard work is noticed.

De-escalation Strategies

In an ideal world, caregivers would be exceptionally proactive and prevent every meltdown. The reality, however, is that no one can prevent every challenging behavior. There are a range of tools that can be used in the moment of a meltdown, but they must be introduced and practiced when the child is happy and calm. It's unlikely that a child will respond positively to something that is completely new in the moment of a meltdown. The following strategies should be somewhat familiar to a child when the parent needs to use them during a meltdown.

Choices

There is power in being able to choose. During a meltdown, children might feel like they are losing control of emotions, behaviors and what's going on around them. When children have a meltdown, give them back some control by offering two choices. Let them choose between two activities they can do to calm down. When children make a choice on their own, they are more likely to take ownership of that choice and follow through.

Token Board

A token board is an example of positive reinforcement. When children are having a meltdown, pull out their token board to remind them of what they are working towards. This is another opportunity for them to make a choice by choosing what they will be working for on their token board. Immediately reward your children with a token when they show positive and appropriate behavior. Be sure to verbally praise children so they know why they are being rewarded.

Change of Environment

Consider your child's sensory differences in the heat of a meltdown. Is the room overwhelming? Is it too loud or too bright? Are there too many people? Try changing your child's environment by moving from one room to another. This can help with the calming process. A fresh new environment can result in a fresh new feeling for your child. A "calm down" corner in your child's bedroom or a quiet area of your house can also be effective. You can redirect your child to this corner during a meltdown.

Request a Break

If children are overwhelmed by the demands around them, it is important for them to be able to communicate these feelings to a trusted person. Does your child have a way to ask for a break? It is important for your child to self-advocate when he/she is upset and needs some time to cool off. This could be done with the use of a visual aid that says, "I need a break," and by teaching your child to use this visual when upset. Remember, you have to teach this many times, before the meltdown, in order for your child to be able to use it when upset. Parents should also teach by modelling. Show your child exactly how to ask for a break.

Be Mindful of Your Reaction

The reactions of people around your child can either escalate or de-escalate a situation. While it can be hard in the moment, try to remain calm, keep an unreactive expression on your face and your voice level low, and maintain a neutral tone of voice. Your child can calm down on his/her own just by watching your reaction. Your child can sense and will mimic your energy and attitude.



Putting these proactive strategies in place on a daily basis will help parents and caregivers make the transition from a problem-focused approach to one that is solution-focused. Right now, you may feel that your child's negative behaviors are all-consuming and take over your entire day. They may seem hard to handle. When you become comfortable with these strategies, however, the hard things will eventually become easy. You will be able to better support your child's needs.



Molly Johnson, M.Ed., is an autism parent consultant and uses her education and experience as a former autism teacher to support parents from around the world. Through the Autism Parent Inner Circle, Molly helps families understand the reasons for their child's barriers. She is passionate about creating action plans to help children and families move forward. She belongs to a supportive community of autism parents and professionals. Throughout her career, Molly has worked with individuals with autism and their families in a variety of settings, including the public school system, a university program, a private autism program and privately with parents. Molly's journey as an autism parent consultant began during her last year as an autism classroom teacher. During that time she started the Autism Consultant podcast, where she addresses how to help children with autism move beyond challenging behaviors and learn new skills. Molly's goal is to provide support and guidance to parents as they help their children thrive at home.

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