



THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MELTDOWNS AND TANTRUMS AND HOW TO HELP

Navigating the world of childhood emotions can be like finding your way through a maze.

As children grow, they develop new abilities, independence and experience emotional changes that they may not yet fully understand. This makes their behaviours unpredictable and sometimes overwhelming.

Tantrums and meltdowns can feel daunting, but they are a normal part of your child's development and pretty much every parent has experienced them at some point.

Know you are not alone. But also know how you respond, can help them better manage their emotions going forward and learn healthy coping mechanisms which may they stop altogether.

Sometimes, it's hard to distinguish between a tantrum and a meltdown, but understanding the differences can help you know your child better, respond effectively, and be supportive.



Tantrums

When a child throws a tantrum, the root cause is typically obvious—they long for something they cannot have, experience a change in routine, or stop doing something they are enjoying.

An example is if they cannot get a sweet or a toy from the shop, you need to take a different route when going home or need them to go to bed.

At this moment, their emotions can become overwhelming. As children, they are still learning the complexity of their emotional lives. They can't understand what they are feeling or how to express it properly. This can lead to escalating levels of frustration, resulting in a tantrum.

Although these moments may be tricky, you can help your little one maintain some level of control.

DO

Stay Calm: Maintain composure and take deep breaths. Your calm demeanour can reassure your little one.

Get down on their level: Being on the same physical level as you, can help your little one feel safer, more in control, and more connected to you – helping them to calm down.

Encourage Communication: Help them to express their feelings calmly, offering deep breathing exercises or counting down.

Validate Emotions: Acknowledge their feelings and offer reassurance that it's okay to feel upset.

Set Boundaries: Be consistent and explain the reasons behind rules, offering choices when possible.

DON'T

Raise your voice: Sadly this can lead to a war of 'who's the loudest.' If you get angry or shout, your child may try to copy your behaviour, and think that yelling is the right thing to do.

Ignore them: If you ignore a tantrum, it might stop. But what lessons did your child learn? They are alone. They should suppress their feelings.

Attempt to bribe them to stop: whilst tempting, you need to remember that a tantrum is just an expression of frustration, and by offering a bribe you are actually shutting down that emotion again not giving them the tools to self-regulate and manage their emotions going forward.

Meltdowns

When it comes to a meltdown, there is rarely just one trigger to identify. Instead, meltdowns are caused by overload — think of them as a glass of water slowly filling up and getting too full, resulting in overflow.

They can be caused by sensory overload, loud noises, too much going on, and the inability to communicate.

For example, becoming overwhelmed and agitated during a crowded and noisy event, such as a birthday party or a busy shopping street.

DO

Give Them Space: Remove your little one from any potential danger and create a calm, safe space for them to express their emotions.

Allow Recovery Time: Understand that it may take time for them to recover.

Provide Protection: Provide physical comfort by placing a large pillow under their head to protect them.

Offer Emotional Support: Remain close but maintain a safe distance. Sing, hum, or lightly stroke their face or hand if they permit.

Adjust Surroundings: Reduce sensory overload like noise and light. Ask individuals to move and give space.

Provide Distractions: Items such as toys, books, or special objects can help your little one refocus their attention and ease their distress.

Stay Patient: Take deep breaths and remain calm.

DON'T

Feel Judged: Don't let others' opinions or stares stress you out, or make you feel like a bad parent. Instead, focus on what you know is best for you and your little one.

Raise your voice or make sudden body movements: know that your little one is experiencing emotional overload and a heightened state of being. Loud noises, and rapid movement will only amplify this.

For more tips, tricks, hacks and advice on how to raise happy, confident children visit the [BBC Children in Need website](#).

