

Understanding Behaviour

Being a kid can be tough! They experience big emotions but don't yet have the emotional regulation tools to understand why, or what they can do to help themselves feel better.



Children's behaviour is how they communicate their needs, emotions, and reactions – especially before they have strong language or communication skills.

Children with disability or developmental delay may develop emotional regulation skills more slowly, differently, or need additional support to learn how to manage their feelings.

Why emotional regulation might be more challenging

- **Communication difficulties** – a child who experiences difficulties with communication may express their wants, needs or feelings through behaviours, particularly when they are unable to communicate effectively.
- **Sensory processing** – loud sounds, bright lights, certain textures and many other sensory stimuli can overwhelm some children, leading to big emotional reactions.
- **Cognitive delays** – a child may not fully understand what they're feeling or how to respond.
- **Social differences** – some children may struggle to read social cues or recognize others' emotions.
- **Anxiety or trauma** – past experiences or brain differences may make it harder for some children to stay calm, particularly if overwhelmed.



Emotional regulation in children with disability or developmental delay



What is a tantrum?

- Often a tantrum occurs when a child is trying to get something – a toy, a treat, attention – or get their way.
- During a tantrum, the child is somewhat in control and may stop the moment they get what they want, or if they realise it's not working.
- Remember: tantrums are typical for young children as they learn how to handle big feelings.

What is a meltdown?

- A meltdown happens when a child's brain is overloaded – possibly from sensory overload, stress, or frustration.
- A meltdown is not about getting something. The child isn't in control and can't just stop – even if they want to.
- Meltdowns can be common for children with autism, ADHD, developmental delay or sensory issues, but they can also happen to any child under stress.

What can we do to help?

Supporting a parent whose child is having a meltdown is all about being calm, non-judgmental, and helpful, without stepping on toes. Here's how to do that in a respectful and supportive way:

- Stay calm and non-judgmental – a kind look can go a long way
- Gently offer support – *"Is there anything I can do to help?"*
- Create space or reduce pressure – let others know to give the child and family space
- Be a calm presence – just standing nearby, calm and kind, can be reassuring—especially if the parent is feeling overwhelmed.

Responses that aren't helpful and can make things harder

- Judging or criticising: try to avoid comments like, *"they just need discipline"*, *"that wouldn't happen if you..."*, *"are you sure it's not just a tantrum?"* These can feel dismissive and hurtful.
- Touching the child (unless asked) – if a child is struggling physically, only step in if the parent or carer asks.
- Offering advice in the moment – a meltdown is not the right time for parenting tips or stories about your experiences.

Parents/carers may be feeling embarrassed, overwhelmed, isolated and judged. The best way to help is to be kind, patient, and supportive – even a simple *"You've got this, it's okay"* can make a world of difference.