



A Sensory Life

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How to Handle a Meltdown in the Classroom A Sensory Perspective

One of the biggest mistakes made by teachers and assistants in the classroom is in how they handle and respond to a “meltdown”. As a sensory based occupational therapist, I believe the biggest missing puzzle piece is in **understanding WHY a child has a meltdown**. Most teachers and staff have simply not been taught why the child may be having a meltdown and how to help them. **Unfortunately meltdowns often fall into the behavior category in our society**. Yet in my clinical opinion, there is a very small percentage of meltdowns which warrant being considered behavioral, especially with children with sensory differences (including but not limited to: ADHD/ADD, autism spectrum disorders, anxiety disorder, developmental disabilities) and sensory processing disorder.

IMPORTANT SENSORY CONCEPT

Children inherently want to please, they do not want to misbehave or get in trouble.

This concept is very important to remember when talking about meltdowns. The meltdown is often misunderstood for attention seeking or spoiled behavior or simply the child trying to get what they want out of the situation. This may be true in a few cases, but with many children it is often much more deep rooted than that.

Here are some of the most common reasons a child with sensory differences may have a meltdown in the classroom....

- Sensory overload from various stimuli (such as a loud and chaotic classroom, visual disorganization, or being bumped or touched unexpectedly by too many children)
- Dysregulation and the inability to maintain self-regulation and a ready state due to minimal or limited sensory tools and strategies in the classroom
- Sensory overload from a loud cafeteria or gym activity
- The inability to cope with a new or challenging situation
- Inability or difficulty in communicating wants and needs
- Difficulty with transitions, and lack of or minimal warning time to transition
- Lack of sleep or over tired
- Lack of proper nutrition or too much of the wrong food
- Change in routine within the classroom, possibly a substitute teacher
- Lack of essential sensory nutrition found through movement and play during recess

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Most meltdowns trigger a "fight or flight" reaction for the child's brain, especially children with sensory differences and needs. Therefore the meltdown lasts longer and is difficult to manage.

What Does "Fight or Flight" Look Like?

- Hitting, kicking, biting, spitting, pushing (especially while standing in line or in new challenging/overwhelming situations or activities)
- Trying to run or escape from the situation
- Trying to hide under something like a desk, table, or chair
- Burying themselves in a teacher's arms, avoiding all eye contact, or trying to curl up in a ball on the floor or at their desk
- Covering ears or eyes
- Crying or screaming
- Shutting down completely and not speaking or responding
- Even falling asleep unexpectedly

How do you Help and Respond with Respect for the Child?

Top Three Points to Remember

1. Physical restraint is NOT an acceptable solution.
2. Do not treat the meltdown as behavior...respond based on "fight or flight".
3. Be prepared and have a safe sensory retreat available for the child.

Children with sensory defensiveness perceive their environment as dangerous and painful based on how they process sensory information. Therefore their nervous system switches to the sympathetic nervous system and displays a "fight or flight" response. A child who has a difficult time processing and modulating sensory input can also have the tendency to switch to "fight or flight". And almost all sensory kiddos have a difficult time with self-regulation, in turn, a greater risk for "fight or flight" episodes.

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Take these steps to help the child recover from a meltdown:

1. Do NOT treat it from a behavioral stand point; your efforts will be fruitless. The brain is not responding in a cortical and cognitive fashion (thinking, judgment, and reasoning), it has shifted to the brainstem level during a “fight or flight” episode. **I feel this is the most important concept to grasp.**
2. Do not try to talk the child through it, calm, bargain, or rationalize. This in itself can be overwhelming and the child’s brain is not ready for this type of interaction yet.
3. Gently guide and direct the child away from the adverse stimuli and decrease sensory stimuli to a minimum.
4. Provide a “sensory retreat” for the child, such as a play tent loaded with pillows with other calming sensory tools (soft music, vibration, chewy/oral sensory tool, weighted blanket, noise cancelling headphones, calming fidget toy)
5. Allow for the child to come out of the sensory retreat on their own terms. Their nervous system will know when it is ready.

