

A Sensory Life

How to Handle a Meltdown in the Classroom A Sensory Perspective

Important sensory and developmental concept:

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

This concept is very important to remember when addressing a meltdown in the classroom or other school setting, such as in the gym or cafeteria. 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...a **sensory meltdown**.

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

- Sensory overload from one or more forms of sensory input (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 where acoustics are very intense, and the unique smells involved, both gym and cafeteria
- The inability to cope with a new or challenging situation or activity
- 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

What a sensory meltdown might look like:

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.

- 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



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How to respond to a sensory meltdown:

- Physical restraint is NOT an acceptable solution.
- Refrain from trying to talk through the situation, and definitely do not yell or raise your voice. Please do not respond to this situation from a behavioral stand point; your efforts will be fruitless. The brain is not processing 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.
- Please do not insist on eye contact, this is impossible for a brain that is dysregulated and in a sensory meltdown.
- Assess the environment and make changes for the child when possible, such as providing a quiet place to recover (a sensory retreat).
- Offer sensory tools that have been provided from the child’s family such as a weighted blanket, noise cancelling headphones, a fidget tool, or oral sensory tool.
- Offer a safe sensory retreat for the child, such as a play tent loaded with pillows (this is an essential sensory tool for all classrooms). More information on this topic can be found on ASensoryLife.com.
- Respect the sensory meltdown for exactly what it is...a neurological response to the environment. Respect, understanding, and empathy can make all of the difference in the world.

Thank you for taking the time to read this handout and for taking the first step in helping our children with sensory difference.

