

SEND &amp; INCLUSION · ALL GRADES

# Meltdown vs Tantrum

How to tell — and what to do

## Why this matters

Schools often respond to meltdowns the same way they respond to tantrums. This is the wrong response and makes meltdowns worse. The two look superficially similar — loud crying, big behaviour, a child apparently 'losing it.' But they have different CAUSES and need different responses.

## The difference at a glance

Tantrum	Meltdown
Goal-directed (wants something specific)	Not goal-directed — overwhelmed
Stops if no one watches	Doesn't stop — child can't control it
Calculated escalation	Loss of control
Child checks for response	Child is barely aware of you
Stops when child gets what they want	Stops when overload eases
Child is in control	Child is overwhelmed
Can be managed with consequences	Cannot be 'managed' through consequences
Common in toddlers, less so by school age	Common in autism, sensory needs, severe anxiety

## What a TANTRUM might look like



<p><b>Trigger</b></p> <p>Something specific is denied — a turn, a toy, an outcome the child wanted.</p>	<p><b>Behaviour</b></p> <p>Crying, shouting, sometimes throwing things. Often dramatic. Watching for adult response.</p>
<p><b>Resolution</b></p> <p>Stops when the child gets what they want, OR when it becomes clear the strategy won't work.</p>	<p><b>Right response</b></p> <p>Calm, neutral, don't reward the behaviour. State expectation. Offer face-saving exit. Reconnect when calm.</p>

## What a MELTDOWN might look like

<p><b>Trigger</b></p> <p>Sensory overload, accumulated stress, sudden change, exhaustion, sometimes nothing visible.</p>	<p><b>Behaviour</b></p> <p>Crying, screaming, sometimes self-injury or aggression. Child is NOT in control. Often little eye contact.</p>
<p><b>Resolution</b></p> <p>Doesn't stop when 'consequences' are imposed. Eases gradually as the nervous system recovers — minutes to hours.</p>	<p><b>Right response</b></p> <p>Reduce input. Quiet voice. Space. Don't ask questions. Don't give consequences. Sit with them. Recover slowly.</p>

## After a meltdown

When the child has recovered (and this can take an hour or more): 1. NORMALISE. 'That was hard. You're OK now. We're going to keep going.' 2. DON'T DEBRIEF FROM A PUNITIVE PLACE. Asking 'why did you do that?' makes a child who was overwhelmed feel ashamed for something they couldn't control. 3. LOOK FOR THE PATTERN. Was it noise? Hunger? Tiredness? A sudden change? Patterns help prevent. 4. ADJUST. If the same trigger keeps causing meltdowns, the trigger needs reducing. That's not 'giving in' — that's reducing demand to a manageable level.

## When you can't tell which it is

Sometimes you genuinely can't tell. Default to the meltdown response — calm, low-input, supportive — because:

- If it WAS a tantrum, you've responded calmly and not rewarded escalation.
- If it WAS a meltdown, you've helped, not hurt. The meltdown response is never wrong, even if it turns out to be a tantrum. The tantrum response IS wrong if it turns out to be a meltdown — it makes overwhelm worse.

