

CICC Preschool at Home: OT

By CICC Occupational Therapist Ad Rosszell

Tantrums vs. Meltdowns

It's hard to tell the difference between a tantrum and a meltdown. They can look alike, as both result in an upset child. Knowing the difference between the two can help you better understand and support your child in taming the tantrums and in managing the meltdowns. This takes practice, as you need to learn to read your child's reactions and try to respond accordingly.

Tantrums tend to be outbursts that are more intentional and are used as a way of getting something a child wants. They have a purpose and children are looking for a certain response. These are typical in toddlers and preschoolers and are considered behaviour based. Children can often stop a tantrum, once they get what they want, or when they get rewarded for using a more appropriate behaviour.

Meltdowns are more of a response or reaction to a child being overwhelmed with the situation or the environment. They do not have control over this or their feelings. These are considered sensory based. Once meltdowns start, children usually can't stop them. They tend to result in the child either being worn out and fatigued, or if the amount of sensory input is reduced, the child may feel less overwhelmed and be able to calm down. For example, taking the child out of an overcrowded, loud setting such as a family gathering, or the mall may reduce the sensory overload and help them calm down.

Strategies for tantrums: To ease tantrums, acknowledge the wants or needs of the child without giving into them. Make it clear that you understand what they want, but that it can't happen or can't happen at that time. "I know you want a cookie right now and that it's hard to wait, but you need to have your lunch first" or in simpler terms "First lunch, then cookie".

Strategies for Meltdowns: To ease or prevent meltdowns, you need to learn what triggers your child, e.g. noise, bright lights, unexpected touch, crowded places, etc. If you find your child is starting to appear overwhelmed, remove your child from the over-stimulating situation and find a quiet place to calm down ("Let's leave the family gathering for a little while and sit in your room or the car"). Let your child know you are there for them with a calm reassuring presence that is not too overstimulating. A hug, quiet song, rocking may help some children, while others just need their own quiet space to self-regulate. As the child calms down, you can help them by articulating their feelings ("It was very loud in there, and you felt overwhelmed. But now we are here, and you are fine.").

Both tantrums and meltdowns are difficult, especially in public, but take heart: they tend to lessen as children develop and are better able to understand their feelings and communicate them.

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