

Tantrum vs *meltdown*.

A side-by-side guide to telling them apart, what helps in the moment, and the words that land when emotions run high.

	Tantrum	Meltdown
Triggers	● Not getting what they want ● A non-preferred outcome (losing, being told no)	● Overstimulation ● Overwhelm ● Built-up distress
Presentation	● Quick to escalate ● Often stops when attention or the desired outcome is given	● Early warning signs are usually present ● Avoiding discomfort, seeking escape ● Does not ease when attention is provided
Aim	● Goal-directed, to achieve a desired outcome	● Not goal-directed ● A response to overwhelm
Strategies	● Set clear, consistent boundaries. This may trigger further tantrums; that is okay, children have tantrums. ● Don't give toys or rewards to end it ● Don't change the rules to suit them ● Resolve the situation before moving on ● Work through the emotions together afterwards ● If escalation continues, give space and time. Giving space during a tantrum, when it's safe to do so, can give children the opportunity to settle and try a different approach next time. Every family and child is different, these are general starting points and not a fixed rulebook.	In the moment, co-regulate ● Remove the source of overstimulation ● Offer calming input that suits your child (this is different for every child) ● Deep pressure through a hug ● A dark, quiet space Proactive, reduce the chance of a meltdown ● Increase predictability ("first / then" instructions, talking through the day or weekend, who is collecting them) ● Build deep-pressure sensory input into the day (hugs, chewy snacks, blowing bubbles, carrying library books) Deep pressure usually supports calming, but every child is different. Consult an OT for guidance on your child's sensory profile.

	Tantrum	Meltdown
Key phrases to use	● "It's hard when we don't get what we want." ● "It's not okay to hit or throw." ● "I'm standing back to keep us safe; I'll come back when you're being safe." ● "I'm here when you're ready." It's okay to say nothing, clearly state the boundary, and attempt redirection when you see signs of calm.	Connection first, then move on when the time is right. ● "It feels like too much." ● "It's okay to be upset." ● "Want a hug and a rest?" ● "First we'll have breakfast, then we'll go to school." ● "I wonder what you'll do at recess today, maybe a snack and a play?" ● "It's okay to have a hard time. We all have hard times." Physical connection: a hug, a back rub, gentle rocking together, holding hands.

01 | When a tantrum tips into a meltdown

Sometimes a tantrum can escalate into a meltdown, especially if a child becomes overwhelmed, distressed or unable to regulate their emotions. While a tantrum is typically goal-directed, prolonged frustration, sensory overload or emotional fatigue can push a child beyond their coping capacity.

Signs a tantrum is ending

- Seeking connection, asking for hugs
- Expressing needs more clearly

What to do: offer connection, calmly remind of the boundary, move on together and remind them you're there to help.

Warning signs to watch for

- Increased intensity or duration
- Loss of responsiveness to your usual strategies
- Signs of distress rather than frustration, panic, withdrawal or shutting down
- Attempts to escape the environment

Switch your approach

When this shift happens, stop using tantrum-based strategies (such as holding the boundary) and move to meltdown supports:

- Focus on co-regulation
- Reduce demands

- Remove sources of overstimulation
- Offer a calm, safe, predictable environment

● **IMPORTANT TO NOTE**

It is important to note that the priority at this stage is helping your child feel safe and regain regulation. The conversation about what happened can come later, once everyone is calm. This guide is general information and not a substitute for individual assessment. If you have concerns about your child's regulation or behaviour, speak with a qualified health professional. If you'd like tailored support understanding your child's sensory profile, regulation or behaviour, you're welcome to get in touch. Tamsyn Stephens, Occupational Therapist. AHPRA Reg. OCC0002575860.