



**FIRSTPATH**  
AUTISM



## 10 Tips for Managing a Meltdown



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## What do I do if...

The question we get asked most often is, “What do I do if my child has a meltdown?”

For children with autism, the best strategy is to prevent a meltdown from happening in the first place, which, I realize, is easier said than done. If you don’t lay the groundwork before a meltdown happens you place you and your child in a stressful situation, which will be even more difficult to manage.

Much of what we teach at FirstPath Autism is preventative and proactive. When you are only able to react to a situation, it suddenly becomes an emergency and the stress level soars. So it is extremely important that you practice appropriate behaviour when you and your child are not stressed – and make it fun.

You can do this by practicing with your child using, what we call, “Social Stories.” Such stories are role-playing exercises where you ask questions like “How do we behave at a restaurant?” “What do we do when we go shopping?”

Behaviour is a SKILL (like writing, reading, riding a bike). It takes teaching, practice and reinforcement to learn *good behaving*. Reactive strategies on an emergency basis are sometimes your only choice. But just being reactive when a child is having a meltdown is like asking your child to write the letter “A,” when the child hasn’t learned yet to write the letter “A.”

Here are ten simple reactive strategies you may find helpful when a meltdown occurs.

- 1) **Always take steps to ensure your child and people near your child are safe.**  
For example, don’t allow your child to grab something that could be used to hurt others. And make sure your child doesn’t hurt himself. For example, if a child is head banging against a hard surface, safely place your hand or something soft between the child’s head and the surface.
- 2) **Do not pay undue attention to the meltdown.**  
This does not mean you should ignore your child altogether. Don’t use lots of words; don’t lecture; and don’t bargain, argue, or negotiate. When your child is upset, he is not likely to listen to you. If the child wants attention, doing those types of things will only reinforce your child wanting to have a meltdown the next time he wants attention. Or, if the child is engaging in a meltdown to *delay* something he doesn’t want to do, the longer you talk, the longer the delay, and so the child has an investment in keeping the meltdown going as long as possible.
- 3) **Stay calm.**  
This is usually easier said than done, especially when out in public, but you

will have to fake it as best you can, if necessary. If you, as the parent, start visibly “*losing it*” (raising your voice for example), that will only make matters worse and adds more stress to an already stressful situation. It will not allow you to think clearly and it can inadvertently reinforce a *meltdown for attention*.

- 4) **Reduce stimulation levels ... if you can.**  
This may be hard to do in certain public places. But we are specifically talking about sensory issues. So it’s a good idea to lower your voice and not bombard your child with lots of words. If possible, lower lighting levels and don’t touch your child unless necessary. Also make sure that people don’t crowd around your child. Even for a meltdown that is not maintained by a sensory function, most people who become *upset* will become somewhat sensory-sensitive. So, reducing sensory stimuli whenever possible is almost always a very good thing to do.
- 5) **If you use visual cues for your child, now is the time to use them**  
Use of visuals will help decrease your use of verbal over-stimulation and many of our children learn more through their eyes than through their ears.
- 6) **For a minor meltdown.**  
If you can wait out, that’s good. However, that might not be possible in certain community environments. In that case, as quickly and as safely as possible, you should escort your child to a quieter place, where you have more control and where this is not so much sensory stimulation. But if you decide to use the *wait it out* strategy you may need to allow your child to scream and cry. Every minute or two, briefly remind your child what he should be doing. He will eventually learn that the meltdown is not working and also how to get out of the meltdown (this is provided in your brief reminders). Also, meltdowns take a lot of energy, like a thunderstorm, and the child can only “storm” for so long before wearing out.
- 7) **It is best to interrupt a meltdown when it is just beginning.**  
Don’t wait until a meltdown has gathered steam and started spinning out of control. This could be as simple as a quick re-direction and reminding him of what he will earn based on good behaviour, at the very onset of a meltdown.
- 8) **Try something new and unexpected.**  
If you have a pattern of doing the *same dance* when dealing with your child during a meltdown, you might try what is called a **Stimulus Change strategy**. In other words, do something that the child is totally not expecting. Don’t use the same words. Spin in a circle. Doing something

totally unexpected could interrupt a meltdown that is just starting. If you can do this before it gathers steam, you can totally redirect your child. For a full-blown meltdown, grab your child's attention long enough to quickly move the child to a different location.

9) **Never give in during a meltdown.**

This is very important. If your child wants a toy, do not reinforce the notion that throwing a meltdown is how one gets a toy, because that will be the tool your child will use in the future anytime he wants a toy ... or anything else. And *giving in* has a cumulative negative effect as every time you *give in*; you strengthen the meltdown even more and make it harder to break in the future. However, it is important during non-meltdown times, to practice with the child an appropriate way, say, to get a toy, and make sure you honor those appropriate requests as much as possible while the child is learning this new appropriate way to request.

10) **After the meltdown is over, it is over.**

Let you and your child rest after a meltdown. Discuss what happened later, during a non-stressful time. Establish a clear expectation about what is appropriate in the future, and not in a lecturing way, but in a pleasant and instructional way. And don't forget to teach and practice new behavioral skills with your child – the more practice, the better the child will get at behaving appropriately. Just like riding a bike.