

*Dysregulation, Meltdowns and Shutdowns:*  
**A Guide for Parents**



# Dysregulation, Meltdowns and Shutdowns: A Guide for Parents

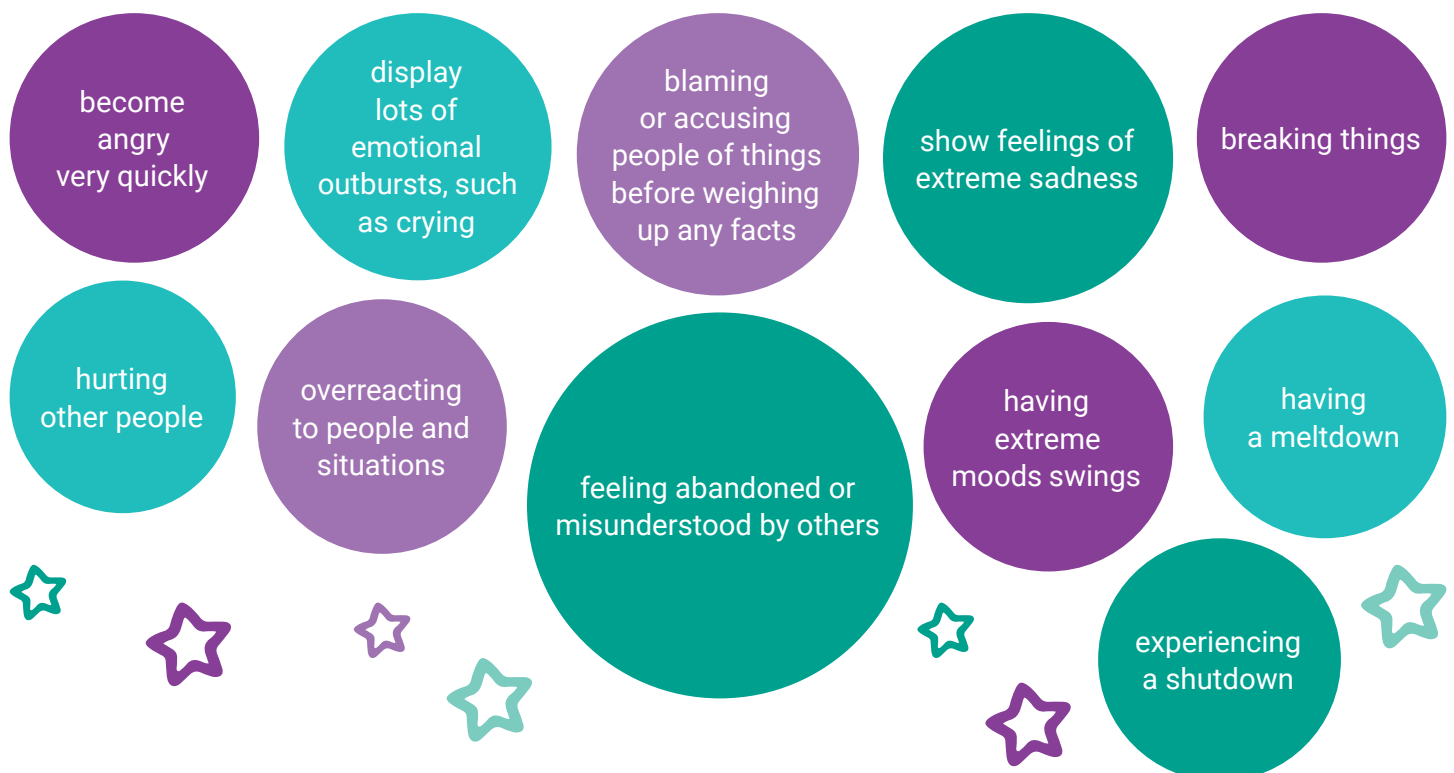
If you have an Autistic child, you might find at times that their emotional responses to certain situations might be displayed as emotional dysregulation, which can result in a meltdown or a shutdown. It's important to know what these are, what they look like and how you can support your child.

## What is dysregulation?

If you have self-regulation, it means you are able to regulate your own response to a situation in terms of your behaviour and emotions. Someone with self-regulation is able to understand how other people might be feeling and has developed inbuilt strategies to calm themselves when they feel anxious. Their reactions are seen to be a reasonable response to the particular situation.

Dysregulation, also known as emotional dysregulation, is when someone is unable to control their response to a situation. It can cause great distress to that person. It can be caused by an inability to see a situation from another person's perspective or difficulty in recognising emotions. It can also be as a result of overwhelming sensory stimulation or someone's reaction to unexpected changes during their day or routine. Too much social interaction or too many demands placed upon someone can elicit a dysregulated response. A child with Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) finds managing these types of situations very difficult and therefore the response to the build-up of stress from these can be dysregulation.

During a period of dysregulation, you might see your child:



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## What is a meltdown?

A meltdown is the response to an overwhelming situation, causing the child to lose control of their behaviour. You might have heard of the phrase 'fight or flight', which refers to the physiological response of the body to a threatening or stressful situation. If someone feels they can't escape, they might fight or freeze. A meltdown is similar to the body's fight response. During a meltdown, a child's loss of control can manifest in verbal and physical ways, such as loud screaming, shouting and crying or hitting, kicking and biting. For some children, a meltdown involves both physical and verbal aggression.

It is important to understand that a meltdown is not a temper tantrum.

It does not mean that your child is being 'naughty'. It is the result of them feeling highly anxious and overwhelmed. It is an uncontrolled response and therefore your child is not choosing to behave in this manner. Meltdowns are distressing for the child; they are also distressing to view as a parent or onlooker.

## What is a shutdown?

If a meltdown is the 'fight' response to an overwhelming situation, a shutdown is a 'freeze' response. It can be very quiet and might go unnoticed by an onlooker who is not looking for this type of response. Your child may go into what looks like a trance, not focusing on anything around them. They may retreat into themselves and find a safe space away from others in which to hide. They become very quiet and withdrawn as a result of not being able to take in any more information and their body seems to shut down as it is completely overwhelmed.

Sometimes, a meltdown can then become a shutdown. This might be misunderstood as the person 'feeling better', but actually, a shutdown doesn't mean the distress has been reduced. Your child may show the outward signs of stress and anxiety with a meltdown, then withdraw into a shutdown until those stress levels are feeling more manageable.

Just like a meltdown, your child is not choosing this behaviour: do not treat it as sulking or rude because they have no control over this. Your support is what is required in these situations.

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## Supporting Your Child During a Period of Dysregulation or Meltdown

Each time your child experiences a meltdown or a shutdown, you'll learn a bit more about how to support your child. Here are some things that might help them:

Make sure they are safe. Remove anything that they may hurt themselves on. Also, remove other people who may get hurt.

Stay calm. Don't raise your own voice or start to tell them off. Maintain a handle on your own emotions, even if you are feeling distressed about what you are seeing. Your child needs someone to show them that everything will be okay.

Give them time and space. They may need time to rest after a meltdown or a shutdown as the experience is exhausting.

Don't try to reason with them; this is not the time to talk about what triggered the meltdown or shutdown.

Be there. Don't feel you have to constantly talk to them; your child just knowing you are there will help enormously. Some children may like you to stroke their back; others will not. Learn what helps your child.



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## Preventing Meltdown and Shutdowns

You will not be able to prevent your child from ever having a meltdown or a shutdown, but with some forward planning, you may be able to reduce their frequency. Try some of these:

Provide your child with information about what to expect in a situation or on any particular day. A visual timetable can be an excellent way to show your child what their day will look like. A 'Now and Next' board can help those tricky transitions between activities they might not enjoy and their favourite ones.

Think about ways that you can reduce sensory overload. Would your child benefit from ear defenders? Can you reduce lighting?

Provide a distraction if you can see the warning signs of a meltdown or shutdown.

Provide your child with a stress toy or paper to rip up to help them to express frustration, then do something that might help to divert your child's focus, such as listening to calming music or laying under a weighted blanket.

Keep a log of each incidence of a meltdown or shutdown. You might be able to identify a pattern or particular triggers, which you can then avoid.

Teach relaxation techniques to your child. This can be a fun way to spend some time together and they will benefit from the activities. Things like using a fidget toy, going for a walk, listening to music, breathing techniques and reading might help them. They might also benefit from activities such as bouncing on a trampoline, carrying heavy items or tight hugs and applying firm pressure to their body for deep pressure therapy.



Disclaimers:

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