



how to calm an autistic meltdown

**INCLUDES 21+
CALM DOWN BOX IDEAS**

INTRODUCTION

Most, if not all, parents of children aged 2 and older have experienced a temper tantrum in their lifetime, but few people truly understand the difference between a tantrum and an autistic meltdown. On the surface, they look pretty similar, but while temper tantrums are often goal-driven behaviors that are fueled by an audience, autistic meltdowns typically occur in response to feelings of overwhelm and occur with or without spectators.

Temper tantrums are often a manipulation ploy small children use to try and get what they want, and can typically be rectified through appropriate discipline. Autistic meltdowns, on the other hand, can happen at any age, and are more emotional and longer lasting. A meltdown typically begins with warning signals called 'rumblings', which are characterized as a build up of emotions that cause screaming, stimming, pacing, and other behaviors that indicate the person is about to lose control, and if not redirected in time, can lead to an explosive rage.

Unfortunately, little can be done to stop a meltdown when it's in full force. Unlike temper tantrums, autistic meltdowns cannot be lessened through rewards and bribes as the purpose of the meltdown isn't to obtain something. There is no end goal other than gaining control over an overwhelming situation, and caregivers are often left feeling helpless.

7 STRATEGIES TO CALM AN AUTISTIC MELTDOWN

While temper tantrums can seemingly come out of nowhere, autistic meltdowns typically follow a predictable flow – rumbling, rage, and recovery – and there are certain things caregivers can do to help manage the experience.

- 1. Be proactive.** Keep a meltdown journal in which you record what happened before, during, and after the meltdown so you can look for consistencies.
- 2. Remove triggers.** Once you've identified the things that typically precipitate a meltdown, like crowds or loud noises, come up with an action plan to help avoid them wherever possible.
- 3. Recognize warning signs.** The rumbling phase of an autistic meltdown often manifests itself in such a way that caregivers can recognize the warning signs. The individual may tense up or withdraw, or they may exhibit more external signs like stimming, pacing, or talking under their breath. Whatever the predecessor is, early intervention is key in ensuring a full-blown meltdown doesn't occur.
- 4. Distract.** Once you're able to recognize the warning signs of an impending meltdown, distraction can sometimes help avoid the behavior from escalating. Focus on an activity that offers comfort but that isn't too overwhelming.
- 5. Stay calm.** Lead by example by taking deep breaths, avoiding sudden movements and actions, and talking in a soft voice to help instill a sense of calm in everyone.

6. Remove the individual from the situation. Wherever possible, remove the person from the situation completely so they can calm down.

7. Allow stimming (if safe). Stimming helps with self-regulation and should not be intercepted unless the individual is hurting him or herself.

Of course, life isn't always predictable, and there will be times when it's simply not possible to avoid triggers and redirect behavior, which can be very stressful for caregivers. The good news is that there are certain tools that can be used to help lessen the magnitude of a meltdown once it starts, which can be put together as part of a 'Calm Down Box.'

WHAT IS A CALM DOWN BOX?

Simply put, a Calm Down Box is a collection of tools that help regulate emotions and promote a sense of calm and relaxation. The contents of the box are specific to the person in need as no two autistic individuals are the same and each respond to different strategies and techniques. The trick is to find out what works for your child.

DO YOU NEED A CALM DOWN BOX?

Only you can decide if you need a Calm Down Box, but they can make a world of difference in helping to keep your child calm in overwhelming situations that cannot be avoided, like doctors' offices, busy airports, and even family gatherings.

It will take a little trial and error on your part to find a set of tools that work, but having a Calm Down Box at the ready when a meltdown threatens to erupt can make a huge difference in helping to keep big emotions under control.

It's important to keep in mind that meltdowns are more difficult for your child than they are for you. While it might seem like they are simply misbehaving – which can be very frustrating! – meltdowns are a result of intense feelings of overwhelm, and many autistic people feel embarrassed and guilty for their actions once they've calmed down.

Having a set of tools to regulate emotions and restore a sense of calm will benefit everyone.

WHAT SHOULD YOUR CALM DOWN BOX INCLUDE?

There are heaps of different things you can include in your child's Calm Down Box, and if you have an open mind, it can actually be quite fun to put together a toolkit with your child. While caregivers often prefer their child didn't stim and draw attention to themselves, allowing your child to experiment with different props to see which ones give them the most comfort will not only validate their need for self-regulation, but it will also help them feel more in control. When they know they have tangible objects at their disposal to help them deal when life feels overwhelming, they will feel better able to manage their emotions.

I've gathered together 21 effective tools you should consider when putting together your child's Calm Down Box with a brief explanation of each on the pages to follow.

NOTE: If you are interested in seeing where you can find out more about these items so you can purchase them or make them yourself, I've put together a list with links, which you can view here.

1. Weighted lap pad: Lap pads offer a great way to take advantage of the benefits of deep pressure therapy while on the go. The extra weight helps calm the nervous system, and a lap pad can be applied to an individual's lap, back, or shoulders for sensory input when needed.

2. Adjustable ear defenders: Ear defenders are perfect for blocking out overwhelming noises from large crowds as well as any other difficult noises or triggers that might cause a meltdown.

3. Calm down jar: The attention-grabbing sparkly objects within these bottles coupled with the auditory component of the glass beads makes these an excellent tool for diverting meltdowns.

4. Squeeze balls: Perfect for helping children (and adults!) focus, squeeze balls also help alleviate anxiety in high-stress situations.

5. Essential oils: Known to help children stay calm during transitions and sleep more soundly, more and more people are turning to essential oils to help restore and maintain a sense of calm in the face of autistic meltdowns.

6. Collection of calming songs: Soft, relaxing music is said to help reduce the severity of meltdowns in autistic children, and the prevalence of smartphones makes this an easy tool to have on hand if and when a meltdown occurs.

7. Anger Management Calming Strategy Cards: It's important to help your child differentiate their emotions as well as the intensity with which they feel them, and these Calming Strategy Cards (which are free to download here!) offer a great tool to empower your child to choose different strategies to help manage big emotions.

8. Bubbles: Slow, deep breathing is a well-known relaxation technique, and if a child is unable to engage in slow, deliberate breathing, blowing bubbles is an excellent tool to help restore a sense of calm.

9. Kaleidoscope: Kaleidoscopes help decrease stress levels by minimizing distractions and increasing focus, making them a simple and effective calming tool while on the go.

10. Fidget toys: Fidget toys are fabulous for self-regulation and help children focus by promoting movement and tactile input. They come in many different shapes and sizes and serve a variety of sensory needs. You can find heaps of them on Amazon!

11. Dreampad music app: The new Dreampad music app includes a rhythmic breathing exercise to reduce stress, engage the nervous system's relaxation response, and lower blood pressure and heart rate. You can download it here.

12. I spy bottle: Similar to a calm down jar, an I Spy bottle is a fabulous tool to redirect focus and promote relaxation.

13. Pipe cleaners and popsicle sticks: As strange as it sounds, pipe cleaners and popsicle sticks can help teach kids how to be more flexible. Read more about how to use this technique over on Connected Families.

14. Chewing gum: For some children, chewing gum can help reduce anxiety and increase focus while also making transitions less stressful. It can also help alleviate a child's dependence on fidget toys and make them less likely to bite clothes, toys, fingers, etc.

15. Books: Books offer a great way to not only teach kids about their meltdowns, but also make them feel less alone by showing them that other people experience them as well. There are heaps of great books to choose from that include relatable stories, coping strategies, and workbooks. 'Peter Panda Melts Down' by Artie Bennett, 'Totally Chill: My Complete Guide to Staying Cool, A Stress Management Workbook for Kids with Social, Emotional, or Sensory Sensitivities' by Christopher Lynch, and 'Angry Octopus: An Anger Management Story introducing active progressive muscular relaxation and deep breathing' by Lori Lite are 3 great books to start with.

16. Favorite shows on an iPad: If you're on the go and cannot avoid a trigger situation and/or sense a meltdown coming on, equipping your child with a pair of noise-cancelling headphones so they can watch their favorite shows on an iPad is a simple distraction that can work wonders.

17. Mirror and paper: For older kids, a great strategy to help understand big emotions is to give them a mirror so they can observe their emotions, and then provide them with a pen and paper so they can express how they feel through drawing, writing, etc. This offers a great way for caregivers to connect with and understand what is going on, and work with the child to come up with solutions that promote relaxation.

18. Pinwheel: Similar to bubbles, a pinwheel is a great tool to help teach children the art of deep breathing to reduce stress and anxiety, and the spinning movement combined with bright colors can help distract them from meltdown triggers before big emotions take over.

19. Activate the vagus nerve: The vagus nerve is the most important nerve in the parasympathetic system, which is sometimes referred to as our 'rest and digest' system. If the vagus nerve isn't working correctly, it can lead to all kinds of disorders, including anxiety and depression, and activating the vagus nerve through cold exposure, singing, laughing, deep breathing, exercise, use of probiotics, and massage may reduce the severity of autistic meltdowns. You can read more about the importance of the vagus nerve [here](#).

20. Calm down cubes: Cool Down Cubes offer a fabulous DIY tool to calm down an angry child by allowing them to come up with their own strategies to cool off when they become overwhelmed. Learn how to make your own set of Cool Down Cubes [here](#).

21. Hug: While there are lots of different tools you can make or buy to help calm an autistic meltdown, sometimes the best remedy is a big, deep, bear hug. Just be mindful of how overwhelmed your child is feeling as not all kids like to be hugged, and if a child already feels overwhelmed, they may not welcome the additional sensory input.

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A FINAL NOTE

Being the parent or caregiver of a child with autism is not easy. Not by a long stretch! From figuring out the best therapies and school options to coping with sleep deprivation and feelings of loneliness, the additional stress of dealing with meltdowns can be extremely overwhelming.

In 2016, the Centers for Disease Control's Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring reported that roughly 1 in 68 children in the United States has some form of Autism Spectrum Disorder (source), which means there are many other moms, dads, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, grandmas, granddads, and second cousins twice removed who are navigating the rocky waters of autism right along with you.

Reach out to them via support groups in your community, find them in online forums, develop friendships with them, and remember: **you are not alone.**

