



Supporting Shutdowns & Meltdowns

A no-shame parent guide for emotional spikes

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Important note

This resource is intended to support understanding and good practice in neuro-inclusive workplace design. It provides general guidance and does not constitute legal, medical, or clinical advice. Organisations should apply the principles in line with their own policies, regulatory obligations, and professional judgement.

If you're here, you're probably trying to help... and it feels confusing, intense, or exhausting.

Shutdowns and meltdowns are not failures of parenting. They are **nervous-system events**, not choices.

This guide helps you understand **what's happening**, **what actually helps**, and **how to protect the relationship** in the process.

First: an important reframe

Your child is not:

- being dramatic
- trying to control the situation
- testing boundaries
- choosing this reaction

Their nervous system has crossed its **capacity limit**.

Once that happens, **reasoning, teaching, and correcting stop working**.

Support comes first. Learning comes later.

Meltdown vs Shutdown (quick clarity)

Meltdown looks like:

- crying, yelling, anger
- throwing things or pushing away
- intense emotion that spills outward
- frantic or explosive energy

Shutdown looks like:

- silence or withdrawal
- blankness or freezing
- inability to speak or respond
- collapse, sleep, or "checking out"

Both are **protective responses**.

Neither is misbehaviour.

What's happening in the nervous system

Before the spike:

- sensory load builds (noise, light, people)
- emotional load builds (pressure, demands, expectations)
- cognitive load builds (instructions, transitions, decisions)
- masking or holding it together uses energy

Then:

- capacity is exceeded
- the nervous system flips into **survival mode**

At this point:

- your child cannot “calm down”
- consequences don't teach
- words may not land

The body is in charge now.

What helps *during* a meltdown or shutdown

1. Lower demand immediately

This is the most important step.

That means:

- stop asking questions
- pause instructions
- remove expectations
- delay consequences

Even helpful demands add load right now.

2. Reduce sensory input

If possible:

- lower noise
- dim lights
- reduce people
- move to a quieter space

You are not giving in...
you're reducing nervous-system threat.

3. Keep your presence steady and simple

You don't need to say much.

Helpful phrases:

- "You're safe."
- "I'm here."
- "You don't need to explain."
- "This will pass."

Calm presence > perfect words.

4. Don't force eye contact, talking, or touch

During overwhelm:

- eye contact can feel threatening
- talking can be impossible
- touch can escalate

Let your child lead.

If touch helps *them*, they'll show you.

5. Focus on safety, not behaviour

Your only goals in the moment:

- no one gets hurt
- the environment is contained
- the nervous system can settle

That's it.

What *doesn't* help (even if well-meant)

Avoid:

- “Why are you doing this?”
- “Calm down.”
- “You’re fine.”
- Lecturing or explaining
- Threats or punishments
- Reasoning or logic
- Taking it personally

These increase threat... and prolong the episode.

After the storm passes

When regulation returns, your child may:

- feel embarrassed or ashamed
- feel exhausted or tearful
- want space
- act as if nothing happened

All of this is normal.

What helps *after* (later, not immediately)

- gentle reassurance:
“*That was a lot. You’re not in trouble.*”
- physical comfort **if welcomed**
- rest and recovery time
- returning to normal without drama

This is **repair**, not avoidance.

Talking about it later (optional)

Only when:

- everyone is calm
- there’s no urgency
- your child has capacity

Keep it simple:

- “What was hard about that?”
- “What might help next time?”

- “How can I support you sooner?”

This is **collaboration**, not correction.

A gentle truth for parents

Meltdowns and shutdowns usually mean:

- too much demand
- too little recovery
- environments that overwhelm
- expectations that don't match capacity

They are **signals**, not moral failures.

Looking after *yourself* matters too

Supporting emotional spikes is hard.

You are allowed to:

- step away once safety is established
- feel overwhelmed too
- need support
- make mistakes
- not have the perfect response

Your nervous system matters as well.

When to seek extra support

Consider additional help if:

- meltdowns are frequent and intense
- recovery takes days
- school or home feels constantly unsafe
- you're burning out as a parent

Support is not a sign you've failed.
It's a sign you're paying attention.

Closing note

Your child isn't giving you a hard time.
They're **having** a hard time.

Your calm presence teaches safety more deeply than any consequence ever could.

You don't need to fix the storm.
You just need to **be the steady place it can pass through.**

That is real support.

