

Meltdowns...Par for the Sensory Course

I think it is quite possible the word "**meltdown**" is the most frequently used term and struggle for parents of sensory kiddos. A meltdown can be referred to a child who is kicking and screaming and biting or spitting...or a child who simply can't stop crying....or a child reacting to a situation in a disruptive and aggressive manner...or simply losing all emotional control.

As a sensory OT I think the biggest missing puzzle piece is in understanding WHY a child has a meltdown. Most parents, teachers, caregivers, etc simply have not been taught why the sensory child has a meltdown and how to help them. Unfortunately meltdowns often fall into the behavior category in our society. Yet in my professional opinion, there is a very very small percentage of meltdowns which warrant being considered behavioral, especially with our sensory kiddos! **IMPORTANT SENSORY CONCEPT: Children inherently want to please, they do not want to misbehave or get in trouble.** I think this concept is SO very important to remember when talking about meltdowns. The meltdown is often misunderstood for attention seeking or spoiled behavior or simply the child trying to get what they want out of the situation. This may be true in a few cases, but with our sensory kiddos it is often much more deep rooted than that. Here are some of the most common reasons a sensory child may have a meltdown....

- Sensory overload
- Dysregulation and the inability to maintain **self-regulation** and a ready state
- "Fight or flight" response to sensory overload yet mistaken for a meltdown
- The inability to cope with a new or challenging situation
- Inability to communicate wants and needs
- Difficulty with transitions
- Lack of sleep or over tired
- Lack of proper nutrition or too much of the wrong food
- Change in routine

HOW TO HELP!

I truly believe most meltdowns trigger a "fight or flight" reaction for the child's brain, especially with sensory kiddos. Therefore the meltdown lasts longer and is difficult to manage. Here are my three recommendations...

#1 Do not treat the meltdown as behavior.

#2 Try to determine if there is a sensory trigger or lack of essential sensory input (too much screen time).

#3 Follow the steps below in regards to "fight or flight".

"Fight or Flight" Response

Understanding and Addressing the Sympathetic Nervous System

Research shows that children with sensory processing disorder and sensory processing differences have a greater tendency to switch from the PNS (parasympathetic nervous system) to the SNS (sympathetic nervous system) based on an adverse stimuli or an environment with new or a great amount of sensory stimuli.

Parasympathetic nervous system: This is where our nervous remains most of the time and when we are at "ready state" for learning, social interaction, and alert and awake.

Sympathetic nervous system: The state of "fight or flight". This part of our nervous system is intended for safety and the ability to react to a perceived dangerous situation.

Why do we See our Sensory Kids in “Fight or Flight”?

Children with sensory defensiveness or sensory over-responsivity perceive their environment as dangerous and painful based on how they process sensory information. Therefore their nervous system switches to the SNS and displays a “fight or flight” response. A child who has a difficult time processing and modulating sensory input can also have the tendency to switch to “fight or flight”. And almost all sensory kiddos have a difficult time with self-regulation, in turn, a greater risk for “fight or flight” episodes.

What Does “Fight or Flight” Look Like?

There are many different manifestations of “fight or flight” but some common responses may be:

- Hitting, kicking, biting, spitting, pushing (especially while standing in line or in new challenging/overwhelming situations or activities)
- Trying to run or escape from the situation
- Trying to hide under something like a desk, table, or chair
- Burying themselves in a teacher’s arms, avoiding all eye contact, or trying to curl up in a ball on the floor or at their desk
- Covering ears or eyes
- Crying or screaming
- Hiding in the closet, under couch cushions, or under covers in bed
- Shutting down completely and not speaking or responding
- Even falling asleep unexpectedly

What Do You Do? How to Respond...

#1 Do NOT treat it from a behavioral stand point; your efforts will be fruitless. The brain is not responding in a cortical manor (thinking, judgment, and reasoning), it has shifted to brainstem level during a “fight or flight” episode. **I think this is the most important concept to grasp.**

#2 Remove the child from the adverse stimuli and decrease sensory stimuli to a minimum.

#3 Provide a **sensory retreat** for the child, such as a play tent loaded with pillows with other calming sensory tools (soft music, vibration, chewy/oral sensory tool, weighted blanket, noise cancelling headphones, calming fidget toy)

#4 Allow for the child to come out of the sensory retreat on their own terms. Their nervous system will know when it is ready.

#5 Do not try to talk the child through it, calm, bargain, or rationalize. This in itself can be overwhelming and the child’s brain is not ready for that type of interaction yet.

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