

Trends is published regularly throughout the school year by **Cornerstone Day School** as a service to New Jersey school professionals. Written by the educational professionals at Cornerstone, each issue highlights one important topic with practical applications for those working with students with emotional and behavioral problems.

# TRENDS

## MANAGING MELTDOWNS

A meltdown is a condition wherein a student temporarily loses control due to his/her emotional responses to environmental factors. He/she may become loud and disruptive, and display verbal and physical aggression. It may appear that the student has lost control over a single, specific issue; however, this is very rarely the case. Meltdowns are most often a response to an accumulation of a number of frustrations that may have occurred over days, even weeks. Unfortunately, there's not a lot you can do once a meltdown occurs. The best thing you can do is to train yourself to recognize a meltdown before it happens and take steps to prevent it.

### Identify precursor behaviors:

The behaviors that indicate a child is at risk of a meltdown vary from student to student, but generally include: fidgeting, rapid movements, grimacing, and tensing of the muscles. The student may display name calling, swearing, refusal to cooperate, and verbal threats. Students may make noises (grunting or whining) and display increases or decreases in voice volume.

### Implement preventative strategies:

Increase your proximity to the student. For some students, standing near them, may be calming (for others it may have the opposite effect). You may attempt to acknowledge what you see ("you seem to be feeling upset or frustrated"). It is often a good idea to pair this acknowledgement with a prompt for the student to engage in a previously taught self-calming activity, e.g. taking some deep breaths, putting head down on the desk, going to the bathroom or getting a drink of water. Many students on the autism spectrum or with ADHD may benefit from visual information about what to do, as their ability to process verbal information may be compromised. It is often a good idea to identify environmental supports like a space in the classroom or in another room that can serve as a "safe place" for students to calm themselves. Choosing the best intervention is typically a process of trial and error, but some combination of these strategies will generally be helpful.

### Managing an active meltdown:

Sometimes our best efforts at prevention may not be successful and students will enter a state of active meltdown. The behaviors they display may include

screaming, biting, hitting, and/or destroying property. Other students may display complete withdrawal, with no verbalization or movement, and may appear unresponsive. No intervention is possible at this point to stop the meltdown and our focus is on safety. We should implement plans to protect the student, others and environment. If possible, we should prompt the student to go to his/her "safe place". If that is not possible, remove others from proximity. Use brief simple directions, delivered slowly in a calm voice, and one step at a time. Don't discipline or offer rewards. Have a clear plan and follow it.

### After the meltdown:

Allow the student to rest until she/he appears relaxed and responsive. You can check the student's responsiveness by prompting her/him to engage in a learned relaxation routine, or by redirecting the student to a preferred activity. Do not attempt to debrief the meltdown with the student until some time has passed and you are confident she/he has recovered. Record the event for later analysis, paying attention to the student's appearance, duration and intensity, and what appeared to work and what didn't.

Meltdowns can be triggered by many different problems that students encounter in a typical day, at school and at home. Often the inability to regulate emotions is the result of an underlying mental health problem (anxiety and/or depression) or a neurological disorder such as Autism Spectrum Disorder or ADHD. Whatever combination of child and environmental variables may result in meltdowns, most mental health professionals believe that children who have frequent emotional outbursts are lacking certain skills that would help them better handle situations that cause them frustration, anxiety or anger. These are skills that can be taught and modeled by teachers, parents and peers. They include:

- Impulse control
- Problem solving
- Delaying gratification
- Negotiating
- Communicating wants and needs to adults
- Knowing what's appropriate or expected in a given situation
- Self-calming



*"Integrating state of the art psychiatric treatment and outstanding academics within a dynamic school environment."*

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### References:

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- Greene, R. (2010) The Explosive Child. New York, NY : Harper Collins, Publishing