Taming Tantrums and Meltdowns: Techniques for Caregivers of Children with Autism

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The purpose of this presentation is to provide education and general information.

This is not a replacement for participating in therapy with a clinician who can address your child’s specific needs.

If your child is engaging in substantial difficult behavior (e.g., aggression, self-injury), I encourage you to seek out treatment with a therapist who specializes in these issues.
What does “Meltdown” Mean to You?
Tantrums and ASD

- Children with ASD have more tantrums than typically developing children, those with language impairments only, and those with ADHD only (e.g., Tureck, et al., 2013)

- ASD symptom severity is positively correlated with severity of tantrum behavior (e.g., Konst, et al., 2013)

- Tantrum behavior has been related to symptoms of anxiety and depression (e.g., Quek et al., 2012)
Features of ASD that Impact Behavior

- Communication Deficits
- Difficulties with Social Interactions
- Challenges with Peer Relationships
- Preference for Routine/Sameness
- Restricted Interests
- Sensory Sensitivities and/or Aversions
Related Challenges

- Developmental and Cognitive Delays
- Trouble with Perspective Taking/Theory of Mind
- Difficulty with Generalization
- Challenges with Emotion Regulation
- Anxiety
- Inattention
- Impulsivity
- Processing Speed
Screaming
Hitting
Dropping to Floor
Refusing

Frustration about Communication Problems
Limited Coping Skills
Trouble Initiating Social Interactions

Difficulty Understanding Emotions
Anxiety about the Unknown
Sensory Sensitivities
The ABC’s of Behavior

A → B → C

(Antecedent) → (Behaviour) → (Consequence)
The ABC’s of Behavior

- **Antecedents**
  - Events or circumstances that occur *before* a behavior
  - Make a behavior more or less likely to occur
    - Hungry? Sleepy? Sick? Dirty Diaper?

- **Behaviors**

- **Consequences**
  - Events that occur *after* a behavior
  - To increase a behavior → provide desirable consequence
  - To decrease a behavior → provide undesirable consequence
The Importance of Data

- May allow you to see patterns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date/Time</th>
<th>Antecedent</th>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Consequence</th>
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- Critical part of determining the "function"
<table>
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<th>Functions of Behavior</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Attention</strong></td>
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<td>• When I want social interaction</td>
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<td><strong>Tangible</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• When I want an object or activity</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Escape</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• When I want to get away from something I don’t like</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sensory</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• When I want certain sensory input</td>
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Function Should Guide the Intervention

- Identify the Function
- Modify the Environment
- Teach a Substitute Behavior
- Reduce Reinforcement of Tantrums
Modify the Environment

• Make the world more predictable
  o Schedules
  o Routines
  o Timers
  o Visual supports
  o Physical structure

• Give effective directions

• Increase specific praise and positive attention for desired behaviors
Visual Supports for Transitions/Routines

Stop

First: work

Then: computer

Pause
Give Effective Directions

- Ensure you have attention first
- Use a firm (not loud) voice
- Use specific and simple directions
- Use physical gestures such as pointing
- Use positive directions
  - “Stay by my side” rather than
  - “Don’t run down the aisle”
- Reward when he follows your direction
- Avoid questions, chain directions, and vague directions
Praise and Reward Desired Behaviors

- Types of Rewards:
  - **Verbal Rewards** – praise (e.g., “I like it when you...”” “Thank you for...”)
  - **Physical Rewards** – hugs, pats on the back, high five, tickles, etc.
  - **Activity Rewards** – things you do with the child that the child likes (e.g., playing a game, reading a story, making something together)
  - **Nonsocial Rewards** – include things such as toys, food, stickers, etc. ALWAYS combine nonsocial rewards with social rewards such as praise

- Use eye contact, smiles, and enthusiasm when you give praise
Teach a Substitute Behavior/Skill

- Communication
  - Picture communication or signs
  - A social script
- Appropriate Social Initiation Skills
- Emotion Recognition
- Coping Strategies:
  - Calm Down Space
  - Deep Breathing
  - Muscle Relaxation
  - Counting
  - Helpful Thoughts

Modify the Environment

Identify the Function

Teach a Substitute Behavior

Reduce Reinforcement of Tantrums
“The Rage Cycle”

From Smith Myles & Southwick, 2005
Teach Communication

“No thank you” or “Not right now”
Teach Skills with Social Stories

Playing

Sometimes I like to play with other kids.

I can ask them, "Do you want to play with me?"

If they say "yes", I can play with them. I will have fun.

If they say "no", it's ok.

I can ask someone else or play by myself.
Teach Emotion Recognition

- **Angry**
  - Fall down
  - Loud voice/Yell
  - Throw/Grab
  - Try to leave

- **Worried**
  - Cry
  - Scream
  - Hit someone
  - Refuse/Say, “No!”

- **A Little Stressed**
  - Sweaty hands
  - Heart racing
  - Breathe fast
  - Clinched Fists

- **Calm**
  - Relaxed body
  - Smiley face
  - Calm voice
  - Normal heart beat
Teach Coping Skills

Take 10 Deep Breaths

Count to 40

I can squeeze my squishy ball 5 times.

1. Squeeze    Relax
Notes for Teaching New Skills

- People are not available for learning when they are in the "rumbling," "rage," or "recovery" stages of a meltdown.

- Skills should be practiced repeatedly and regularly.

- Visual supports and role play may be important.
In the Meltdown Moment

- Minimize conversation and negotiation, quiet voice
- Use visual supports or modeling
- Validate feelings
- Relocate/Take a walk/Calm down space
- Be patient, use your own coping skills – deep breaths
Behaviors That Can Escalate the Tantrum

- Yelling
- Using physical force
- Bribing
- Rewarding tantrum behavior
- Giving complex instructions
- Backing the child into a corner
- Negotiating
- Insisting on having the last word
Reduce Reinforcement of Tantrums

- Planned Ignoring
- Response Cost
- Time-out

Modify the Environment

Teach a Substitute Behavior

Identify the Function

Reduce Reinforcement of Tantrums
The Most Effective Consequences

- Immediate
- Consistent
- Frequent
- Highly motivating

- It is very important for children to have a balance of positive (praise, rewards) and negative (ignoring, taking away something preferred) consequences
Planned Ignoring

- Best for mild behavior problems such as whining, crying, demanding attention, and tantrums
- When you are ignoring remove all attention, DO NOT
  - Make physical contact
  - Make eye contact
  - Talk
- Once you begin ignoring a certain behavior, you MUST keep ignoring until the behavior stops
- When it stops, give lots of attention for the next appropriate behavior
Extinction Bursts
Outlasting a Child is Difficult

- **Relax**
  - Take deep breaths
  - Tense and relax your muscles

- **Think Helpful Thoughts**
  - Understand that the whining, crying, and other negative behaviors *are* behaviors—which you know how to deal with
  - “I have done this before, I can do it again” or “My ignoring will decrease this behavior, I can do this.”
  - Try thinking of something positive, like a pleasant activity that you have scheduled at the end of the day, etc.

- **Monitor Your Behavior**
  - Maintain a neutral face and neutral behavior
  - If the child sees anger in your verbal or nonverbal behavior—he or she may increase the negative behavior
Other Consequences

- **Response Cost**
  - Removal of access to a specific reinforcer

- **Time-out**
  - Removal of access to most reinforcers for a brief period of time
Example: Jack

1. Identify the Function
2. Modify the Environment
3. Teach a Substitute Behavior
4. Reduce Reinforcement of Tantrums
Example: Sarah

- Identify the Function
- Modify the Environment
- Teach a Substitute Behavior
- Reduce Reinforcement of Tantrums
Example: Jacob

- Identify the Function
- Modify the Environment
- Teach a Substitute Behavior
- Reduce Reinforcement of Tantrums
Be Kind to Yourself

- Be aware of your basic needs
- Lean on others for support
- Self care strategies
- Mindfulness, gratitude, forgiveness

- Find a support group
- Consider respite

There are days I drop words of comfort on myself like falling rain & remember it is enough to be taken care of by myself.
Questions?

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Resources

- **Behavioral therapy:**
  - Call the KKI referral line (443-923-9400)
  - Use the [http://www.pathfindersforautism.org/](http://www.pathfindersforautism.org/) website to find a local provider

- **Books for parents and teachers**
  - *Overcoming Autism* by Lynn Kern Koegel, Ph.D. and Claire LaZebnik
  - *Asperger Syndrome and Difficult Moments* by Brenda Smith Myles and Jack Southwick
  - *No More Meltdowns* by Jed Baker, Ph.D.

- **Websites**
  - Social stories: [www.thegraycenter.org](http://www.thegraycenter.org)