

Tantrums vs. Meltdowns

(Pre-k-Elementary)

At a glance it can be difficult to tell the difference between a child who is having a tantrum and one who is experiencing a meltdown. Understanding the difference can assist caregivers in knowing how best to respond and support a child in learning how to manage their big feelings.

Tantrums:

- **Unmet need**- A tantrum generally stems from an unmet need or desire. Even when a child is unable to verbalize that need or desire, a caregiver can generally identify (either before or after the behavior) what it was.
- **Child will watch for reaction**- Because a child is seeking a particular goal they will be somewhat aware of whether their action is getting the desired response from the caregiver.
- **Child will avoid danger**- Children who are having a tantrum will generally be careful to avoid doing themselves any true harm.
- **Typically ends fairly quickly**- A child who tantrums will typically stop once their need has been met or they grow tired from lack of response.

Children who tantrum are not children who are simply behaving badly. A tantrum is the result of a child lacking the skill with which to appropriately get their needs met. Children who frequently tantrum can benefit from learning skills to better identify and appropriately express their feelings. Caregivers can help their child by validating the needs and feelings they observe and being consistent in their responses to the child.

Meltdowns:

- **NOT an unmet need**- There is no identifiable need or desire expressed or identified before, during, or after the behavior.
- **Child has NO interest in reactions**- A child experiencing a meltdown is in a state of being overloaded and they have little to no interest in who or what is around them.
- **Child has NO regard for safety**- A meltdown will activate a child's brain to go into survival mode. They will generally have very little awareness about their safety or anyone else's safety and well-being.
- **It is typically slow to end**- A meltdown will end when the brain signals to the body that it no longer feels in danger. This generally happens when a child has an opportunity to calm in a safe environment, free from potentially triggering sights, sounds, smells, textures/touch etc...

Children experiencing a meltdown have little to no control over when, where, or how they become triggered into sensory overload. Children who experience meltdowns need caregivers who can provide a patient, supportive, and safe environment with which to calm. Children who experience meltdowns can benefit from planning and practicing the use of calming strategies to assist them when they become sensory overloaded.

(Handout is for informational purposes only and is not intended to and should not be relied upon or construed as medical/mental health advice)