

Kid Meltdowns

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Okay, picture this—you're at the park with your girlfriend, your four-year-old daughter and her three-year-old son. After about 30 minutes of swinging the kids, watching them climb up the slide (rather than down, of course) and a rousing game of tag you decide to hit the bench to take a bit of a break. Until your kid notices...then all heck breaks loose. *You* need a breather but apparently *she* doesn't, and so the nagging starts. "Come on, Mom! Let's run some more" quickly escalates when you don't capitulate to a hearty (and very loud) "You promised to play with me. I don't like you!" And then the fun really begins—there's more than just tears in store for you as she's practically wailing about how unfair it is and the sobs begin to come in waves. Talk about embarrassing—at least a thousand or so other parents must be looking right at you, wondering what in the world you've done to harm this little angel, or for the cynical voyeurs, what in the world is wrong with your kid. And, your girlfriend isn't much help either—she and her boy have slithered away, leaving you to face the glances, and even glares, of the other park goers.

Yep, you're right in the middle of a commercial-grade kid meltdown with no back up plan, nowhere to hide, and even your best buddy has abandoned you. What's a parent to do in this type of situation and what's your kid's meltdown really about? We've all experienced similar situations, felt the embarrassment as well as the confusion and anger, and many have reacted in ways that are less than appropriate. Let's take a look at kid meltdowns, both in the home and outside, for some insights as well as answers.

What's a kid meltdown and why do they occur?

A meltdown is a tantrum, pure and simple. Depending upon your child's personality, nature, and style of communicating the outburst can range from simple whining, crying and fussing to a full-fledged fall-to-the-floor, head-banging-free-for-all. Some kids become physical and aggressive (darned if they're going to hurt themselves—they'd rather take a swing at Mom), others pout and refuse to come out from under the bench, table or from behind the tree, whereas very verbal children may fling a few choice expletives ("You're a potty-head!") or negative statements ("You're not the boss of me, you can't tell me what to do!"). Why? Well, most likely you've said the magic word—"No".

Why do kids react so intensely to a measly two-letter word? Well, children tend to want what they want when they want it, and "No" definitely is a hindrance, from their perspective, toward achieving their goals. Whether it's 10 more minutes of play, a snack before dinner, getting to stay up later, or having to leave a party before the last present is unwrapped children tend to feel deprived, angry or sad when they perceive that they are not getting their needs met or getting their own way. Little ones tantrum over small things, whereas big kids and teens display meltdowns over more complex issues. Regardless of age, though, the common thread seems to be not being able to do, or to get, something that they want. Grade-schoolers may fuss when asked to turn off the TV and begin their homework, middle-schoolers pout at having to leave the mall without the

parent purchasing a desired item of clothing, and teens, if denied a later curfew, can throw the mother-of-all-meltdowns by slamming doors, cursing, threatening to run away or taking the car without permission. Although the method may be different due to age, ability, cognitive development and whether one has a driver's license or not, the kid's behavior during a meltdown or a tantrum usually suggests that he or she is angry, frustrated or has just plain "had it."

How to handle a meltdown when at home:

It's always a lot easier to deal with meltdowns when you are not in a public place—the child can be sent to time-out while you gather your thoughts to decide how to handle the incident. Try to give yourself time to come up with the best consequence to be meted out—it may be listening to your daughter's argument once she can keep the volume down to a reasonable level while explaining her case and then the two of you coming up with a compromise, or it can be the taking away of a privilege or possession in order to get your child's attention so that the misbehavior won't occur again in the near future. Whatever path you chose—try to be reasonable, wait until both you and the child have calmed down before a disciplinary decision is made, and respond in a calm manner. If *you* need a time-out before you can calmly deal with your child again, take one—go to your room, grab a shower, or drop and do some push-ups on the floor!

Hopefully you've already set up some type of behavior management system that includes rewards for appropriate behavior and demerits for misbehavior, and you can use your game plan for enforcing consequences, good and bad. If not, please set up such a system as soon as possible so that you'll be able to handle kid meltdowns quickly and efficiently.

What to do when your kid melts down outside of the home:

Children have the incredible knack of throwing a whopper of a tantrum when you're in public—especially in the mall, at the grocery store, or in the car. It's almost as if they know that your hands are somewhat tied in terms of disciplinary options, and, boy are they correct! It's tough to put a three-year-old in time-out in the middle of the mall, and it sure is embarrassing when your six-year-old twins decide to play hide and seek between the racks of clothing in the department store. And they know it. Or, if you're in the park and your child decides that she hasn't had enough swinging, sliding and running time and is adamant about not leaving when you request her to head to the car, you are really in a bind.

But, it doesn't have to be a behavioral free-for-all just because you're in public and do not have a time-out room handy. First, try to be *proactive* in order to *avoid* the meltdowns. Set up an agreement with your five-year-old such as "We'll go to the park and I'll bring my timer with me. When there are only 10 minutes left to play, the buzzer will go off, and I'll warn you that we will have to leave soon, and I'll set the timer for the remaining 10 minutes. When it goes off again that means that we will be leaving immediately. If you give me any problems—fussing, whining, pouting—we will go

straight home and you will go into a 5 minute time-out. And, we will not go back to the park again for a few days. Think about your behavior, and I hope that you make good choices.”

Also, use lots of positives in your communications with your child. Stress that you really appreciate the times when he or she is cooperative and follows your directions and requests. You may want to set up a “behavior/consequence deal” such as “I know that you get bored running errands with me. If you hold my hand and are polite while I’m returning some things at the store, and you don’t fuss with your little brother in the car, then on the way home we’ll stop and get some fries and a drink. And, I really appreciate your helpfulness—it makes our days together so much fun!”

Should you step in if you see another child throwing a tantrum, and the Mom is about to lose it?

Probably the best way to intervene is to offer empathy, compassion and assistance. Try not to be judgmental or condemning (remember the times when you may have been in this position!)—this could be interpreted as criticism and may anger the parent, putting the child in more danger of being harmed. Saying to the parent “I know what you’re going through, I’ve been there myself. How can I help you at this moment?” may take the edge off of the situation or give the frustrated parent a minute or two to consider their options and behavior. Or, they just may take you up on your offer and ask you to watch the child for a bit while they stop to catch their breath and regain their senses. However, if the situation looks dangerous or potentially harmful to the child do not look the other way—call the police or security guard for assistance. Hopefully, it won’t come to this, but the child’s safety is of primary importance.

It’s normal, but perhaps not pretty!

Meltdowns, at home or outside of the house, are normal, all too frequent kid behaviors. As they grow children learn how to better handle frustration, irritation and taking-no-for-an-answer situations as you either ignore (at first) the fusses, verbally reprimand, or actively give a consequence for the tantrums. By also rewarding and praising their ability to tolerate let-downs and inconveniences your children develop the capacity to better cope with disappointments and to consider positive, effective alternative behaviors.