

After-school meltdowns: what causes them and tips for dealing with them



During the first few months of school there is a scenario that often has parents perplexed. Parents hear from the teacher that their child is doing well at school and there are no concerns. However, almost every day when their child steps off the bus they immediately meltdown. The parent ends up feeling confused as to why their child acts like an angel with everyone else but is a mess when they come home from school or after-school care.

This scenario happens so frequently that a term was coined to explain it. That term is ***after-school restraint collapse***. It occurs because kids often hold their feelings in all day at school and when they get home they feel safe to release them. This collapse is a meltdown of coping ability. Unlike a tantrum, a meltdown is an uncontrollable release of emotions not driven by need for attention, control or a desire for something.

Restraint collapse is actually a normal occurrence for all humans. When we hit our coping limit, we hold it together for as long, especially out in public, but when we get home, to our safe place, we tend to break down. Of course, this collapse of coping skills happens more frequently and

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can look/sound more intense for young children. As we mature, we gain more coping skills and ability to manage and refuel when we feel maxed out.

Children and adolescents often release emotions through:

- Screaming
- Crying
- Whining
- Disrespectful behaviour
- Anger

Although all kids can experience after-school restraint collapse, it can be more prominent for children who have learning or social challenges or are sensitive. Also, being tired, hungry, overstimulated or sick may result in even the most resourced kids losing control once they get home.

What can help?

Firstly, it's helpful to remember adjusting to the school schedule and everything it entails like time away from home, missing parents, having to sit and follow instructions, learning challenging topics, and navigating the social scene, takes time.

It is helpful to set our expectation to match the potential reality that kids are likely to feel emotionally and physically exhausted when they get home. In addition, it can be helpful to keep in mind that we have created an environment at home where our children feel safe to let their emotions out, and that's a good thing.

Things to avoid:

Screen Time:

Avoiding screens for at least the first hour after school. We often think screens help us veg out and relax but the opposite is actually true. They activate our nervous system. In truth, screen time just delays the collapse. We want to calm the nervous system first before activating it more.

Limiting after school activities:

Allow some time for kids to decompress. Rushing from school to an after-school activity multiple times a week can have kids remaining overstimulated and not allowing them the down time needed to refuel.

Asking a million questions about their day:

Remember that kids need time to land before their brains are ready to search for answers to your questions. Their brains have been working hard all day and need a "brain break" before they are ready to work more.

Creating ways to help the transition:

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Creating a ritual of connection when you come back together is very useful for helping avoid restraint collapse. A ritual of connection is simply something your child can depend on to happen every time they return to your care. A short time where they get your undivided attention helps them land more grounded through the transition from school to home or after-school-care to home and can reduce the length of restraint collapse or avoid it completely.

A few things you could include in your ritual of connection;

1. Time outside. Being in nature helps us calm our nervous system and often involves moving our bodies which helps us let off some of the pent-up energy/emotions.
2. Connection time with a calm and emotionally available adult.
3. Snack, something yummy but healthy. Popcorn and a smoothie are great easy options.
4. Quiet time.

When your child melts down anyways:

Sometimes all our efforts don't prevent the meltdown. That's because an emotional release is needed to reset the nervous system. And that's ok. We want to allow our children to release their emotions while supporting and validating their feelings. This can be easier said than done, because our child's emotions and/or behaviour may trigger us to react. Don't take it personally. Remind yourself that your child is having a hard time and that it has nothing to do with you. Take comfort knowing that your child feels safe to express their emotions with you.

Ensure you wait until your child is calm before trying to address the meltdown or their behaviour. Remember their brain isn't working during a meltdown, so it's not the time to try to teach a lesson, change behaviour or ask questions. The best thing we can do is to help them release and soothe them.

It's also helpful to keep in mind that just because we talk about it, doesn't mean that they will be able to avoid a meltdown the next day. The transition to a school schedule takes time to get used to, the after-school restraint collapse, usually doesn't last the whole school year. Children do tend to become more efficient in managing their emotions as the school year goes on. For some that transition only takes a few weeks for others it's a few months. Trust the process and know one day, your child will stop having meltdowns so frequently after school.

Our Family Support Navigators are here to help explain behaviour, provide support, connect to resources and bridge home and school.