



The Meltdown Survival Guide

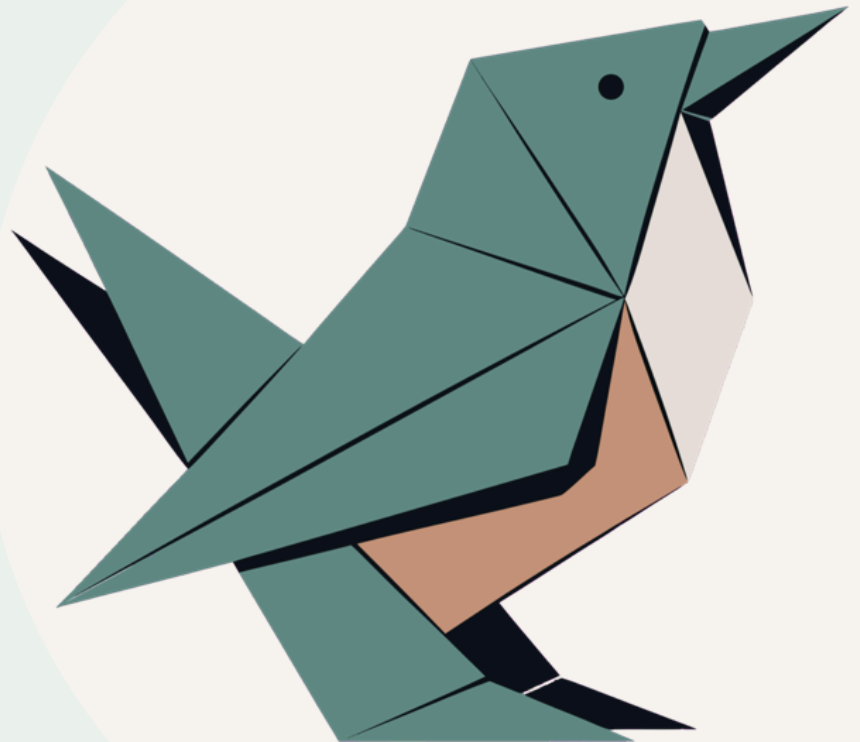
What to say and do in the hard moment, by age

Ages 4–6

7–10

11–14

+ a note on teens



Calm, practical steps grounded in child development research and trusted health guidance. With printable pocket cards and a 7-day pattern tracker.

Hello, tired parent.

If you picked up this guide, you have probably been through a storm recently. Screaming in the supermarket. A slammed door. A small body on the floor, or a big one locked in a bedroom.

First, the most important line in this guide: meltdowns are a normal part of growing up, and they do not mean you are failing. Tantrums are a normal part of early childhood ^[1, 2], and big feelings keep showing up, in new forms, all the way through the teen years. Every parent faces them. What helps is having a plan you can reach for when your own heart is pounding.

That is what this guide is. Short, practical, and written to be used in real life, not read once and forgotten.

Right now, mid-storm?

Go to **page 6** (During) or grab a **pocket card** (page 16).

Tonight, when it's quiet?

Read **Why meltdowns happen** and **Calm yourself first**. Ten minutes.

This week?

Use the **7-day tracker** to spot what sets things off.

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A word on words: we say “meltdown” for any big outburst where a child loses control of their feelings: crying, shouting, throwing, collapsing. Some people use “tantrum” for one kind and “meltdown” for another. In the moment, the first steps are the same: keep everyone safe and help your child come back to calm. Small numbers like [1] point to the sources on page 18.

Why meltdowns happen

A meltdown is a sign of skills that are still growing, not a character flaw.

The skills that help us handle big feelings (waiting, switching plans, coping with disappointment, thinking before acting) are not something children are born with. They build slowly through childhood and keep developing through the teen years and beyond ^[3]. A four-year-old, a nine-year-old and a thirteen-year-old are all still practising.

When the demand is bigger than the skill

Psychologist Ross Greene puts it simply: **kids do well if they can**. When a moment asks for more flexibility or patience than a child has right now, the result can be an outburst ^[4, 5]. That changes the question from "Why won't they behave?" to "What is hard for them here?"

Calm is learned from calm

Children learn to settle themselves by being settled by a steady adult, again and again. Researchers call this **co-regulation**: your warmth and calm act like scaffolding while their own self-control is being built. Children are not born with these skills, only with the potential to build them, and relationships with adults are central ^[3, 6]. Your calm is something they can borrow.

Bodies matter

Hunger, tiredness and frustration are some of the most common triggers ^[1, 2]. Sleep matters even in small amounts. In one small study of children aged 7 to 11, a little less sleep on school nights made them more emotionally up and down at school (as rated by their teachers), and a little more sleep helped ^[7].

Big feelings crowd out thinking

When a feeling is huge, it is hard for anyone, adult or child, to listen to reasons. That is why connection comes first and teaching comes later, once the storm has passed ^[8].



Try this thought: "My child isn't against me right now. They're overwhelmed, and I'm the one who can help."

THE QUICK VERSION

- **Outburst = demand bigger than skill.** Not bad character, not bad parenting.
- **Check the body first.** Hungry? Tired? Overloaded?
- **Lend your calm now.** Teach the skill later, when everyone is settled.

Calm yourself first

Your calm is the most useful tool in the room.

It sounds backwards, but the first step in helping a melting-down child is to steady yourself. Children borrow calm from the adults around them ^[6], and staying calm (and showing slow, steady breathing) is one of the most practical things a parent can do ^[2, 9].

The 30-second reset

- 1 **Breathe slowly.** A few slow breaths, out through your mouth. You are showing them what to do.
- 2 **Soften your body.** Drop your shoulders. Unclench your jaw and hands.
- 3 **Get lower and quieter.** Kneel or sit if it is safe. Speak more slowly and softly than you want to.
- 4 **Tell yourself one true sentence.** "This is a hard moment, not a forever." Or: "I don't have to fix this right now. I just have to stay steady."

It's OK to take a pause

If everyone is safe and you feel yourself about to explode, it is fine to say: **"I need a minute to calm my body. I'm right here."** Step a few feet away and breathe. You are showing your child exactly the skill you want them to learn.

If you already lost it

You are human. Raised voices happen in loving homes. What matters most is what comes next: coming back and making it right. See **Repair** on page 7.

If you ever feel you might hurt your child, put them somewhere safe (like their cot or room), step away, and call someone you trust or a parenting helpline. If anyone is in immediate danger, call your local emergency number. Needing support is not a failure. It is a strong, responsible choice.

PRACTISE IT TONIGHT

Skills we rehearse when calm are easier to reach when stressed. Tonight, while things are quiet, run the 30-second reset once: breathe out slowly, drop your shoulders, and say your one true sentence out loud. Pick the sentence now, so it is ready when you need it.

Look after the person holding everyone else together. Sleep, food, and someone to talk to are not luxuries. If you feel low, anxious or exhausted most days, please talk to your own doctor.

Before set things up**During** stay safe and steady**After** repair and solve

Before: set things up

The easiest meltdown to handle is the one that never starts.

You can't prevent every storm, and you shouldn't try. But a few small habits can make them less frequent and less intense.

Give a heads-up before changes

Switching from something fun to something less fun is a classic trigger. A warning helps ^[9].

"Five more minutes at the park, then shoes on."

Offer two good choices

A small choice gives a sense of control without giving up the limit ^[1].

"Pyjamas first or teeth first?"

Make big jobs small

Break a task into steps so it feels doable ^[9].

"Just the socks first. Then we'll see."

Feed and rest

A snack before the shop. A calmer evening after a short night ^[1, 2, 7].

"Snack and quiet time first, then homework."

Notice the good moments

Praise the specific behaviour you want to see more of, especially calm and flexible moments ^[10].

"You were disappointed and you still turned the game off. That was hard, and you did it."

Practise calm when it's calm

Skills are learned when the brain can learn. Practise breathing, a cosy calm-down spot, or words for feelings on good days ^[6, 11].

"Let's practise our dragon breaths before bed."

For children 7 and up: if the same problem keeps causing blow-ups (mornings, homework, screens), solve it **together, ahead of time**, at a calm moment. There's a simple 3-step way to do it on page 7 ^[4, 5].

THE QUICK VERSION

- **Warn** before changes.
- **Offer** two choices you are happy with.
- **Feed and rest** first, and **shrink** big tasks.
- **Praise** the calm moments out loud.

Before set things up**During** stay safe and steady**After** repair and solve

During: the hard moment

Your only jobs right now: keep everyone safe, stay steady, and wait for the wave to pass.

1 Safety first

Move things that could break or hurt. Step between siblings. If your child hits, kicks, bites or throws, step in calmly; these are not behaviours to ignore ^[1].

"I won't let you hit. I'm going to keep us both safe."

2 Say less

Short sentences, low and slow voice. No lectures, no questions that need long answers. The teaching can wait ^[8, 9].

3 Name the feeling

Put simple words to what you see ^[2, 8]. An early study of families linked this kind of "emotion coaching" with children who were better at managing their feelings a few years later ^[12]. In adults, putting a feeling into words has been shown to dampen the brain's alarm response ^[13].

"You're really angry. You wanted to stay."

4 Hold the limit, kindly

All feelings are allowed. Not all actions are. Don't give in to the demand that started the storm; if you do, the lesson children learn is that a meltdown works ^[2, 10].

"You can be mad. The answer is still no. I'm here."

5 Stay close and wait

Some children want a hug. Some need a little space. Offer, then follow their lead. Your steady presence is doing the work ^[6].

"Hug, or space? I'll be right here either way."

As the storm passes

Offer water, a breath together, a cuddle, something ordinary. Then move on gently. Talk it through later, not now ^[8, 14].

In public?

Move somewhere quieter if you can. The strangers watching don't matter. You are doing the job, and that is enough.

Before set things up**During** stay safe and steady**After** repair and solve

After: repair and solve

Connect first. Talk later. Solve together.

1. Reconnect

Before any talk about what happened, come back together. A snack, a story, sitting side by side. Connection first, then guidance

[8, 14]

2. Repair, if you need to

If you yelled or said something you regret, say so. Close relationships are not mistake-free. Researchers who study parents and babies describe them as full of small misses followed by repair, and link frequent repair with healthy development [15]. Saying sorry shows your child how to repair too.

"I yelled earlier. That wasn't OK, and I'm sorry. I love you, even when we're both upset."

3. Talk about it, when calm

Later, maybe at bedtime, help your child tell the story of what happened. Name the feelings. Then talk about what they could do next time [8, 11].

"What was the hardest part? What did your body feel like?"

4. Keep consequences small and fair

If there is a consequence, keep it short, related to what happened, and explain why [10]. Shaming, yelling and physical punishment don't help in the long run [16].

Solve it together (ages 7 and up)

When the same problem keeps causing outbursts, sit down at a calm time and work through three steps. This approach, called Collaborative Problem Solving, has been studied with children who have frequent, intense outbursts [4, 5].

Listen

"I've noticed mornings have been really hard. What's going on?" Then listen and ask more.

Share your worry

"My concern is that we're late and you miss the start of class."

Invite ideas

"Let's find a plan that works for both of us. Any ideas?" Try it, then check how it went.

What to say, ages 4–6

WHAT HELPS AT THIS AGE

- **Very few words.** Short, concrete sentences.
- **Choices and play.** Two options, a silly voice, a pretend game.
- **Your body speaks first.** Get down to their level; a soft face and voice.
- **Help with feeling words.** They're still learning names for feelings ^[2, 11].

Before

"In two more slides, it's time for shoes."

"First teeth, then story."

"Do you want to walk or hop to the car?"

"We're going to the shop. We're not buying toys today. You can hold the list."

During

"I'm here. You're safe."

"You're so mad. You wanted the blue cup."

"I won't let you hit. I'm moving back so we're both safe."

CALM VOICE, NO GRABBING

"Squeeze or space?"

"Let's blow out the birthday candles together."

SLOW BREATH, ONCE CALMER

After

"That was a big feeling. Where did you feel it in your body?"

"You got really angry, and then you calmed down. You did that."

"Let's draw the angry feeling."

"Next time you're mad, you can stomp your feet or squeeze a pillow."

Skip: long explanations, "Why did you do that?", and "Use your words" mid-storm (words are hard to find when feelings are this big). Offer one feeling word instead.

MAKE A CALM CORNER TOGETHER

On a good day, pick a cosy spot with your child: a cushion, a soft toy, a picture book, maybe a card that shows "dragon breaths." Practise going there together when nobody is upset. Then, in a hard moment, you can offer: "Want to go to our calm corner? I'll come too." It is a place to settle, not a punishment.

What to say, ages 7–10

WHAT HELPS AT THIS AGE

- **Fairness matters.** Explain the why, briefly, and later.
- **Plans help.** They can start to make a calm-down plan with you.
- **Respect the effort.** Notice when they manage a hard feeling.
- **Watch the after-school dip.** Hunger and tiredness hit hard on busy days ^[1, 7].

Before

“In ten minutes the game goes off. Do you want a five-minute warning too?”

“Homework looks huge. What's the smallest first step?”

“Tomorrow's a big day. What would help it go well?”

During

“This is really frustrating. I get it.”

“You can be angry. You can't throw things. Let's move away from the table.”

“I'm not going anywhere. Take your time.”

“Do you want me to talk, or just sit with you?”

After

“What was the hardest part?”

“What could help next time? Let's make a plan.”

“I was too loud earlier. I'm sorry.”

“You calmed yourself down. How did you do it?”

Skip: sarcasm, comparisons with siblings, and “You're overreacting.” Their feeling is real, even if the reason looks small to you.

MAKE A CALM-DOWN PLAN CARD TOGETHER

At a calm time, sit down with paper and ask: “When you're really upset, what helps your body calm down?” Let them choose three things (for example: a drink of water, ten slow breaths, squeezing a pillow, time alone in their room, a hug). Write them on a card in their words and keep it somewhere easy to see. In the hard moment, you only need to say: “Want to try something from your card?”

What to say, ages 11–14 and teens

WHAT HELPS AT THIS AGE

- **Dignity first.** Avoid an audience. Talk privately.
- **Fewer words, more space.** Let them cool down before you talk.
- **Side by side beats face to face.** Car rides and walks are good for talking.
- **Ask, don't tell.** Invite them to help solve the problem ^[4].

Before

“Exam week is coming. What do you need from me?”

“Heads-up: we're leaving at six. Is that doable?”

“I've noticed Sunday nights are rough. Want to figure out why together?”

During

“I can see this is a lot. I'm nearby when you want me.”

“You don't have to explain right now.”

“I'm not trying to win. I want to understand.”

“Slamming doors isn't OK. Being upset is.”

“Let's both take ten minutes, then try again.”

After

“What do you need from me next time?”

“I got that wrong earlier. I'm sorry.”

“I've noticed this keeps happening. What's getting in the way?”

Skip: following them to keep arguing, bringing up past mistakes, and big punishments decided in anger. Wait until you are both calm.

A note on older teens (15+). Big outbursts often look different now: shutting down, leaving, harsh words. The same principles hold: stay calm, give space and dignity, and reconnect later. Stay alert to the warning signs on page 14. If your teen talks about hurting themselves or not wanting to live, take it seriously every time and get help ^[17].

What to avoid, and what to try

Everyone does some of these sometimes. The goal isn't perfect. The goal is to notice, and repair.

INSTEAD OF...	TRY...
✗ Explaining or lecturing mid-storm	✓ Few words now. Talk it through later, when calm. ^[8]
✗ "Calm down!"	✓ "I'm here. Let's breathe together." ^[9]
✗ Matching their volume	✓ Lower and slower than feels natural. ^[2, 9]
✗ Giving in to stop the storm	✓ Hold the limit, kindly: "Still no. I'm here." ^[2, 10]
✗ Threats you won't carry out	✓ Small, related consequences you will follow through on. ^[10]
✗ Ignoring hitting, biting, kicking	✓ Step in calmly and keep everyone safe. ^[1]
✗ "Stop being a baby", shaming, mocking	✓ Name the feeling: "You're really upset." ^[2, 16]
✗ Smacking or physical punishment	✓ Calm limits and connection. Physical punishment is linked with worse outcomes for children. ^[16]



Why this matters: the American Academy of Pediatrics notes that yelling, shaming and physical punishment work poorly in the moment and not at all in the long run ^[16]. Calm limits plus warmth teach the skill you actually want.

Spotting patterns

Meltdowns often feel random. Usually they are not.

Identifying what tends to set things off is one of the most useful things you can do ^[9]. Once you can see the pattern, you can plan around it. Here are the usual suspects:

Hungry

Before meals, after school, long outings ^[1, 2].

Try: a snack before the danger zone.

Tired

Late nights, early starts, the end of a big day ^[1, 7].

Try: protect sleep; lighter plans after short nights.

Transitions

Leaving the park, screens off, getting out the door ^[9].

Try: warnings, timers, a routine.

School days

Many parents notice that children hold it together all day, then let it out at home, where they feel safe.

Try: snack and quiet before questions.

Busy or loud places

Noise, crowds, scratchy clothes, bright shops can overwhelm some children (see page 13).

Try: shorter trips, quiet breaks.

Big changes

A new sibling, a move, a separation, a new school, a loss.

Try: extra routine, extra connection.

How to spot yours: write down each outburst for a week using the tracker on page 15. Note the time, what happened just before, and what helped. After seven days, look for repeats: same time of day? Same activity? Same person? That's your pattern.

WHAT A PATTERN CAN LOOK LIKE (A MADE-UP EXAMPLE)

Sam is 6. After a week of notes, his parent sees that four of five outbursts happened between 4 and 6 pm on school days, usually when asked to stop playing. Nothing on the weekend. The plan: a snack at pick-up, twenty quiet minutes at home before any questions, and a five-minute warning before play ends. The goal is not zero outbursts. It is fewer, shorter ones, and a calmer you.

ADHD, anxiety and sensory needs

Some children have more frequent or more intense outbursts because something else is making daily life harder. These notes are not for diagnosing your child. They are to help you understand them, and to know when it is worth asking a professional.

ADHD

Difficulty managing emotions is common in children with ADHD, and it is a big part of what makes everyday life hard for them and their families ^[18]. Feelings can come on fast and strong.

The tools in this guide still apply, often with extra structure: predictable routines, warnings before transitions, tasks broken into small steps, and lots of specific praise ^[9, 10]. Expect to repeat them more often.

Anxiety

Anxiety does not always look like worry. In children it can show up as getting angry or irritable quickly, being clingy, or trouble sleeping ^[19]. An outburst before school or a party can be fear in disguise ^[9].

Ideas to try: name the worry out loud, talk about it at calm times, and offer reassurance. Many children's worries ease with a parent's support ^[19].

Sensory sensitivity

Some children are strongly bothered by everyday sounds, textures or touch. In one large study of school-age children, those with stronger sensitivities also tended to have more emotional and self-regulation difficulties, as reported by their parents ^[20].

Ideas to try: noticing which sensations bother your child, reducing them where you can (quieter spaces, comfortable clothes, headphones), and planning breaks.

If any of this sounds familiar, talk to your child's doctor or school. A proper assessment can open the door to real support, and the strategies in this guide still apply alongside it ^[9].

When to get help

GET EMERGENCY HELP NOW

If anyone is in danger, if your child is seriously hurting themselves or someone else, or if your child talks about wanting to die or to hurt themselves: **call your local emergency number** or go to the nearest emergency department. A mental health emergency is as serious as a physical one ^[17, 21].

Talk to your child's doctor or a mental health professional if:

- **Outbursts are persistent, happen everywhere, and get in the way** of school, family life or friendships, especially past the preschool years ^[22].
- **Your child regularly hurts others or themselves** during outbursts (hitting, biting, head-banging, scratching) ^[23].
- **They can't calm down** even with your help, or outbursts often happen at school or daycare too ^[23].
- **They are losing skills** they used to have, such as speech, toileting or play skills ^[24].
- **You see signs of self-harm** such as unexplained cuts or scars, or hiding their skin ^[17].
- **Worry seems constant**, is getting worse rather than better, or gets in the way of school, family life or friendships ^[19].
- **You are worried.** Your instinct counts. Always ^[1, 2].

Help works

Structured parenting programmes, such as Parent-Child Interaction Therapy and Triple P, reduced children's behaviour problems in a review of 24 studies ^[25]. Asking for one is a smart, loving move, not a sign that you've failed.

If you suspect self-harm

Stay calm. Listen more than you speak, without judgement. Remove sharp objects, medicines and firearms from the home, and contact your child's doctor. Self-harm is treatable, and it does not mean you are a bad parent ^[17].

7-day meltdown tracker

Fill in one line per outburst (or per day). No judgement, just notes. After a week, look for repeats.

Day	Time & place	What happened just before?	Tick any	How long?	What helped?
Day 1			☐ Hungry ☐ Tired ☐ Transition ☐ School day		
Day 2			☐ Hungry ☐ Tired ☐ Transition ☐ School day		
Day 3			☐ Hungry ☐ Tired ☐ Transition ☐ School day		
Day 4			☐ Hungry ☐ Tired ☐ Transition ☐ School day		
Day 5			☐ Hungry ☐ Tired ☐ Transition ☐ School day		
Day 6			☐ Hungry ☐ Tired ☐ Transition ☐ School day		
Day 7			☐ Hungry ☐ Tired ☐ Transition ☐ School day		

Looking back over the week

Times of day that were hardest:

Situations that came up more than once:

What helped most:

One thing to try next week:

Printable pocket cards

Print at 100% (actual size), cut along the dashed lines, and keep one in your wallet, on the fridge, or in the car. Each card is credit-card sized.

Me first

1. Slow breath out
 2. Shoulders down
 3. Get low, go quiet
- "This is a hard moment, not a forever."

During: 5 steps

1. Safety first
2. Say less
3. Name the feeling
4. Hold the limit, kindly
5. Stay close and wait

Ages 4-6

"I'm here. You're safe."
 "You're so mad."
 "I won't let you hit."
 "Squeeze or space?"

Ages 7-10

"This is really frustrating."
 "You can be angry. You can't throw things."
 "Talk, or just sit with you?"

Ages 11-14

"I can see this is a lot."
 "You don't have to explain right now."
 "Let's both take ten minutes."

After

1. Reconnect
2. Repair: "I'm sorry I yelled."
3. Talk when calm
4. Solve it together

Hold the limit

"You can be mad. The answer is still no. I'm here."
 Feelings: always OK.
 Hurting: never OK.

Get help now if

Someone is in danger, or your child talks about wanting to die or hurt themselves.
Call your local emergency number.

Littlemind: a calm helper in your pocket

Littlemind is a gentle app for parents of children aged 4 to 14. It helps with the hard moments, and with seeing the bigger picture.

SOS for hard moments. Tap SOS and get a short, calm plan for your child's age and what's happening.

30-second evening check-ins. Mood, sleep, energy and a quick note for each child.

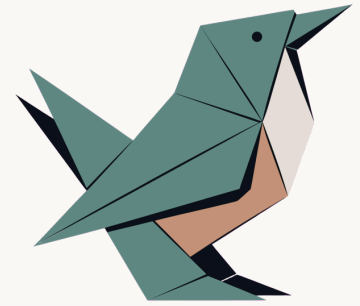
Insights over time. See patterns you might miss, for example harder evenings after short nights.

Littlemind is a support tool for parents. It does not diagnose and is not a substitute for professional care.



App Store and Google Play

Scan with your phone camera, or open littlemindapp.com/get



How this guide was made

This guide was written by the Littlemind team for parents, in plain language. Every recommendation is based on published research, guidance from health organisations (including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the NHS, the CDC, the Child Mind Institute and the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard), and the central ideas of well-known parenting books by clinicians and researchers. We checked each source ourselves, paraphrased rather than copied, and left out anything we could not verify. All example phrases are our own. Sources are listed on the next page.

Important: this guide is general information for parents. It is not medical advice and is not a substitute for help from a doctor, psychologist or other qualified professional who knows your child. If you are worried about your child's safety or development, please reach out to one (see page 14).

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Sources and further reading

Numbers match the references in the text. Web pages were checked in October 2026. Where we cite a book, it is only for the author's central, widely documented idea.

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