No More Meltdowns
Managing and Preventing Challenging Behaviors

By Jed Baker, PhD
You’re in the supermarket with your two kids and have just a few minutes to get in and out before your child’s soccer game. As the group whines for dessert, you keep the kids quiet with some cookies. You warn them that having cookies now means no sweets later.

When it’s time to check out, the children whine again for candy. This time you say, “No,” and that’s when it happens. Both kids start screaming, crying, and falling to the floor. You try to ignore it, but soon your children are grabbing at your ankles. The woman behind you in line shakes her head disapprovingly. What started as a minor irritation is growing into rage as you feel other shoppers questioning your parenting. Now you have your own meltdown, yelling at your children. Adding fuel to the fire, you thereby escalate your children’s tantrum and create more of the embarrassment that spurred your anger.

How do you handle the discomfort of these moments? If you can’t tolerate the uneasiness, you may give in and let your kids have the candy. But soon your kids will act up again because they learned that their tantrum paid off. How do you handle the discomfort of these moments? If you can’t tolerate the uneasiness, you may give in and let your kids have the candy. But soon your kids will act up again because they learned that their tantrum paid off. Adding fuel to the fire, you thereby escalate your children’s tantrum and create more of the embarrassment that spurred your anger.

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Controlling Your Own Temper
To parent thoughtfully, we must be able to control our own emotions. Research on parenting shows that when parents have hope that things will improve, they are better able to tolerate challenges without giving in to their kids or losing their temper. They can hold firm to rules calmly knowing that it will eventually pay off. Hope also allows us to take time to prevent problems rather than simply reacting to problems with punishments.

If we see a child’s behavior as an intentional attempt to manipulate us, we take it personally and get upset. If instead we see the child’s behavior as a result of poor coping skills, then we realize it has little to do with us, and we can educate our children about better ways to handle themselves. All children have tantrums because they lack the skills to cope with some challenging situations. Some children have more meltdowns due to their temperament. Expecting these problems, and having a thoughtful plan to handle them, helps to keep emotions in check. If this sounds difficult, it is. Parenting demands a huge energy output. And, if it bothers you that other adults stare when your kid blows a gasket, remember, it’s probably because the adults are remembering similar moments they experienced while raising their kids.

Calming the Storm
When a meltdown has already occurred and the child is escalating out of control, there are several ways to calm and distract him in the moment. Consider novel items, special interests, and sensory routines. Common sensory activities that calm a crying baby include gently rocking or massaging the baby or singing to him. A novel item could be the jingle of your car keys that suddenly distracts your child from whatever is upsetting.

The art of distraction can be equally effective for older kids. Here’s a hypothetical scenario: Back
in the supermarket where your kids were screaming because they did not get candy, you pull out their favorite small toys, and suddenly they start to play and forget about the candy. Or, you take the kids to the car and pop in their favorite CD, and once again they calm. Knowing your children’s interests is an important step in distracting and calming them. Don’t try to reason with screaming children. Instead, think distraction. Later when the children are calm, you can contemplate and discuss other ways to avoid meltdowns.

One warning on using distraction: If a child is trying to avoid a task, such as homework, then distraction may not be your best tool, as it may allow her to avoid doing the task. If a child tantrums to get out of homework, instead of excusing her from the work with another activity, try to simplify and shorten the homework. This way she learns that tantrums do not get her out of a task, and that she can get help to complete the task.

Anticipating the Triggers to Meltdowns
If your child continues to have tantrums, it pays to know what the triggers are so you can prevent the meltdowns. Keep a diary documenting when problematic behaviors arise, what preceded your child’s breakdown, and how you reacted. We have created a new app to help parents and teachers keep track of their children’s behaviors, triggers, and reactions to the behavior on a mobile device. The app is available at the Apple App store or, for non-Apple users, at www.symtrend.com/nmm. In addition to storing information in real time about your child’s behavior, the app also syncs to the www.symtrend.com/nmm website, which analyzes the data to help you determine common triggers. Knowing the triggers then allows you to consider what type of prevention plan will help resolve the problem. The No More Meltdowns app and the No More Meltdowns book have lists of prevention plans for many of the following triggering situations:

Internal/Biological Triggers
Do meltdowns occur when your child is sick, hungry, or tired? Or perhaps it’s a psychological, internal trigger, such as a grief reaction when a loved one dies or parents divorce. When we see an increase in problems across situations and over time, then it seems that children bring the problem with them wherever they go. That suggests the problem is within. We then need to see if they are sick (perhaps a doctor’s visit is in order), or if they were simply hungry or exhausted, or if there has been a significant life stressor (such as a loss at home). Although we may not always be able to change the internal trigger immediately (e.g., if the child has the flu), we can reduce the demands temporarily for the child struggling with an internal challenge.

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Sensory Triggers
Do problems happen when your child is over-stimulated by noise, lights, or crowds? Or is your child bored and seeking more stimulation? You may need to adjust the stimulation to meet your kid’s needs, such as by limiting over-stimulating situations and giving the child things to do when he or she appears bored.

Demands
Does a meltdown result when your child is asked to do something such as complete homework, do chores, or get ready in the morning? Consider whether your child knows how to do these tasks or needs them simplified. Written or picture rules for how to complete a task can help. Shortening the activity or offering frequent breaks can increase compliance. When it comes to homework, kids often refuse to do it rather than admit they need help. You may need to teach your children that they are not supposed to know how to do it, so that they will not feel embarrassed to ask for assistance. Tell an oppositional child that he does not have to do the work but simply should watch. After he has watched for a while, then ask him to try one step of the work. Many children fear making mistakes, so watching first allows them to ease into it without risking failure. Consider rewarding effort, not outcome, for those who have frequent frustrations with work. Thus, provide rewards for asking to watch, asking for help, and trying the work, and not just for getting the work done correctly.

Waiting
Do problems occur when your children do not get want they want immediately? You can make waiting easier by establishing a clear time that they will get what they want and/or lessen how long they will have to wait. Use a timer so that they can concretely see how long the wait is. In the supermarket example, clearly state what snacks the children will get and when, so there are no surprises in the market. You can also give your children activities to keep them occupied while you shop, such as helping to find items on the shelves or playing with a toy.

Threats to Self-Esteem
Sometimes meltdowns occur when kids feel bad about themselves after losing a game, making a mistake, or being teased. Encourage children to think differently about these situations. Teach them: “If you lose a game and don’t get mad, you can win a friend because other people will like playing with you,” and, “Mistakes are good because they help you learn.”

Offer incentives for when your children lose or make mistakes without getting upset so that you reward self-control rather than perfection. With regard to teasing, enable children to understand that it is the teaser who has the problem, not the child being teased.

Unmet Needs for Attention
Do tantrums occur when your children are denied attention? When children crave parental attention, arrange scheduled playtimes with your kids. In addition, children need to be taught the words to ask a parent, sibling, or friend to play, rather than to do bothersome things to get attention.

In the end, your children and you will feel a lot better if you remain in control yourself, anticipate the triggers for tantrums, and have a concise plan of how to prevent meltdowns.

Jed Baker, PhD, is the author of No More Meltdowns: Positive strategies for managing and preventing out-of-control behavior (Future Horizons). Dr. Baker directs the Social Skills Training Project. His work has been featured on ABC World News and Nightline. Log onto www.socialskillstrainingproject.com or www.jedbaker.com for more information.