

Managing Challenging Behaviour

Frequently challenging behaviour is the result of anxiety or unmet needs.

Anxiety in children is often thought to look like this:



But in reality this is just one way a child can manifest anxiety. Other ways may be by swearing, shouting, running away, attacking people or being really controlling. We would not want to punish a child when they are anxious so usually traditional parenting techniques do not work on anxious children and a totally different approach is needed.

We need anxiety and it is natural to feel anxious at times. When we become very anxious the part of our brain that controls rational thought shuts down and only the most primitive part remains active. This is why anxiety can make people react in ways that they would not usually, such as running across a busy road. When we experience anxiety we get a rush of adrenaline to prepare us for fight or flight, however, these are not the only two responses when anxious - there are actually 5 main types of responses to anxiety.

- A 'fight' response is designed to facilitate defending ourselves from an aggressor or danger.
- In a 'flight' scenario the extra energy made available enables us to escape.
- 'Freeze' is a survival reaction during which the body is temporarily immobilised or numbed, similar to that of a mouse in response to an imminent attack from a cat.
- A 'flop' response results in a total bodily collapse, which might involve blacking out or loss of consciousness, loss of control over bodily functions or total disorientation.
- A 'fawn' response is when someone placates the person that is causing the fear by be-friending them.

This shows all the different ways people manifest anxiety.

Keeping anxiety low to manage behaviour:

- Plan transitions if a child struggles with them.
- Allow the child to have as much control as is practical. For example, “would you like to take your bath now or after supper?”
- Have a consistent daily routine
- Give plenty of time for the child to process instructions

Communication difficulties:

Communication difficulties can also cause meltdowns. Speech is broken down into two areas:

Expressive - Expressive language is the child’s ability to make their views, wants and wishes known

Receptive - Receptive is the child’s ability to understand what other people say to them

Just because a child has good expressive language does not mean they have good receptive language and vice versa.

Some things which might help with communication are:

- Use an object to signify time to stop or start something rather than language, for example use a bath toy to signify time for a bath.
- Give them ways to end situations if they need to without shouting or violence like raising their hand or showing a red card.
- Support communication with visuals. These can be videos, pictures, cartoons, drawings... anything that works for your child.

Top tip: Use YouTube or Google images to show your child a place before you go there so they can visualise where they are going and what might be there.

Supporting children with anxiety based demand avoidant profiles:

- Accept 'no' if your child refuses to do something and then try and gently dig for the reason behind the refusal.
- Use a diary to identify patterns/triggers and the outcomes of their behaviour (intended or otherwise)
- Don't engage in head on confrontations. This is the classic battle of wills; "you will do what I tell you to because I am the adult and you are the child!" This will never lead to good things and you will find yourself locked into conflict with a person who is willing to go much further than you are to 'win'. At the end you will both be traumatised with bad feelings towards the other.
- Use technology to be the 'bad guy' so to turn off their tablet, tell them it's bed time or to tell them it is time to do a particular task they dislike doing. This can be Alexa, Siri or Ok Google or reminders on their phone or apps like Screen Time which regulates the use of a tablet or computer.
- Build a strong relationship and trust between you and your child.
- Help develop emotional regulation and resilience in your child (for ideas on how to do this take a look at <https://www.heysigmund.com/building-resilience-children/>)
- Check your expectations of the child to make sure they are realistic.
- Show the child respect and listen to their fears acknowledging how real they feel to them even if they don't make sense to you.
- Model compromise and kindness. Children will copy the adults around them.
- Approach the child at the level they are at rather than where they should be, so if a child's ability to share their toys, for example, is that of a much younger child, build on that from where they are rather than where their ability is expected to be at for their age.

Believe in your child's anxieties and validate their emotions. They are real to them even if they do not make sense to you. The relationship between you and your child is the most important thing. More important than their education, how people see them or people's views on your parenting. People may judge but as long as you are your child's ally and they have a stayed person they know they can trust and depend on, then you are doing great.

Top tip: Allow your child to put away toys they do not want to share. These are precious to them and they might not be able to cope with sharing them at this time.

Identifying triggers

Triggers can take many forms. For example:

1. Sensory triggers like noise, a certain smell or just too much going on around them
2. Coping with a change
3. Struggling with difficult emotions like shame or embarrassment
4. Difficulties in communicating

Knowing the triggers helps you to support your child better and to work with them to lessen challenging behaviour.

Top tip: Your child will not reflect on their behaviour and change. If you want change, the only way this will happen is if you change the way you react to the child's behaviour.

What to do if your child is in meltdown:

- Stay quiet and calm
- Have only one person in the room with them (if this is safe)
- Give emotional & physical space
- Give clear instructions on what you want them to do rather than what you want them to stop doing.
- Give only 5-8 words instructions then wait 8 seconds, then repeat if needed.
- Figure out what the child wants – what is at the core of this behaviour and can this be addressed now?
- Don't try and reason with them as their body is flooded with stress hormones and their rational brain has shut down. They cannot be reasoned with at this time.
- Try to decrease stimulation if you know this helps your child calm down so you might close the curtains, cut out all noise and decrease movement around the house if this is possible and helpful to your child.
- Above all, keep yourself and your child safe the best you can. If you have to leave them to protect yourself or siblings then do that. Calling the police is obviously a last resort but you will not be the first parent to contact them for help during a particularly intense meltdown.

Quote from the PDA Society – “Meltdowns are best understood as a panic attack. This is not a battle to be lost or won, but a crisis to manage.”

Averting a meltdown that is in the early stages

A meltdown in the very early stages may be halted by using certain techniques. All children are different and you will have to find what works for your child but these techniques might be worth a try:

- Distracting the child onto another task
- Helping the child communicate something that is frustrating them
- Validating the child's feelings which in time can help the child to verbalise how they feel rather than demonstrating their feelings through behaviour. For example, "I understand that you are frustrated that the internet is not working at the moment. I feel frustrated too."
- Meeting their physiological needs so this might be feeding them, encouraging them to rest or getting them something to drink. (Even high functioning children with SEND can find it hard to recognise the signals from their body telling them what they need and may just feel stressed when their physiological needs aren't met but not know why.)

Once a meltdown has taken hold, the majority of the time there is no stopping it and you have to just ride it out. This is why recognising the build up to a meltdown using a diary is so helpful.

Recovery after a meltdown

It is best to let the dust settle after a meltdown. It takes time to get back to normal as it takes its toll on all parties. Some children (and parents) are very shaken and scared. A drink or snack may be in order. Some children like to

Top tip: When asking your child to do a task, there may be certain times of day when your child is less amenable such as first thing in the morning or just after school when they might be tired. If a particular task can be completed another time then it is best to choose a more suitable moment. This is something to bear in mind if a child or young person is on medication, you may need to choose your moments when placing any demands, some demands are better received at a well-chosen time of day.

retreat and be quiet and others like to talk, sometimes these chats can reveal insights but such conversations must be handled sensitively with respect for the child's feelings. It is very easy to escalate the meltdown again if the child has not cooled off sufficiently. The most important thing is to create a calm and safe environment.

Things to support yours and your child's mental health:

- Take lots of videos and photos of happy moments and look over them. Remind yourself and them that there are good times and love between you.
- Plan something fun for the two of you for no reason at all. If you both like bowling for example just go one day and laugh, hug, chat and have fun and have some timeout together.
- If you see some small gift your child might like buy it for them and give it to them out of the blue just because you love them.
- Preserve your relationship with your child at all costs. You will need that relationship healthy for you both to emotionally survive the difficulties ahead.

Online sources of support:

<https://hes-extraordinary.com/de-escalation-techniques>

<https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/life-with-pda-menu/family-life-intro/meltdowns/>

<https://www.facebook.com/TheSENDVCBProject>

<https://hampshirecamhs.nhs.uk/help/parents-carers/managing-challenging-behaviour/>

Suggested reading:

The Explosive Child: A New Approach for Understanding and Parenting Easily Frustrated, Chronically Inflexible Children	Dr Ross Greene
The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Proven Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind	Dr Tina Payne Bryson Dr. Daniel Siegel
Don't Rant & Rave on Wednesdays!: The Children's Anger-Control Book	Adolph Mosser
What to Do When Your Temper Flares: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Problems with Anger	Dawn Huebner
Therapeutic Parenting in a Nutshell: Positives and Pitfalls	Sarah Naish
The Incredible 5-Point Scale: The Significantly Improved and Expanded Second Edition	Kari Dunn Buron and Mitzi Curtis