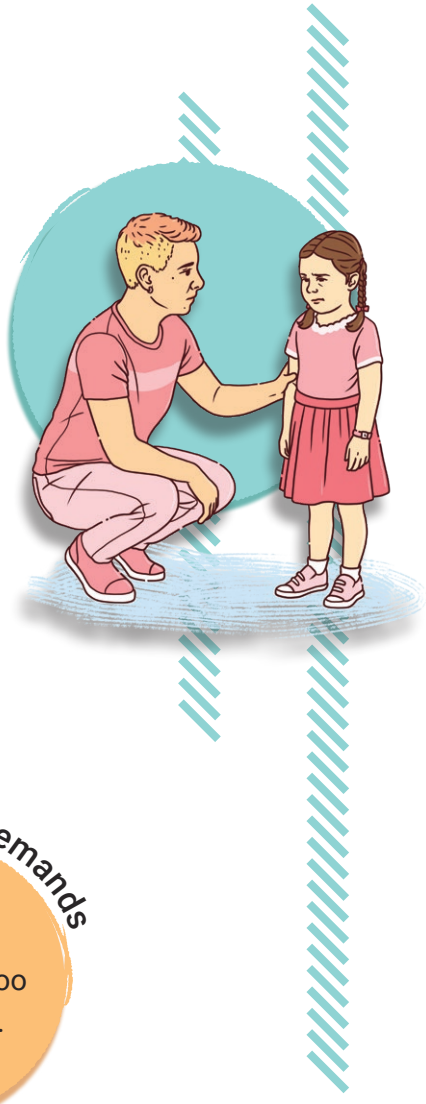
Dysregulation, Meltdowns and Shutdowns: A Support Snippet for Parents

What is dysregulation?

- An inability to regulate emotions or control an emotional response to a situation.
- Feeling emotions more intensely, often for a prolonged period of time.
- Commonly experienced by children who are neurodivergent (e.g. a child who is autistic or who has ADHD).



Can be caused by:

Sensory overwhelm
e.g. being in an environment that's too loud, bright or busy.

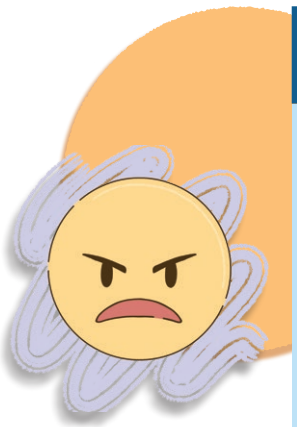
Changes to routine
e.g. a change of plan that is unexpected.

Difficulty recognising emotions
e.g. struggling to understand the feelings of others

Overstimulation
e.g. being too excited or getting too much sensory input.

Social challenges
e.g. too many interactions.

Overwhelming demands
e.g. feeling stressed by too much to do.



What is a meltdown?

- An **uncontrollable 'fight' response** to an overwhelming situation.
- Feelings of anxiety are **external** and often trigger explosive reactions.
- Can result in impulsive, verbal reactions, e.g. your child might scream or shout.
- Can also cause physical reactions, e.g. your child might kick, hit or bite.
- Very distressing, both for the child and the parent supporting them.

What is a shutdown?

- An **uncontrollable 'freeze' response** to an overwhelming situation.
- Feelings of anxiety are more **internal**.
- A child's body may appear to 'shutdown' as they struggle to take in more information.
- Your child may retreat to a safe space, away from everyone.
- Your child may become withdrawn and 'quiet'.
- Sometimes, a meltdown can turn into a shutdown.

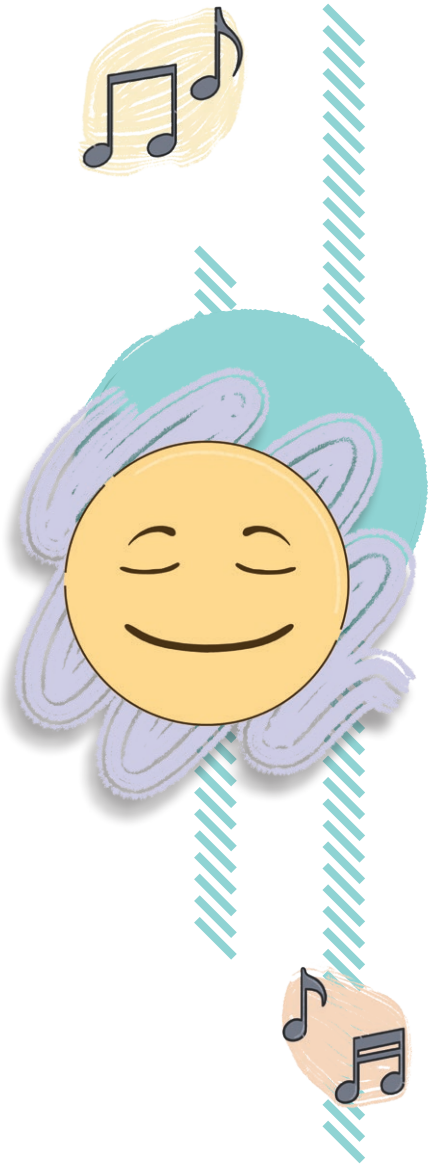


Signs your child is dysregulated:

- emotional response may seem out of proportion with the situation
- anger builds up very quickly
- struggles to calm down
- feelings of extreme sadness
- emotional outbursts, e.g. crying
- may hurt themselves or others
- overly giddy, excited or erratic
- difficulty expressing personal emotions
- excessive anxiety and worry
- feels isolated or misunderstood
- increased sensitivity to things in their environment
- more impulsive
- struggles to transition between activities
- overreacts to people and situations
- withdrawing from a situation
- may run away
- extreme mood swings
- stims more than usual, e.g. rocking or flapping
- blaming or accusing others of things before weighing up facts
- having a meltdown or shutdown
- may break things
- clenches or grinds their teeth

Supporting Your Child in the Moment

- Make sure they are safe.
- Remove anything nearby that they may hurt themselves on.
- Give your child space.
- Ask other people around them to move away.
- Speak calmly to them.
- Be aware of your body language, don't stand over them.
- Try your best to manage your own emotions, even if you're feeling overwhelmed too.
- Assure your child that everything is OK.
- Give them all the time they need.
- Validate their feelings, e.g. by saying 'It's OK to feel sad'.
- Avoid talking about the situation at that moment in time.
- Simply be there for them.
- Offer physical comfort (if your child likes this).
- Support them with breathing exercises.
- Offer a calming activity, e.g. listen to some music.
- Distract your child, e.g. by giving them a sensory toy.





Supporting Your Child in the Long-Term

- Be proactive instead of reactive - support your child to stay regulated so there are fewer dysregulated moments.
- Create a sensory area or calming space in your home.
- Fill a box with things that help to calm your child down, e.g. stress toys or a blanket.
- Make a visual timetable for your child to use at home, e.g. a 'Now and Next' board.
- Help your child learn names for different emotions, e.g. by reading books or playing games.



- Try deep pressure techniques such as tight hugs or the use of a weighted blanket (only use weighted items under guidance from your child's occupational therapist or GP).
- Identify potential anxiety triggers by keeping a diary.
- Add relaxing activities into your daily routine, e.g. family walks or mindfulness colouring.
- Encourage body movement, e.g. bouncing on a trampoline (but make sure to limit time to short bursts or include a calming activity after to avoid overstimulation).
- Try to reduce sensory overload, e.g. use dimmer lighting or try some ear defenders.
- Learn to identify early warning signs if your child is feeling dysregulated.
- Offer lots of praise to your child when they make positive choices.
- Seek professional support, e.g. by talking to their class teacher, your GP or to a paediatrician.

For more information on dysregulation, meltdowns and shutdowns, download **this guide**.

These resources are those which we have generally found to be of benefit to learners with SEND. However, every learner's needs are different and so these resources may not be suitable for your learner. It is for you to consider whether it is appropriate to use these resources with your learner.

We hope you find the information on our website and resources useful. As far as possible, the contents of this resource are reflective of current professional research. However, please be aware that every child is different and information can quickly become out of date. The information given here is intended for general guidance purposes only and may not apply to your specific situation.

This resource is provided for informational and educational purposes only. As far as possible, the contents of this resource are reflective of professional research as of July 2025. This resource is not intended to be used in an emergency and should not replace professional training. If you require mental health advice, you should contact a suitably qualified mental health professional.

This resource is provided for informational and educational purposes only. It is intended to offer general information and should never be taken as medical advice. As medical information is situation-specific and can change, we do not warrant that the information provided is correct. You and your children should not rely on the material included within this resource and we do not accept any responsibility if you or your children do. It is up to you to contact a suitably qualified health professional if you are concerned about your health or the health of your children.