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## How can My Child Be Supported if They're Having a Meltdown?

Research continues to tell us that we must view 'challenging behaviour' as a way in which the child is trying to communicate their needs with us. It has been suggested that we must move away from using the term 'challenging behaviour' and instead view the child's responses as reactions to the environment.

If we begin to think about environment as the **Physical Environment; Temporal Environment** and **Interactional Environment**, we can go a long way to ensuring that children don't experience 'meltdowns' in school. Autistic children don't always know what is expected of them, which can contribute to causing a 'meltdown'. Due to the differences they experience in communicating and asking questions, they may not always be able to ask you to clarify.

Think about how you feel when you don't know what you are supposed to be doing and imagine what it would feel like if no one was clarifying it for you.

### Physical Environment

The *Physical Environment's* organisation of the school and the classroom are significant factors impacting on children's engagement levels.

It is important that your child feels comfortable and secure in their environment and that they can navigate it with confidence. It is also crucial that there is space available for them to take a stimming break and self-regulate when necessary. Providing space for them to complete tasks that take account of their need to preserve their personal space is helpful. Direct attention to seating your child in an area of the classroom with the least distraction, for example avoiding seating the child near the door or toilet area.

Research on all pupils' learning and development suggests that classrooms should have a range of teaching and learning resources linked to children's interests and development. This is also important for autistic children, where the classroom should have attractive and engaging resources, aligned with children's interests and sensory preferences. Using signposting around the school can also enhance children's ability to cope with the physical environment.

### Temporal Environment

The *Temporal Environment* is linked to creating a sense of predictability, routine and structure for autistic children. We know that many can experience anxiety and feel overwhelmed when there is a change in routine and their lives become unpredictable. Strategies in relation to using social stories and visual time-tables are useful ways to manage anxiety and sudden changes.

Using visual timetables or schedules in the classroom can be very useful in letting the child know what is happening for the day ahead and in preempting their anxiety, which can cause a

meltdown. Assigning the child a role in placing the visual depiction of the activity in a finish-box, when the activity is completed, also assists them in seeing time passing visually.

## **Interactional Environment**

The *Interactional Environment* refers to the quality of the social and emotional interactions all children experience at home and in schools each day, which have been identified as the main driving force in children's learning and development.

In relation to autistic children, the interactional environment should accommodate their:

- social and communication needs,
- flexibility of thought and behaviour, and
- sensory differences.

Firstly children should feel safe, secure, and valued in both home and school settings. All of the strategies in relation to communicating with autistic children should be employed, such as:

- adopting a clear and concise use of language;
- allowing time to respond to questions;
- directing attention to the physical and temporal environments, and;
- considering the strategies discussed such as visual tools, alternative communication, and interactive planners.

We must remember that while many autistic children have lots of words in their vocabulary, they may not be able to communicate their needs clearly and effectively for lots of different reasons. They may not be able to state exactly what the problem is; or they may think that because *they* know what the problem is, that *you* should know, and are therefore distressed that you are seemingly doing nothing about it.

Think about what you would do yourself if you were in a similar situation?

It will be useful to communicate this advice to your child's class teacher so that you can work together to ensure that your child is safe and secure within the classroom and avoids 'meltdowns'.

There is usually no 'quick fix' for 'challenging behaviour'. However, it is important to closely observe your child; consult with your child and discuss possible solutions with your child, your child's teacher and any other professionals such as a psychologist.

Dr Emer Ring is the Head of the Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. As part of our *#BackToRoutine* series for beginning the new school term, she's answered a number of commonly asked questions and concerns families have when starting school.