

Dr. Vera's
CALM & CONNECTED GUIDES

stop the



~~meltdown!~~

and help them feel safe

What to Say and Do When Your
Child with Autism Is Overwhelmed

DR. FERNANDO VERA, OT

DR. VERA'S CALM & CONNECTED GUIDES

Stop the Meltdown

What to Say and Do When Your Child with Autism Is
Overwhelmed

Dr. Fernando Vera, OT

Licensed Occupational Therapist · Empower Health, Houston, TX
[StartEmpowering.com](https://www.StartEmpowering.com)

© 2026 Dr. Fernando Vera, Empower Health. All rights reserved. No part of this guide may be copied, shared or resold without written permission.

Important: This guide is for education and support. It does not replace medical advice, diagnosis or treatment, or individualized therapy. Every child with autism is different. Talk with your child's doctor about any new, sudden or worsening behavior, pain, sleep or feeding problem, and before starting or changing any medication. If anyone is in danger, call 911.

A note on language: this guide uses person-first language, such as "child with autism" and "child on the spectrum."

A LETTER BEFORE YOU BEGIN

You are not doing it wrong.

If you picked up this guide, you have probably stood in a store aisle, a driveway or a bedroom doorway while your child screamed, dropped to the floor or hit, and you had no idea what to say next.

As an occupational therapist, I work with families every week who feel exactly that way. Here is the most important thing I can tell you: **a meltdown is not bad behavior, and it is not a sign of bad parenting.** It is a nervous system that has run out of room. Too much noise, change, demand or feeling, and the brain switches from "thinking" to "surviving."

That changes what helps. Lectures, threats and rewards work on choices. Meltdowns are not a choice. What helps is **safety, less input, fewer words and a calm adult nearby.** And the biggest wins come from what you do *before* the storm: warnings, visuals, sensory tools and routines that lower the load.

How to use this guide

In the moment

Find the situation in the contents.
Read the "Instead of... Try this" swaps on the left page. Each one takes about 30 seconds.

When things are calm

Read the right page: what to say, what to do, what to avoid and how to set up for next time.

Get to know your child

Fill in the sensory profile and early-warning pages. They turn guessing into a plan.

Share it

The "My Calm Plan" page is made to hand to grandparents, sitters and teachers.

DR. VERA'S TIP

You don't need to do everything in this book. Pick one situation that happens most often, try one swap for a week, and build from there.

INSIDE THIS GUIDE

Contents

Part one: Everyday Transitions and Changes

1	Leaving a Fun Place	12
2	Turning Off Screens	14
3	A Sudden Change in Plans	16
4	Waiting and "Not Right Now"	18
5	Hearing "No"	20
6	Losing a Game or Making a Mistake	22
7	Getting Dressed and Out the Door	24
8	The After-School Meltdown	26

Part two: Sensory Overload at Home

9	Loud Sounds at Home	29
10	Clothes, Tags, Socks and New Shoes	31
11	Bath Time and Hair Washing	33
12	Tooth Brushing	35
13	Haircut Time	37
14	Nail Trimming	39
15	Bright, Busy or Cluttered Rooms	41
16	Being Touched, Hugged or Crowded	43

Part three: Out in Public

17	The Grocery Store	46
18	Eating at Restaurants	48
19	Birthday Parties	50
20	Doctor and Dentist Visits	52
21	Car Rides and Car Seats	54
22	Family Gatherings and Holidays	56
23	Quiet Places: Church, Library, Waiting Rooms	58
24	Playgrounds and Taking Turns	60

Part four: When the Storm Hits

25	Hitting, Kicking or Biting During a Meltdown	63
26	Head-Banging and Self-Injury	65
27	Throwing and Breaking Things	67
28	Running Off During a Meltdown	69
29	Shutdowns: Going Silent or Freezing	71
30	Keeping Siblings Safe and Supported	73

Start here

Meltdown, tantrum or shutdown?	5
The meltdown wave	6
The S.A.F.E. method	7
Your child's 8 senses	8
My child's sensory profile	9
Early warning signs	10
Tools and printables	
Home calming kit	75
Setting up a calm corner	76
First-Then board and countdown	77
My Calm Plan	78
Trigger detective log	79
Kindness cards for public	80
After the storm	81
When to get more help	82
Taking care of you	83
More	
About Dr. Vera	84

START HERE

Meltdown, tantrum or shutdown?

They can look alike from the outside. They need very different responses, so it helps to know which one you're seeing.

	TANTRUM	MELTDOWN	SHUTDOWN
What drives it	Wanting something: a toy, a treat, to skip a task	Overload: too much sound, change, demand or feeling	Overload too, but the body "powers down" instead of exploding
Control	Some control. Checks if you're watching	Little or no control. Doesn't care who's watching	Little or no control. May seem "checked out"
What it looks like	Crying, demanding, bargaining	Screaming, dropping, hitting, running, self-injury	Silent, frozen, won't answer, hides, stares
When it ends	Often stops fast once the goal is met or clearly off the table	Runs its course, then the child is exhausted	Slowly, with quiet and time
What helps	Calm, clear, kind limits and consistent follow-through	Safety, less input, fewer words, a calm adult nearby	Quiet, low demands, no questions, time and space

Not sure which it is?

Treat it as a meltdown. Staying calm, safe and quiet never makes a tantrum worse, but using limits and consequences on a meltdown almost always does.

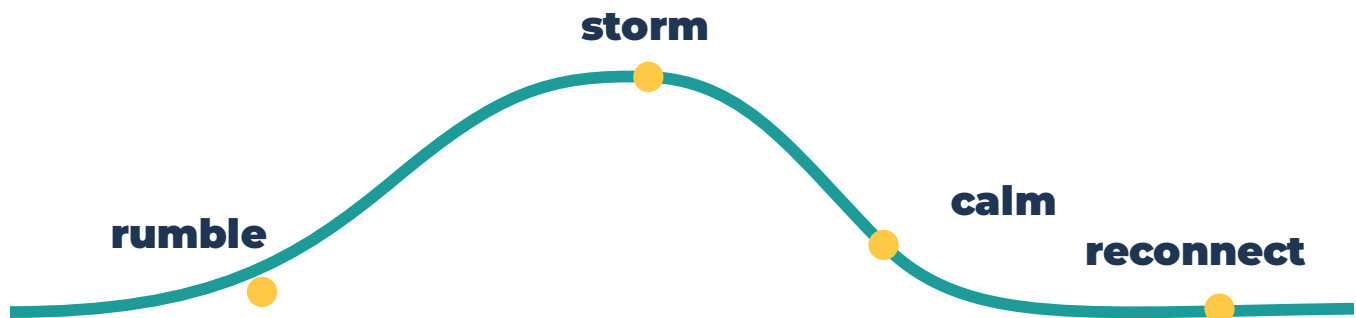
Both can be true

A tantrum over a "no" can tip into a meltdown if the body is already tired, hungry or overloaded. Watch the body, not just the words.

START HERE

The meltdown wave

Most meltdowns follow the same four stages. The earlier you step in, the smaller the wave. Your job changes at each stage.



BEFORE

1 • The rumble

Pacing, louder voice, covering ears, repeating questions, stimming more, saying “no” to everything.

- Lower demands now
- Offer the calm kit or a break
- Fewer words, softer voice

DURING

2 • The storm

Screaming, dropping, hitting, running, crying, self-injury. The thinking brain is offline.

- Safety first
- Cut the input: noise, lights, people
- Stay near, say very little

AFTER

3 • The calm

Quiet, exhausted, may cry or sleep. Still fragile; small things can restart the storm.

- Water, rest, comfort item
- No lessons yet
- Low lights, low demands

LATER

4 • Reconnect

Back to baseline. Now the thinking brain can learn and talk.

- Reconnect first
- Talk simply or draw it out
- Plan one change for next time

DR. VERA'S TIP

The rumble stage is your biggest opportunity. Learn your child's early signs on page 10 and you'll stop many storms before they start.

START HERE

The S.A.F.E. method

One simple plan you can use in any meltdown, anywhere. Every situation in this guide builds on it.



Safety first

Move sharp or breakable things away. Move siblings to another room. Put space between your child and roads, water or traffic. If anyone is in danger, call 911.



Adjust the senses

Turn down the noise, dim the lights, turn off the TV, step outside, offer headphones, sunglasses or a hood. Less input helps the brain reboot faster.



Fewer words

Say less. Use a low, slow voice and 2–4 word phrases: “You're safe.” “I'm here.” “Breathe with me.” Skip questions, reasons and warnings until later.



Empathy, then reconnect

Stay close without crowding. Wait. When the storm passes, offer water, rest and comfort. Talk about what happened only later, when your child is truly calm.

What NOT to do mid-storm

- ✗ Punish, threaten or take away comfort items
- ✗ Demand eye contact or "use your words"
- ✗ Ask "why?" or explain the rules

Remember

Your calm is contagious. Children borrow the adult's nervous system. Slow your breathing, drop your shoulders and lower your voice first.

START HERE

Your child's 8 senses

Most people know five senses. OTs work with eight. Many children with autism are extra sensitive in some (avoiders) and under-sensitive in others (seekers). Most children are a mix.

 Sight

Avoids: Bright lights, busy patterns, clutter

Seeks: Loves spinning objects, lights, screens

 Sound

Avoids: Covers ears, hates vacuums, dryers, crowds

Seeks: Makes noise, loves loud music

 Touch

Avoids: Tags, socks, hair brushing, messy hands

Seeks: Touches everything, likes tight hugs

 Taste

Avoids: Very few “safe” foods, gags easily

Seeks: Mouths or chews objects, loves strong flavors

 Smell

Avoids: Upset by perfume, food or bathroom smells

Seeks: Sniffs people and things

 Movement

Avoids: Fear of swings, stairs or feet off the ground

Seeks: Spins, rocks, jumps, can't sit still

 Body position

Avoids: Clumsy, too rough or too soft with force

Seeks: Crashes, stomps, loves heavy blankets

 Inside body

Avoids: Misses hunger, thirst, pain or bathroom signals

Seeks: May seem to feel hunger or pain very strongly

DR. VERA'S TIP

Seekers need more input on purpose (jumping, carrying, crunchy snacks). Avoiders need less (quiet, soft, predictable). Both calm the nervous system.

PRINTABLE

My child's sensory profile

Check how often you see each one. Share it with your child's OT, teacher or doctor.

MY CHILD...	RARELY	SOMETIMES	OFTEN
Covers ears or melts down at loud or sudden sounds	☐	☐	☐
Bothered by clothing tags, seams, socks or new clothes	☐	☐	☐
Hates hair brushing, hair washing, haircuts or nail trims	☐	☐	☐
Very picky eater or gags at certain textures	☐	☐	☐
Upset by bright lights, busy stores or visual clutter	☐	☐	☐
Avoids messy play (paint, sand, glue)	☐	☐	☐
Constantly moving, jumping, spinning or crashing	☐	☐	☐
Chews on shirts, toys or fingers	☐	☐	☐
Seeks tight hugs, heavy blankets or squeezing into small spaces	☐	☐	☐
Doesn't notice hunger, thirst, pain or needing the bathroom	☐	☐	☐
Melts down more when tired, hungry or after school	☐	☐	☐
Has a hard time with changes in routine or plans	☐	☐	☐

The three things that help my child feel calm are:

PRINTABLE

Early warning signs

Every child has a "rumble" before the storm. Circle the signs you see in your child. When you spot them, lower the demands and offer a break right away.

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Voice gets louder or higher | ☐ Says "no" to everything |
| ☐ Covers ears or eyes | ☐ Clenched fists, stiff body, red face |
| ☐ Repeats the same question or phrase | ☐ Goes very quiet or stares |
| ☐ Stims more (rocking, flapping, humming) | ☐ Chews, bites clothing or fingers |
| ☐ Paces, runs back and forth or climbs | ☐ Tries to leave the room |
| | ☐ Cries or whines more easily |
| | ☐ Pushes siblings or throws small things |

Other signs I notice in my child:

When I see these signs, I will:

DR. VERA'S TIP

Tape this page inside a kitchen cabinet. Everyone in the house learns the signs faster when they see them every day.

part one

Everyday Transitions and Changes

Leaving, stopping, waiting and hearing “no.” How to make the hardest moments of an ordinary day predictable and calmer.

- | | | | |
|----------|-----------------------------|----------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 | Leaving a Fun Place | 5 | Hearing "No" |
| 2 | Turning Off Screens | 6 | Losing a Game or Making a Mistake |
| 3 | A Sudden Change in Plans | 7 | Getting Dressed and Out the Door |
| 4 | Waiting and "Not Right Now" | 8 | The After-School Meltdown |

1

PART ONE · EVERYDAY TRANSITIONS AND CHANGES

Leaving a Fun Place

What it looks like

You say it's time to leave the park or pool, and your child drops to the ground, screams, or bolts back toward the slide.

What's really going on

Stopping something enjoyable is a hard shift for a child with autism. The end feels sudden and final, and the body is already busy with noise, movement and excitement.

Instead of... try this

 3 swaps you can use today**SAY** INSTEAD OF

~~"We have to go NOW!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Two more slides, then shoes on. I'll hold up my fingers."

Why it works: A clear number turns a sudden stop into an ending your child can see coming.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Walk over and pull your child off the equipment.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Crouch nearby, show the timer, and let the last turn finish.

Why it works: A predictable ending feels safer than being moved without warning.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"If you cry, we're never coming back."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"It's hard to leave. We can come back on Saturday."

Why it works: Naming the feeling and a return date eases the fear that fun is gone forever.



More things to say

"Last one. Then bye-bye, slide."

"You can carry the bucket to the car."

"Big feelings. I'm right here."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Give a 5-minute and a 1-minute warning, with a visual timer if you have one.
- ✓ Offer a carrying job, like the bag or water bottle, for heavy work.
- ✓ If a meltdown starts, move to a quieter spot and stop talking.
- ✓ Let your child stim, rock or hum while walking to the car.



Avoid

- ✗ Leaving with no warning because you are running late.
- ✗ Threatening to cancel future outings during the meltdown.
- ✗ Long explanations about why you have to go.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Show a first-then card before you arrive: first park, then car, then snack.
- ✓ Pack a transition object, like a small toy that always rides home in the car.
- ✓ Plan a calm, familiar next step after leaving, such as a favorite song in the car.



GET MORE HELP IF

If leaving places leads to long meltdowns most days or running into danger, ask your child's OT about a transition plan.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Ending on a job beats ending on a loss. "Help me carry this" gets more kids to the car than "time to go."

2

PART ONE · EVERYDAY TRANSITIONS AND CHANGES

Turning Off Screens

What it looks like

The tablet goes off and your child yells, throws it, grabs for it, or melts into tears in the middle of a video or game.

What's really going on

Screens hold attention tightly and often calm the senses. Being cut off mid-level or mid-episode feels like losing something unfinished, with no warning.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Grab the tablet out of your child's hands.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Set a timer together and let your child press the off button.

Why it works: Having control over the ending lowers the sense of loss.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Screen time is over. Give it to me."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"When this episode ends, the tablet goes to sleep."

Why it works: Ending at a natural stopping point feels finished, not cut off.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"You're addicted to that thing."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"It's hard to stop something you love. What's next is play-dough."

Why it works: Your child hears empathy and a clear next step, not shame.

More things to say

"Save your game. Then goodnight, tablet."

"One more video or two more minutes. You pick."

"You can tell me about the level while we walk."

Do this in the moment

-  Warn at 10, 5 and 1 minute, and point to the timer each time.
-  Stay close and calm when the screen turns off.
-  Move the tablet out of sight to its charging spot.
-  Offer a movement activity right after, like jumping or pushing a laundry basket.

Avoid

-  Turning off screens in the middle of a level or show.
-  Using the screen as a threat all day long.
-  Arguing about screen rules while your child is upset.

Set up for next time

-  Add screen time to the visual schedule, with a clear picture of what comes after.
-  Choose shows with short episodes or games that let your child save progress.
-  Build a charging spot where the tablet sleeps, so it has a home.



GET MORE HELP IF

If screens are the only way your child can calm down, talk with your OT about building other calming tools.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Let the tablet say goodnight. A little ritual, like tapping it to sleep, gives your child the last word.

3

PART ONE · EVERYDAY TRANSITIONS AND CHANGES

A Sudden Change in Plans

What it looks like

The pool is closed, grandma can't come, or you take a new route. Your child panics, screams, or keeps repeating the old plan.

What's really going on

Plans help kids with autism feel safe because they know what's coming. A surprise change pulls that away, and the brain reads it as danger.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"It's not a big deal. Just get over it."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"This is a big change. The pool is closed. Let's make a new plan."

Why it works: Calling it big matches how your child feels, so they can trust you.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Explain the reasons over and over.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Draw the new plan in two or three simple pictures.

Why it works: Seeing the new plan is easier than holding lots of words in mind.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Stop asking me about it!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"The pool is closed today. Let's check the schedule together."

Why it works: A calm, same answer each time builds trust in the new plan.



More things to say

"Plan changed. You are safe. I'll show you."

"You can be mad about it. I get it."

"Library or backyard? You choose."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Tell your child about the change as early as you can.
- ✓ Offer two choices so your child gets some control back.
- ✓ Give extra time for stims, pacing or questions.
- ✓ Keep the rest of the day as close to normal as possible.



Avoid

- ✗ Hiding the change until the last second.
- ✗ Promising things you might not be able to keep.
- ✗ Rushing into the new plan before your child is calm.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Use a "surprise" or "change" card on the visual schedule and practice it for small, fun changes.
- ✓ Read a simple social story about plans changing and how we still stay safe.
- ✓ Say "maybe" out loud for plans that aren't certain yet.



GET MORE HELP IF

If small changes cause daily distress or your child gets stuck on plans for hours, talk with your doctor or OT.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Practice with fun changes first. "Surprise! Pancakes for dinner!" teaches that change can be good too.

4

PART ONE · EVERYDAY TRANSITIONS AND CHANGES

Waiting and "Not Right Now"

What it looks like

Your child asks for a snack or turn and hears "in a minute." They whine, repeat the request nonstop, or fall apart.

What's really going on

Time is invisible and hard to feel. "Later" can sound like "never," and waiting with nothing to do builds up restless energy in the body.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"In a minute!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"When the timer beeps, it's your turn."

Why it works: A timer makes waiting visible and gives your child a clear end point.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Keep answering the same question with more words.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Point to the timer or first-then board without talking.

Why it works: Fewer words keep things calm and show the answer hasn't changed.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Stop bugging me!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"I heard you. You want a snack. After I wash these, snack."

Why it works: Your child knows they were heard and exactly when it will happen.



More things to say

"First shoes, then snack."

"Your turn is next. I'm watching the clock."

"Waiting is hard. Want to squeeze this while we wait?"



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Use a visual timer so your child can watch time run out.
- ✓ Give your child's hands something to do, like a fidget or chewy.
- ✓ Keep your wait promises, so "when the timer beeps" is always true.
- ✓ Offer a small job, like counting cars or holding the list.



Avoid

- ✗ Saying "later" with no clear time.
- ✗ Making your child wait a long time just to practice waiting.
- ✗ Saying yes only after screaming, which teaches that yelling works.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Keep a small waiting kit: fidget, chewy, sticker book, tiny timer.
- ✓ Practice short waits during calm moments and cheer when your child does it.
- ✓ Use a first-then board for common waits like snacks and screen time.



GET MORE HELP IF

If waiting even a few seconds leads to meltdowns or unsafe behavior, ask your OT for a waiting plan.

DR. VERA'S TIP

"Later" is a fog. "After the dishes" is a map. Give your child the map.

5

PART ONE · EVERYDAY TRANSITIONS AND CHANGES

Hearing "No"

What it looks like

You say no to a toy, cookie or activity. Your child screams, collapses, or begs again and again until the meltdown takes over.

What's really going on

A "no" can feel like a wall with no door. Kids with autism often get stuck on one idea and can't shift to another without help.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**SAY** INSTEAD OF

~~"No! Because I said so."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Not cookies. You can have apple or crackers."

Why it works: Pairing no with a yes gives your child a door out.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Give in once the crying gets loud enough.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Stay calm and kind, and keep the same answer.

Why it works: Steady limits feel safe. Changing answers makes the next "no" harder.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Stop crying right now."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"You really wanted that. It's okay to be sad."

Why it works: Feelings get smaller when someone names them instead of fighting them.



More things to say

"Not today. Let's put it on your wish list."

"That's a no for now. I'm still here."

"You can hold it for one minute, then it goes back."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Use fewer words once your child is upset.
- ✓ Write or draw the wish on a list to show you heard it.
- ✓ Stay nearby and keep your face and voice calm.
- ✓ Offer a calming tool, like a squeeze ball or quiet corner.



Avoid

- ✗ Lecturing or explaining the reason again and again.
- ✗ Saying yes after saying no to stop the meltdown.
- ✗ Laughing at or shaming the big feelings.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Say "yes" to what you can: "Yes, after dinner" works better than "no."
- ✓ Keep a picture wish list your child can add to anytime.
- ✓ Talk about stores ahead of time: what you will buy and what you won't.



GET MORE HELP IF

If hearing "no" leads to long meltdowns or self-injury, talk with your child's doctor or OT.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Every "no" needs a door. Show your child one thing they can do right now.

6

PART ONE · EVERYDAY TRANSITIONS AND CHANGES

Losing a Game or Making a Mistake

What it looks like

Your child loses a board game or makes a mistake in drawing. They cry, rip the paper, flip the board or say "I'm stupid."

What's really going on

Many kids with autism think in all-or-nothing terms. One mistake can feel like complete failure, and the feeling floods the body fast.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"It's just a game. Don't be a sore loser."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Losing feels bad. Your body is upset. Let's take a breath."

Why it works: Naming the body feeling helps your child calm down instead of feeling shamed.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Keep playing and tell your child to toughen up.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Pause the game and take a short movement break together.

Why it works: Movement helps the body release the upset before trying again.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"You're not stupid. Stop saying that."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Mistakes help brains grow. I make them too."

Why it works: It turns mistakes into a normal part of learning, not a verdict.



More things to say

"Oops! Want to fix it or start new?"

"You played hard. Next time, rematch?"

"I lost at that yesterday. It was frustrating."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Stop the activity if your child is too upset to keep going.
- ✓ Keep the game pieces away for a few minutes if throwing happens.
- ✓ Offer paper to start fresh or an eraser to fix.
- ✓ Show your own mistakes calmly: "Oops, I spilled. I'll clean it."



Avoid

- ✗ Letting your child win every time.
- ✗ Telling your child they're overreacting.
- ✗ Forcing an apology while your child is still upset.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Play cooperative games where everyone wins or loses together.
- ✓ Practice being a good loser with pretend games using toys or puppets.
- ✓ Create a social story about making mistakes and trying again.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child talks about hating themselves or mistakes stop them from trying new things, talk with a professional.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Lose on purpose sometimes, and do it out loud. "Aw, I lost! Good game!" is a lesson your child will copy.

7

PART ONE · EVERYDAY TRANSITIONS AND CHANGES

Getting Dressed and Out the Door

What it looks like

Mornings are a battle. Your child won't put on shoes, strips off clothes, or freezes, and a meltdown hits right before you leave.

What's really going on

Mornings pack together many steps, clothing sensations and time pressure. Your child's brain and body may not be ready for that much, that fast.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Hurry up, we're late again!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Shirt first. Then pants. I'll check off each one."

Why it works: One step at a time is easier than a rush of many steps.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Pick new clothes each morning without warning.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Lay out clothes the night before with your child's input.

Why it works: Knowing what they will wear lowers stress and sensory surprises.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Just put the socks on, they're fine!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Those socks feel wrong? Let's try your soft ones."

Why it works: Taking the feeling seriously keeps things moving instead of stuck.



More things to say

"Red shirt or blue shirt?"

"Shoes, then you can bring your dinosaur."

"Let's race the timer to the door."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Use a picture checklist for each step of getting ready.
- ✓ Keep tag-free, soft clothes that your child likes on hand.
- ✓ Help with the tricky parts, like zippers or laces, without fuss.
- ✓ Plan for extra time so you don't have to rush.



Avoid

- ✗ Yelling or rushing when your child is stuck on a step.
- ✗ Forcing scratchy or tight clothes.
- ✗ Adding surprise errands to the morning.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Make a picture checklist on the door with each step, from waking up to leaving.
- ✓ Let your child sleep in comfy clothes for the next day, if that works.
- ✓ Start with heavy work, like carrying laundry or pushing a chair, to calm the body.



GET MORE HELP IF

If clothing sensations or morning steps cause daily meltdowns, ask your OT about sensory support and routines.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Slow mornings are faster. Ten extra minutes can save you forty minutes of meltdown.

8

PART ONE · EVERYDAY TRANSITIONS AND CHANGES

The After-School Meltdown

What it looks like

Your child holds it together all day at school, then falls apart the moment they get in the car or through the front door.

What's really going on

Many kids with autism hold in stress all day to fit in. At home, where they feel safe, the built-up overload finally spills out.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"How was your day? What did you do?"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Hi. I'm glad to see you." Then quiet.

Why it works: Questions add load. A warm hello with no demands gives the brain a rest.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Start homework or chores right away.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Give 20 to 30 minutes of quiet, snack and downtime first.

Why it works: Your child's nervous system needs to reset before any new demands.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Your teacher says you were fine all day!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"You worked so hard today. You can rest now."

Why it works: It honors the effort it took to hold it together.



More things to say

"Snack is ready when you are."

"No talking needed. I'm here."

"You can tell me later, or never. Both are okay."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Bring a snack and water to pickup, since hunger adds to overload.
- ✓ Keep the car quiet, with dim light or sunglasses if helpful.
- ✓ Offer a calm space at home with soft lighting and favorite comfort items.
- ✓ Allow stimming, rocking or jumping to release the day's stress.



Avoid

- ✗ Asking lots of questions right after school.
- ✗ Planning errands or activities right after pickup.
- ✗ Taking the meltdown personally. It means your child feels safe with you.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Build an after-school routine: snack, quiet time, movement, then homework.
- ✓ Talk with the teacher about sensory breaks during the school day.
- ✓ Keep a calm corner at home with a blanket, headphones and fidgets.



GET MORE HELP IF

If after-school meltdowns happen daily or last over an hour, talk with the school team and your OT about support.

DR. VERA'S TIP

The after-school meltdown is a sign of trust. Your child saves the hard stuff for the person who feels safest.

part two

Sensory Overload at Home

Sounds, clothes, baths, brushes and touch. How to lower the load so your child's body can feel safe.

9 Loud Sounds at Home

10 Clothes, Tags, Socks and New Shoes

11 Bath Time and Hair Washing

12 Tooth Brushing

13 Haircut Time

14 Nail Trimming

15 Bright, Busy or Cluttered Rooms

16 Being Touched, Hugged or Crowded



PART TWO · SENSORY OVERLOAD AT HOME

Loud Sounds at Home

What it looks like

The vacuum starts and your child screams, covers their ears, and runs. A flushing toilet or blender can do the same thing, even from another room.

What's really going on

Many kids with autism hear sounds louder and sharper than we do. Sudden, roaring noises feel painful and scary, and the body jumps into fight or flight.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"It's just the vacuum. It won't hurt you."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"That's really loud for you. I'm turning it off."

Why it works: It shows you believe them, and the fastest relief is less noise.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Keep vacuuming so they get used to it~~

✓ TRY THIS

Turn the noise off, then help them get to a quiet room

Why it works: Forced exposure builds fear. Safety first, practice later on their terms.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Stop screaming, it's not that bad."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Hands on ears. Good idea. You're safe."

Why it works: It names a coping tool they already use and calms the alarm.



More things to say

"Loud sound. It's over now."

"Want your headphones or the quiet room?"

"I'll tell you before the blender starts next time."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Stop the sound if you can, or move with them away from it.
- ✓ Offer noise-cancelling headphones or earmuffs without a lecture.
- ✓ Lower your own voice and dim other noise, like the TV.
- ✓ Give heavy work after, like pushing a laundry basket, to settle their body.



Avoid

- ✗ Laughing at the reaction or calling it silly.
- ✗ Surprising them with loud appliances to toughen them up.
- ✗ Taking away headphones because they use them too much.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Vacuum or blend when your child is out, or give a two-minute warning first.
- ✓ Keep headphones in the same easy spot, plus a spare pair in the bathroom and car.
- ✓ Let them press the button themselves; control makes noise feel less scary.



GET MORE HELP IF

Talk to your child's doctor or OT if sound reactions are getting worse, or if they avoid bathrooms, school, or meals because of noise.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Hand dryers in public restrooms are the worst. Carry headphones and just say, "We'll use paper towels." One small plan avoids big fear.

10

PART TWO · SENSORY OVERLOAD AT HOME

Clothes, Tags, Socks and New Shoes

What it looks like

Your child rips off a shirt, kicks away socks, or screams that the new shoes "hurt" even though they fit. Getting dressed turns into a long fight.

What's really going on

Tags, seams, tight bands, and stiff fabric can feel like scratching or pinching all day. Their touch system is on high alert, so small feelings are big.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Those socks are fine. Just put them on."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"The seam bugs you. Let's find the smooth ones."

Why it works: It trusts their body signals and solves the real problem.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Force the new shoes on because they cost a lot~~

✓ TRY THIS

Let them wear the old pair and try new shoes at home first

Why it works: Short, calm practice at home lowers fear and builds comfort slowly.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"You're being so picky."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Your skin is telling you something. Which one feels better?"

Why it works: It respects their sensory needs and gives them a choice of two.



More things to say

"Scratchy tag? I'll cut it off."

"Soft shirt or smooth shirt?"

"Shoes on for one song, then we can take a break."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Remove the item that hurts, then pause before trying anything else.
- ✓ Offer two comfy options you already know they tolerate.
- ✓ Give firm, slow pressure on arms or legs, only if they like it.
- ✓ Let them dress in a quiet spot, away from rushing siblings.



Avoid

- ✗ Making them wear it "just for today" to prove a point.
- ✗ Buying lots of new clothes without letting them touch the fabric first.
- ✗ Arguing about whether it really hurts.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Buy tagless, seamless socks and soft cotton; get the same style in several colors.
- ✓ Wash new clothes a few times before wearing to soften them.
- ✓ Lay out tomorrow's outfit the night before, picked together from two choices.



GET MORE HELP IF

Talk to an OT if clothing battles keep your child home, make them miss school, or if very few clothes feel okay.

DR. VERA'S TIP

A "uniform" is okay. If your child wants the same soft shirt every day, buy five. Comfort now means more calm days.

11

PART TWO · SENSORY OVERLOAD AT HOME

Bath Time and Hair Washing

What it looks like

Your child cries, arches, or tries to climb out as soon as the water touches their head. Hair rinsing can bring screams you can hear next door.

What's really going on

Water on the face can feel like drowning, and temperature changes are strong. Tipping the head back can make them feel off balance and unsafe.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Pour a cup of water over their head quickly~~

✓ TRY THIS

Use a handheld sprayer or wet washcloth, and let them hold a dry towel

Why it works: Less water on the face and more control means less panic.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Hold still, we're almost done!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Three more rinses. One, two, three. Done."

Why it works: Counting shows exactly when it ends, which makes it bearable.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Big kids like baths."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Water on your face feels scary. I'll keep it off."

Why it works: Naming their fear builds trust, so they can relax a little.



More things to say

"Warm or a little cooler?"

"You pour the next cup."

"All done with hair. Now you can play."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Stop pouring and hand them a dry towel for their face.
- ✓ Check the water temperature together before they get in.
- ✓ Keep your voice low and slow and your hands gentle.
- ✓ End with a favorite toy or a big warm towel wrap.



Avoid

- ✗ Holding them down to finish the rinse.
- ✗ Washing hair every day if it is a big struggle.
- ✗ Surprising them with water on the face.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Use a picture schedule: water, soap, rinse, towel, pajamas.
- ✓ Try a swim visor or shower cap visor to keep water off the face.
- ✓ Wash hair less often, or let them practice on a doll first.



GET MORE HELP IF

Talk to your OT or doctor if bath fear is so strong that hygiene is hard, or if skin problems make water painful.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Some kids do better with a shower than a bath, or the other way around. Try the one you haven't tried yet.

12

PART TWO · SENSORY OVERLOAD AT HOME

Tooth Brushing

What it looks like

Your child clamps their mouth shut, gags, or pushes your hand away when the toothbrush comes near. Two minutes of brushing feels like an hour.

What's really going on

The mouth is very sensitive. Bristles, foamy paste, and strong mint can feel sharp, burning, or gross. Someone else's hand in their mouth feels out of control.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Pry their mouth open to get it done~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Let them brush first, then you take a short turn to finish

Why it works: Control first means less fear and more cooperation over time.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Open up! You need to brush!"~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Top teeth, then bottom teeth, then done."

Why it works: A short, clear sequence is easier to follow than a demand.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Stop gagging, it's just toothpaste."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"That taste is strong. Let's try a mild one."

Why it works: It solves the real sensory problem instead of blaming them.



More things to say

"Brush while we count to ten."

"Want the blue brush or the green brush?"

"Spit, and all done."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Use a soft, small brush and only a tiny smear of paste.
- ✓ Start with the front teeth, where it feels least strange.
- ✓ Play a two-minute song or sand timer so they know when it ends.
- ✓ Give chewy or crunchy snacks earlier in the day to wake up the mouth.



Avoid

- ✗ Holding them down to brush.
- ✗ Strong mint or foaming toothpaste if they hate it.
- ✗ Long lectures about cavities during the struggle.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Try unflavored or mild-flavored, low-foam toothpaste, or a vibrating brush if they like buzz.
- ✓ Brush in the same order every day, using a picture card on the mirror.
- ✓ Let them brush a stuffed animal's teeth first to practice.



GET MORE HELP IF

Ask your dentist and OT for help if brushing stays very hard, you see cavities, or your child gags or bleeds often.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Done is better than perfect. Thirty seconds of calm brushing twice a day beats two minutes of fighting once.

13

PART TWO · SENSORY OVERLOAD AT HOME

Haircut Time

What it looks like

Your child cries at the clippers, shakes off the cape, and fights to leave the chair. Tiny hairs on their neck can set off a meltdown afterward.

What's really going on

Clipper buzzing, scissors near ears, itchy hair bits, and a stranger's hands all hit at once. The salon lights and noise add even more load.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**SAY** INSTEAD OF

~~"Sit still or you'll get cut!"~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Scissors are near your ear. I'll count to five."

Why it works: It warns before each step and gives a clear end point.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Push through the whole haircut no matter what~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Take breaks and stop early if needed; finish another day

Why it works: A partial haircut is fine. A calm experience matters more for next time.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Everyone gets haircuts. It's no big deal."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Haircuts are hard for you. We'll go slow."

Why it works: Validation lowers stress and builds trust in the adult.



More things to say

"Clippers are next. They buzz."

"Want to hold the mirror?"

"Last snip. Then we're all done."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Let them wear headphones or hold a favorite fidget.
- ✓ Put a soft towel around the neck to catch hairs.
- ✓ Keep your hand on their shoulder with firm pressure, if they like it.
- ✓ Brush away hair right away and offer a clean shirt.



Avoid

- ✗ Surprise haircuts with no warning.
- ✗ Busy salon times, like Saturday mornings.
- ✗ Letting the stylist rush or grab their head.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Read a simple social story about haircuts, with photos of the salon and chair.
- ✓ Find a sensory-friendly stylist, or cut hair at home while they watch a show.
- ✓ Practice at home with a quiet toy clipper and a cape.



GET MORE HELP IF

Talk to your OT if haircuts need more than one adult to finish, or if fear of haircuts is growing each time.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Ask for the first or last appointment of the day. A quiet salon can make all the difference.

14

PART TWO · SENSORY OVERLOAD AT HOME

Nail Trimming

What it looks like

Your child pulls their hand away, screams, or hides their feet when they see the clippers. You might only get one nail done before they fall apart.

What's really going on

Fingertips and toes have lots of nerve endings. The pressure, the click sound, and fear of getting pinched can make trimming feel painful and scary.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Hold their hand tightly and clip fast~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Trim one or two nails, then take a break

Why it works: Small doses feel doable and don't build fear.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"It doesn't hurt, stop crying!"~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Nails feel funny for you. One nail, then we stop."

Why it works: It honors their feeling and makes the end clear.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"We're doing all ten right now."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Pick the finger we start with."

Why it works: Choice gives them control, which makes cooperation easier.



More things to say

"Click. One done."

"Squeeze my hand while I trim."

"All done. High five?"



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Press firmly on the fingertip before clipping, if they like it.
- ✓ Trim after a bath, when nails are softer.
- ✓ Use a nail file instead of clippers if the click is too much.
- ✓ Let them watch a favorite show or hold a fidget.



Avoid

- ✗ Sneaking a trim while they sleep; finding out later can break trust.
- ✗ Cutting too short, which can hurt for days.
- ✗ Doing all nails at once when they are already stressed.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Use a visual chart: ten fingers, color one in after each nail.
- ✓ Trim at the same calm time each week, like after Sunday bath.
- ✓ Try kid clippers with a guard, or a quiet electric nail file.



GET MORE HELP IF

Talk to your doctor if nails are ingrown, infected, or if your child cannot tolerate any nail care at all.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Filing is a great backup. It's quiet, slow, and you can do a little each night while reading a book.

15

PART TWO · SENSORY OVERLOAD AT HOME

Bright, Busy or Cluttered Rooms

What it looks like

Your child gets wild, cranky, or melts down in a messy, noisy room. They may hide under a table or shut their eyes.

What's really going on

Too many things to look at, bright lights, and lots of movement overload the brain. It can't sort it all, so it shuts down or explodes.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Just play with your toys like everyone else."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"This room is a lot. Want to go somewhere quieter?"

Why it works: It spots the overload and gives an easy way out.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Turn on more lights to cheer things up~~

✓ TRY THIS

Dim the lights or open a curtain for soft light

Why it works: Softer light calms the eyes and lowers sensory load.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Clean up this mess right now!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Let's put blocks in the bin together."

Why it works: One small task is easier than a big, vague command.



More things to say

"Too much to look at? Let's find your cozy spot."

"Lights low. Quiet voices."

"One toy out, then we swap."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Guide them to a calm corner with a blanket and pillows.
- ✓ Turn off the TV and any flashing or noisy toys.
- ✓ Offer sunglasses or a hat with a brim.
- ✓ Move other people away to give them space.



Avoid

- ✗ Adding more toys or activities to distract them.
- ✗ Loud fans, bright overhead lights, or flashing screens.
- ✗ Scolding them for hiding or covering their eyes.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Set up a calm corner with dim light, soft pillows, and a few fidgets.
- ✓ Use plain bins with picture labels and keep only a few toys out.
- ✓ Use lamps or warm bulbs instead of harsh overhead lights.



GET MORE HELP IF

Talk to your OT if your child can't stay in most rooms, or if light or clutter reactions are getting stronger.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Get down to your child's eye level and look around. You'll see what they see, and it may surprise you.

16

PART TWO · SENSORY OVERLOAD AT HOME

Being Touched, Hugged or Crowded

What it looks like

Your child pulls away, yells, or hits when someone hugs them or brushes past. Crowded spaces can make them freeze or run.

What's really going on

Light or unexpected touch can feel like a sting or alarm. Crowds bring touch, noise, and smells all at once, which is too much input.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Give Grandma a hug, don't be rude."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"You can wave or high five Grandma."

Why it works: It respects their body and still lets them connect.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Hug them tight to calm them down~~

✓ TRY THIS

Step back, give space, and ask before touching

Why it works: Unwanted touch adds overload; space helps them settle.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"It's just a little bump."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"That touch surprised you. I'll give you more room."

Why it works: It names their experience and shows you'll protect them.



More things to say

"Your body, your choice."

"Hug, high five, or wave?"

"I'm right here. I won't touch unless you ask."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Stand between your child and the crowd to make a buffer.
- ✓ Move to the edge of the room or outside.
- ✓ Offer firm pressure only if they ask, like a squeeze on shoulders.
- ✓ Quietly tell relatives, "She's not up for hugs right now."



Avoid

- ✗ Forcing hugs or kisses to be polite.
- ✗ Sneaking up and touching them from behind.
- ✗ Taking their "no" to touch personally.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Teach a simple signal, like a hand up, that means "please don't touch."
- ✓ Arrive early to events before crowds arrive, or leave before the rush.
- ✓ Tell family ahead of time about greetings your child likes, like waves.



GET MORE HELP IF

Talk to your OT if touch or crowds make it hard to go to school, eat with family, or get medical care.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Some kids want hugs only on their terms. Let them come to you, and your hug will mean even more.

part three

Out in Public

Stores, restaurants, parties and appointments. How to plan ahead, handle a meltdown in public and get home in one piece.

17 The Grocery Store

18 Eating at Restaurants

19 Birthday Parties

20 Doctor and Dentist Visits

21 Car Rides and Car Seats

22 Family Gatherings and Holidays

23 Quiet Places: Church, Library, Waiting Rooms

24 Playgrounds and Taking Turns

17

PART THREE · OUT IN PUBLIC

The Grocery Store

What it looks like

Halfway down the cereal aisle, your child covers their ears, drops to the floor, and screams. Shoppers stare while your cart blocks the aisle.

What's really going on

Stores pile on bright lights, beeping registers, crowds, strong smells, and endless choices. Add hunger or a long trip, and the nervous system simply runs out of room.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**SAY** INSTEAD OF

~~"Stop it right now, everyone is looking at us!"~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Too loud in here. I've got you. We can step outside."

Why it works: Naming the problem and offering an exit lowers the load instead of adding shame.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Keep shopping and finish the list while your child melts down.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Leave the cart with staff, walk to the car or a quiet corner, and let them recover.

Why it works: Recovery comes first. The groceries can wait ten minutes or until tomorrow.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"If you don't calm down, no treat for you."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"You can hold the list. Tell me when we find the bananas."

Why it works: A simple job gives focus and a sense of control in a busy space.



More things to say

"Headphones on? Let's make it quieter."

"Three more things, then checkout, then car."

"You can push the cart with me."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Move to the quietest spot nearby, like the flower section or the car.
- ✓ Offer headphones, sunglasses, or a hat to cut down light and noise.
- ✓ Stand between your child and onlookers to give them a calm shield.
- ✓ Hand them a crunchy snack or water if hunger may be part of it.



Avoid

- ✗ Explaining or apologizing loudly to strangers while your child is overwhelmed.
- ✗ Adding one more store or errand after signs of overload appear.
- ✗ Bargaining with toys in the checkout line to stop the meltdown.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Shop at quiet times, like early morning, and keep trips short.
- ✓ Make a picture shopping list your child can check off as you go.
- ✓ Give heavy work: pushing the cart or carrying the basket calms the body.



GET MORE HELP IF

Talk to your child's OT if store trips almost always end in overload; they can build a sensory plan for outings.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Pick one store and one short route and practice it often. Familiar aisles feel safer, and small wins build your child's confidence.

18

PART THREE · OUT IN PUBLIC

Eating at Restaurants

What it looks like

Your child slides under the table, kicks the chair, or yells when the food takes too long or arrives looking wrong.

What's really going on

Restaurants mean waiting, clattering dishes, loud talk, new smells, and food that may not match what your child expects. Sitting still for a long time is hard work.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**SAY** INSTEAD OF

~~"Sit nicely like the other kids."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Want to sit on the end? You can squeeze your hands under the table."

Why it works: Offering a body break helps them stay regulated without shaming them.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Insist your child try the new food on the plate.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Bring or order a safe food so your child has something they trust to eat.

Why it works: A known food lowers stress, which makes the whole meal easier.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"We are not leaving until everyone finishes."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Want a walk outside with me while we wait?"

Why it works: A short break resets the body before overload builds up.



More things to say

"Food is coming. First we color, then we eat."

"Your pancakes will look a little different here, and that's okay."

"Let's take a quick walk to the door and back."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Ask for a booth or a corner seat away from the kitchen.
- ✓ Hand over a small bag of fidgets, crayons, or a tablet with headphones.
- ✓ Step outside with your child if the noise or wait gets too big.
- ✓ Ask for the check early so you can leave fast if needed.



Avoid

- ✗ Forcing your child to taste, finish, or even touch new food.
- ✗ Ordering a long, multi-course meal on a hard day.
- ✗ Scolding in front of the table while your child is overwhelmed.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Look at the menu and restaurant photos online together before you go.
- ✓ Go at off-peak times, like an early dinner, when it's quieter.
- ✓ Pack a restaurant kit: headphones, fidgets, safe snack, and a favorite small toy.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child eats very few foods or meals often end in distress, ask the doctor or an OT about feeding therapy.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Start with short visits, like a milkshake at the counter. Build up to full meals slowly, one easy success at a time.

19

PART THREE · OUT IN PUBLIC

Birthday Parties

What it looks like

At the party, your child hides behind the couch, runs in circles, or screams when everyone sings "Happy Birthday."

What's really going on

Parties bring loud music, balloons that pop, crowds, unclear rules, and surprise moments like singing. Your child may feel excited and overwhelmed at the same time.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**SAY** INSTEAD OF

~~"Go play with the other kids, don't be shy."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"You can watch from here with me until you're ready."

Why it works: Watching first lets your child learn the space safely before joining in.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Stay in the middle of the loudest room the whole time.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Find a quiet spot, like a bedroom or porch, for breaks.

Why it works: Planned breaks keep the tank from overflowing, so your child can stay longer.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Just blow out the candles, it's fun!"~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Singing is loud. Headphones on, or we can step out for that part."

Why it works: Warning about the loud moment gives your child a choice and a plan.



More things to say

"It's okay to take a break. The party will still be here."

"Balloons can pop. Want to stay away from them?"

"We can leave after cake. That's our plan."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Arrive early, before the crowd, so the space feels calmer at first.
- ✓ Give your child a small job, like handing out napkins.
- ✓ Take breaks outside or in the car before overload builds.
- ✓ Leave early and on a good note, not after a meltdown.



Avoid

- ✗ Pushing your child into group games or photos they don't want.
- ✗ Staying until the very end just to be polite.
- ✗ Taking away their fidget or headphones so they look like other kids.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Tell the host your child may need breaks and a quiet spot.
- ✓ Make a simple social story about the party: arrive, play, cake, singing, go home.
- ✓ Pack headphones, a fidget, and a safe snack in case the food is new.



GET MORE HELP IF

If parties often end in long meltdowns or your child dreads them for days, ask your OT for a sensory plan.

DR. VERA'S TIP

A great party can be 30 minutes long. Leaving happy counts as a win, so plan your exit before you arrive.

PART THREE · OUT IN PUBLIC

20

Doctor and Dentist Visits

What it looks like

Your child refuses to enter the exam room, fights the blood pressure cuff, or clamps their mouth shut at the dentist.

What's really going on

These visits mix strange tools, bright lights, touch from strangers, and the unknown. Past pain or a scary visit makes the body brace for danger.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"It doesn't hurt, stop being silly."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"The cuff will squeeze your arm, then let go. Count with me."

Why it works: Honest words about what they will feel build trust and cut fear.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Let the visit start without any warning or preview.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Show photos or a video of the office and tools the day before.

Why it works: Knowing what comes next makes the unknown feel smaller and safer.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Just open your mouth and it'll be over."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"First, three counts of looking. Then a break. You can raise your hand to stop."

Why it works: A stop signal gives control, which helps your child tolerate hard steps.



More things to say

"First doctor, then park."

"Tell me with a hand up if you need a break."

"You're being brave, even though it's hard."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Ask for the first appointment of the day to cut waiting time.
- ✓ Tell staff what helps: dim lights, fewer words, explain before touching.
- ✓ Let your child hold a comfort item or wear headphones during the exam.
- ✓ Offer deep pressure, like a firm lap hug, only if your child likes it.



Avoid

- ✗ Promising "no shots" when you aren't sure.
- ✗ Letting several adults talk or touch at once.
- ✗ Rushing through steps when your child shows clear signs of overload.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Practice at home with a toy doctor kit, a mirror, and a toothbrush count.
- ✓ Look for doctors and dentists who work with kids with autism or sensory sensitivities.
- ✓ Write a one-page "About Me" card with triggers and helpers to give staff.



GET MORE HELP IF

If needed care keeps getting skipped because visits are too hard, ask the doctor about sensory-friendly options or a care plan.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Ask for "happy visits" where your child just sits in the chair and leaves. No exam, just practice. It really works.

21

PART THREE · OUT IN PUBLIC

Car Rides and Car Seats

What it looks like

Your child arches their back to fight the car seat straps, screams during the drive, or kicks the seat in front.

What's really going on

Straps can feel tight or itchy, the seat may be hot, and traffic noise and motion can overwhelm. Not knowing how long the ride lasts adds stress.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Stop kicking or we're turning around!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Push your feet into my hands. Hard as you can!"

Why it works: Pushing is heavy work that calms the body and gives kicking a safe job.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Keep driving while your child screams, hoping they wear out.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Pull over when safe, turn down the music, and wait quietly.

Why it works: Less sound and motion gives the nervous system a chance to settle.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"We'll get there when we get there."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Two more songs, then we're at Grandma's."

Why it works: Time measured in songs is easier to understand than minutes.



More things to say

"Click, click. Straps are on. Now your music."

"Too bright? Here are your sunglasses."

"We're almost at the red house, then home."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Check that straps are snug but not pinching, and tags aren't scratching.
- ✓ Lower the volume or offer headphones with calm music.
- ✓ Keep a car fidget bag with chewy tools and a weighted lap pad.
- ✓ Pull over safely if a meltdown makes driving unsafe.



Avoid

- ✗ Loosening or unbuckling straps while driving, even if they beg.
- ✗ Reaching back or yelling while you are driving.
- ✗ Taking away a comfort item to stop the screaming.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Use a picture route map: home, gas station, park, school.
- ✓ Cool the car first and use sun shades on hot days.
- ✓ Ask your OT about car seat covers or harness pads for sensory comfort.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child can't ride safely in the car seat, ask the doctor or OT about adaptive or special needs car seats.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Make buckling up a small routine with the same words and song every time. Predictable steps help the body relax.

22

PART THREE · OUT IN PUBLIC

Family Gatherings and Holidays

What it looks like

Your child melts down after relatives crowd in for hugs, or hides under the table while everyone opens presents at once.

What's really going on

Holidays break routines and add new foods, loud voices, decorations, and people wanting touch and eye contact. Changes in sleep and schedule stack up fast.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Give Grandma a hug, don't be rude."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"You can wave or high-five Grandma. You choose."

Why it works: Choosing a greeting protects body autonomy and keeps the connection warm.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Keep your child at the busy table the whole time.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Set up a quiet room with headphones, blankets, and favorite toys.

Why it works: A safe retreat lets your child recharge and come back later.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"It's Christmas, you should be happy!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Lots of people and noise today. We can take a break any time."

Why it works: Naming the load shows your child you understand how it feels.



More things to say

"Let's open one present, then take a rest."

"You can eat your own food today."

"We'll say goodbye at 4 o'clock, after pie."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Stick to usual nap, meal, and bed times as much as you can.
- ✓ Bring a visual schedule of the day, with the ending clearly shown.
- ✓ Stay near your child to step in with calm help if needed.
- ✓ Let your child stim freely; tell relatives it helps them feel calm.



Avoid

- ✗ Forcing hugs, kisses, or sitting on laps.
- ✗ Letting relatives tease, tickle, or push new foods on your child.
- ✗ Packing several visits or parties into one day.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Show photos of who will be there and where you will be ahead of time.
- ✓ Send a short note to relatives about greetings, breaks, and what helps.
- ✓ Wrap gifts loosely or skip wrapping if surprises are too much.



GET MORE HELP IF

If holiday seasons bring weeks of meltdowns, sleep problems, or regression, talk with your OT or doctor about added supports.

DR. VERA'S TIP

You get to protect your child, even from people you love. A kind "We're doing things our way this year" is enough.

PART THREE · OUT IN PUBLIC

23

Quiet Places: Church, Library, Waiting Rooms

What it looks like

In a hushed room, your child hums loudly, rocks, bangs the chair, or bursts into tears because they can't sit still.

What's really going on

Quiet places ask for stillness and silence, which is hard work. Small sounds like coughing or buzzing lights stand out more, and waiting has no clear end.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Shh! Be quiet right now!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Hum into your sleeve, or hold this squishy ball."

Why it works: Giving a quieter way to stim meets the need without stopping it.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Hold your child still in the seat.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Step outside or into the hallway for a movement break.

Why it works: Moving resets the body so your child can return and settle.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"We'll be here as long as it takes."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Five more names, then it's our turn."

Why it works: A clear, countable end makes waiting feel doable.



More things to say

"Whisper voice, like a mouse."

"Squeeze my hand as hard as you want."

"When the music stops, we go outside."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Sit near the back or by the door for easy breaks.
- ✓ Offer a quiet fidget, chewy tool, or a book with headphones.
- ✓ Give firm pressure with a lap pad or hand squeeze, if your child likes it.
- ✓ Leave calmly if your child can't stay, without scolding.



Avoid

- ✗ Telling your child to stop all stimming or rocking.
- ✗ Staying so long that a meltdown is sure to happen.
- ✗ Shushing again and again with more and more frustration.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Pack a quiet bag: fidgets, sticker book, chewy, headphones, snack.
- ✓ Ask about sensory-friendly services, library hours, or a text-me-when-ready option.
- ✓ Before you go, give heavy work like jumping or carrying to calm the body.



GET MORE HELP IF

If waiting or stillness is almost always too hard, ask your OT about movement tools and sensory diets.

DR. VERA'S TIP

A little humming is better than a big meltdown. Choose your child's calm over a perfectly silent room.

24

PART THREE · OUT IN PUBLIC

Playgrounds and Taking Turns

What it looks like

Your child screams when another kid gets on "their" swing, pushes others off the slide, or won't leave the playground.

What's really going on

Waiting for a turn is hard when the rules aren't clear or the need for movement feels urgent. Crowds and shrieking kids add to the overload.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Share! You've had it long enough."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Five more pushes, then it's her turn. Count with me."

Why it works: Counting shows exactly when the turn ends, so change feels less sudden.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Drag your child off the swing when time's up.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Give a warning, then help them move to the slide or monkey bars.

Why it works: Moving to a new job keeps the body busy and eases the change.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Say sorry right now!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"You're upset. Let's sit here and breathe, then check on him."

Why it works: Calm comes first; repair works better once the body is settled.



More things to say

"My turn, your turn. Then back to you."

"The swing is busy. Want the tire swing or the slide?"

"Wait with me and watch. You're next."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Use a visual timer or count out loud for turns.
- ✓ Guide your child to a quieter spot away from the busy area.
- ✓ Offer heavy work, like climbing or pushing a swing, while waiting.
- ✓ Step in calmly and move people away if anyone could get hurt.



Avoid

- ✗ Forcing an apology during a meltdown.
- ✗ Staying at the busiest park at the busiest time.
- ✗ Comparing your child to kids who share easily.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Visit parks at quiet times, like early morning or right after lunch.
- ✓ Practice turn-taking at home with games and a sand timer.
- ✓ Use a social story about waiting and turns at the playground.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child often hurts others or can't join play at all, talk with your OT or doctor about social and sensory supports.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Bring a small timer to the park. When the timer is the boss, you don't have to be the bad guy.

part four

When the Storm Hits

Hitting, self-injury, running and shutdowns. How to keep everyone safe and bring your child back to calm.

25 Hitting, Kicking or Biting During a Meltdown

26 Head-Banging and Self-Injury

27 Throwing and Breaking Things

28 Running Off During a Meltdown

29 Shutdowns: Going Silent or Freezing

30 Keeping Siblings Safe and Supported

PART FOUR · WHEN THE STORM HITS

25

Hitting, Kicking or Biting During a Meltdown

What it looks like

In the middle of a meltdown, your child lashes out. They may hit, kick, scratch or bite whoever is closest, often the person they trust most.

What's really going on

This is a body in fight mode, not a plan to hurt you. The thinking brain is offline, and lashing out is the nervous system trying to protect itself.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"We do NOT hit! Say sorry right now!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"I won't let you hit. I'm moving back."

Why it works: Calm limits keep everyone safe without adding more pressure to an overloaded brain.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Grab their arms and hold them still until they stop~~

✓ TRY THIS

Step back out of reach and put a pillow or cushion between you

Why it works: Distance protects you both. Holding often makes a body in fight mode fight harder.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Look at me! Why did you do that?"~~

✓ TRY THIS

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

Why it works: Questions and eye contact add load. Short reassurance helps the alarm system settle.



More things to say

"I'm staying close. I'm keeping us safe."

"You can squeeze this pillow."

"Your body is working so hard right now."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Move siblings, pets and hard or sharp objects away from your child.
- ✓ Stand to the side, an arm's length or more away, with your hands relaxed and open.
- ✓ Offer something safe to bite or hit, like a chewy tool or a couch cushion.
- ✓ Lower lights and noise, and wait quietly until their breathing slows.



Avoid

- ✗ Punishing, spanking or taking away comfort items after the meltdown.
- ✗ Hitting or biting back to 'show them how it feels'.
- ✗ Crowding them, leaning in or blocking their only way out.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Track what happens before hitting. Hunger, noise, tiredness and transitions are common sparks.
- ✓ Build daily heavy work, like pushing a laundry basket or carrying groceries, to help regulate the body.
- ✓ When calm, practice a 'strong body' plan: squeeze a pillow, stomp feet, push the wall.



GET MORE HELP IF

If anyone is seriously hurt or you cannot keep people safe, call 911. Talk with your child's doctor or OT if aggression is frequent or getting worse.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Your child is not giving you a hard time. They are having a hard time. Protect your body first, then offer calm.

26

PART FOUR · WHEN THE STORM HITS

Head-Banging and Self-Injury

What it looks like

During a meltdown, your child bangs their head on the floor or wall, bites their own hand, hits their face or scratches their skin.

What's really going on

Strong pain or pressure can drown out overwhelming feelings or sensations. It may also signal hidden pain, like an ear infection, toothache or stomach trouble.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Stop that right now! You're hurting yourself!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"I'm here. I'll help keep you safe."

Why it works: Alarm in your voice adds stress. Steady words help the storm pass sooner.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Pin their head or arms down to stop the banging~~

✓ TRY THIS

Slide a pillow or folded blanket between their head and the hard surface

Why it works: Softening the surface lowers injury risk without a struggle that can make things worse.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Why would you do this to yourself?"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"That's a lot. You can push my hands instead."

Why it works: Offering safe, strong pressure can replace the need to hurt themselves.



More things to say

"Soft pillow. Here it is."

"Push, push. Big strong push."

"You're not in trouble. I'm staying right here."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Move them, or move furniture, away from walls, corners and sharp edges if you safely can.
- ✓ Place cushions, a beanbag or a folded blanket where their head is landing.
- ✓ Offer deep pressure only if they like it, like a heavy blanket or hand push.
- ✓ After they calm, check gently for bumps, bleeding or swelling.



Avoid

- ✗ Reacting with a big, scared or angry voice.
- ✗ Giving loads of extra attention only when they self-injure.
- ✗ Assuming it is 'just behavior' without checking for pain or illness.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Ask the doctor to check for ear, tooth, stomach or sleep problems, especially if self-injury is new.
- ✓ Give regular sensory input during the day, like trampoline time, heavy work or a weighted lap pad.
- ✓ Keep a soft spot ready: a beanbag or mat in the calm corner, away from walls.



GET MORE HELP IF

Call 911 for a head injury with vomiting, confusion, fainting or heavy bleeding.
Talk with the doctor and OT soon if self-injury happens at all.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Your calm is protective too. Soften the space, stay close and slow, and trust that you can get help. You don't have to solve this alone.

27

PART FOUR · WHEN THE STORM HITS

Throwing and Breaking Things

What it looks like

Toys, plates, shoes or remotes go flying across the room. Your child may sweep things off a table, tear papers or kick over furniture.

What's really going on

Throwing releases a huge surge of energy the body cannot hold. It can also be the fastest way to say 'too much' when words are gone.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"If you throw that, you lose it forever!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"I'm moving this so no one gets hurt."

Why it works: Clear, calm action prevents harm without threats the child cannot process right now.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Chase them around the room grabbing things out of their hands~~

✓ TRY THIS

Quietly clear breakables and heavy objects from nearby, and move others out of range

Why it works: Removing targets lowers danger and keeps you out of a tug-of-war.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Look what you did! You broke it!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"We'll deal with that later. Right now, let's get calm."

Why it works: Guilt in the moment adds overload. Repair works better once the body is settled.



More things to say

"You can throw the soft ball into the basket."

"Things are on the floor. That's okay for now."

"I'll wait. Take your time."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Guide siblings and pets to another room until things are safe.
- ✓ Offer soft things to throw, like pillows, stuffed animals or a beanbag.
- ✓ Stay near a doorway so you can step back and still watch them.
- ✓ Once calm, clean up together with a simple job, like putting blocks in a bin.



Avoid

- ✗ Throwing away their favorite things as punishment.
- ✗ Lecturing about the cost of broken things during the meltdown.
- ✗ Standing in the path of flying objects to prove a point.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Keep glass, heavy objects and screens up high or put away in rooms where meltdowns often happen.
- ✓ Set up a 'safe throw' spot with a laundry basket and soft balls, and practice using it.
- ✓ Plan daily big-energy play, like throwing beanbags outside, wall pushes or jumping on a mini trampoline.



GET MORE HELP IF

Call 911 if someone is badly hurt. Talk with your child's doctor or OT if throwing is frequent, dangerous or targeting people.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Things can be replaced, people can't. Protect bodies first and let the mess wait. Repair comes later, together and without shame.

28

PART FOUR · WHEN THE STORM HITS

Running Off During a Meltdown

What it looks like

Overwhelmed, your child suddenly bolts: out the front door, across a parking lot or away from you in a store, often toward danger without noticing.

What's really going on

Running is the flight part of the stress response. The brain says 'get away from this', and safety awareness shuts down in that moment.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Get back here right now or else!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

Say their name once, then a short, clear cue you practiced, like "Stop, feet!"

Why it works: One familiar word is easier to hear than a shout full of words.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Chase them loudly, yelling their name~~

✓ TRY THIS

Move quickly and quietly, keep them in sight, and get between them and the road

Why it works: Loud chasing can feel like a game or a threat and makes them run faster.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"You scared me! You're never going anywhere again!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"You're safe now. I've got you."

Why it works: Fear and blame keep the alarm on. Calm words help their body come down.



More things to say

"Stop. Wait for me."

"This way. Walk with me to the car."

"We're going somewhere quiet now."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ If your child goes missing, call 911 right away. Check nearby pools and ponds first.
- ✓ Ask other adults nearby to help block exits or watch the road.
- ✓ Once they stop, lead them to a quiet spot, like the car or a corner.
- ✓ Give them space to calm before talking about what happened.



Avoid

- ✗ Waiting to call for help because you feel embarrassed.
- ✗ Spanking or scaring them afterward to 'teach a lesson'.
- ✗ Leaving doors unlocked when your child is known to run.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Add door alarms, high locks or chimes at home, and use a GPS tracker or ID bracelet.
- ✓ Teach swimming early, and fence or lock off pools. Water is the biggest danger for runners.
- ✓ Practice 'stop' games when calm, and give local police a short info sheet about your child.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child is missing or near traffic or water, call 911 immediately. Ask the doctor or OT for a safety plan if running happens often.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Running is fear, not defiance. Lock up, plan ahead, practice 'stop' as a game, and never hesitate to call for help.

29

PART FOUR · WHEN THE STORM HITS

Shutdowns: Going Silent or Freezing

What it looks like

Instead of exploding, your child goes quiet. They stop talking, stare, curl up, hide under a blanket or seem frozen and unreachable.

What's really going on

A shutdown is a quieter overload. The brain turns inputs down to protect itself. It is just as intense as a meltdown, only inward.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Answer me! I'm talking to you!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"You don't have to talk. I'm right here."

Why it works: Removing the demand to speak lowers pressure so their system can reboot.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Keep asking questions and pull them out of their hiding spot~~

✓ TRY THIS

Dim the lights, lower the noise and sit quietly nearby

Why it works: Less input gives the overloaded brain room to recover.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Come on, you're fine. Snap out of it."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Thumbs up if you want water. It's okay if not."

Why it works: A no-words choice respects where they are and keeps connection open.



More things to say

"Take all the time you need."

"I'll sit here. You can come to me when you're ready."

"Point if you want your blanket."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Let them stay in their safe spot, like under a blanket or in a tent.
- ✓ Offer a comfort item, water or a snack without asking them to respond.
- ✓ Keep other people and noise away, and turn off screens or music.
- ✓ Let them use a picture card, gesture or device to communicate if they want.



Avoid

- ✗ Mistaking a shutdown for calm and adding more tasks or demands.
- ✗ Forcing eye contact, talking or leaving the hiding spot.
- ✗ Calling it rude, lazy or 'giving you the silent treatment'.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Notice early signs, like a flat face, slower movement or fewer words, and offer a break sooner.
- ✓ Build quiet recovery time after school, outings and busy days into the schedule.
- ✓ Create communication cards like 'break', 'help' and 'too loud' for times when speaking is hard.



GET MORE HELP IF

Talk with the doctor if shutdowns are long, frequent or come with staring spells you can't interrupt, which could be a medical issue.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Quiet is not the same as okay. Treat a shutdown with the same care as a meltdown: less input, less talk, more patience.

30

PART FOUR · WHEN THE STORM HITS

Keeping Siblings Safe and Supported

What it looks like

When one child melts down, brothers and sisters get hit, scared, or pushed aside. They may cry, hide, act out or say 'It's not fair.'

What's really going on

Siblings love their brother or sister with autism, but meltdowns can feel scary and confusing. They need safety, simple explanations and their own time with you.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Just ignore it and go play."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Your brother's body is overloaded. Let's go to your safe spot."

Why it works: Siblings feel less scared when they know what is happening and where to go.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Make the sibling stay and help calm their brother or sister~~

✓ TRY THIS

Send them to a planned safe room with a comfort kit or a trusted adult

Why it works: Siblings shouldn't carry adult jobs, and distance keeps them out of harm.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"You need to understand, he can't help it."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"It's okay to feel mad or scared. Tell me about it."

Why it works: Naming feelings helps siblings cope without guilt or blame.



More things to say

"You did a great job going to your safe spot."

"You are safe. I will come to you soon."

"You can always tell me how you feel."



Do this in the moment

- ✓ Teach siblings a code word that means 'go to your safe room now'.
- ✓ Stock the safe room with headphones, books, snacks and a favorite toy.
- ✓ If a sibling is hurt, check them and comfort them first once things are safe.
- ✓ Afterward, give each child a few minutes of one-on-one time with you.



Avoid

- ✗ Making siblings take the blame or 'let him win' to stop a meltdown.
- ✗ Skipping their needs or events every time because of meltdowns.
- ✗ Asking a young sibling to watch or calm their brother or sister with autism.



Set up for next time

- ✓ Practice the safety plan like a fire drill: code word, safe room, and who helps.
- ✓ Explain autism simply with a book or social story, and let siblings ask questions.
- ✓ Look for sibling support groups or camps where kids can meet others like them.



GET MORE HELP IF

Call 911 if anyone is seriously hurt. Talk with a counselor if a sibling seems anxious, withdrawn or afraid at home.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Every child in your home deserves to feel safe and seen. A little one-on-one time each day goes a long way.

TOOLS

Your home calming kit

A small bag or box your child can grab when things feel like too much. Keep one at home and a mini version in the car or your bag.

Ears

Noise-cancelling headphones or earplugs, a favorite calm song

Eyes

Sunglasses, a cap or hood, a picture book or calm-down bottle

Hands

Fidgets, stress ball, putty, a soft fabric square

Mouth

Chewy necklace or tool, crunchy or chewy snack, water bottle with a straw

Body

Small weighted lap pad (if your child likes it), a hoodie, a favorite blanket

Comfort

Favorite small toy, a photo of family, a visual “break” card

How to make it work

- ✓ Let your child help choose and decorate the kit, so it feels like theirs.
- ✓ Practice using it when calm, so it's familiar in a hard moment.
- ✓ Rotate items every few weeks so it stays interesting.
- ✓ Never take the kit away as a punishment.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Ask your child's OT which tools match your child's sensory profile. The right kit is personal.

TOOLS

Setting up a calm corner

A calm corner is a cozy, low-input space your child can go to when they need a break. It is never a time-out or a punishment.

Where

A quiet corner away from the TV and kitchen. A small tent, a big box, the space behind the couch or a closet with the door open all work.

What to put in it

Beanbag or cushions, a soft blanket, dim or warm light, the calming kit, a few favorite books, a visual feelings chart.

What to keep out

Screens, bright lights, hard or sharp furniture, anything breakable, strong smells.

How to introduce it

Visit it together when calm. Read there, breathe there, rest there. Then it's a safe, familiar place when a storm hits.

Words to use

"Want to go to your cozy spot?"

"I'll sit right here by the door."

"Stay as long as you need."

DR. VERA'S TIP

Model it. When you feel stressed, say "I'm going to my calm spot for a minute." Kids copy what they see.

PRINTABLE

First-Then board and countdown

Pictures make the next step easy to see and hard to forget. Cut out, laminate if you can, and use with pictures or simple drawings.

FIRST

draw or paste a picture

THEN

draw or paste a picture

My schedule (up to 5 steps)

1

2

3

4

5

Countdown strip

5

4

3

2

1

ALL DONE**DR. VERA'S TIP**

Remove one circle at a time as time runs out. Seeing the numbers disappear helps the ending feel fair and predictable.

PRINTABLE · SHARE WITH FAMILY, SITTERS AND TEACHERS

My Calm Plan

Fill this in together with your child when possible. Give a copy to anyone who cares for them.

My name is:

Things that overwhelm me:

My early warning signs:

What helps me calm down:

Please don't:

Words that help me:

After a meltdown, I need:

Call this person:

PRINTABLE

Trigger detective log

Track meltdowns for 2 weeks. Patterns jump out fast: the same time of day, the same place, the same demand, or a hungry or tired body.

DATE / TIME	WHERE	WHAT HAPPENED RIGHT BEFORE	WHAT I SAW	WHAT HELPED	HOW LONG

Patterns I notice:

PRINTABLE • CUT ALONG THE DOTTED LINES

Kindness cards for public

You never owe strangers an explanation. But some parents find that handing a card to a staring stranger or a worried store worker saves energy for their child.

My child has autism.

They are overwhelmed right now, not misbehaving. We're OK. The kindest thing you can do is give us a little space. Thank you.

Learn more at autismsociety.org

We're having a hard moment.

My child has autism and their senses are overloaded. Please don't stare or offer advice. A smile helps more than you know.

Learn more at autismsociety.org

Thank you for your patience.

My child has autism. Noise and crowds can be a lot. We may need to step away or leave quickly.

Learn more at autismsociety.org

Autism: more than meets the eye.

My child communicates and feels differently. If you'd like to help, lower your voice and give us room.

Learn more at autismsociety.org

DR. VERA'S TIP

Keep two cards in your wallet and phone case. Your job is your child, not the audience.

TOOLS

After the storm

The minutes and hours after a meltdown matter. Your child's body is exhausted and still sensitive. This is a time to restore, not to teach.

Right after (the calm stage)

- ✓ Offer water and a small snack
- ✓ Keep lights and sounds low
- ✓ Let them rest, rock or stim
- ✓ Skip questions and lessons for now

Later (reconnect)

- ✓ Reconnect first: sit close, play, cuddle if welcome
- ✓ Keep the talk short and blame-free
- ✓ Use drawings, a feelings chart or a social story
- ✓ Plan one small change for next time

Simple repair words

"That was really hard. You're safe now."

"I love you, even in big feelings."

"Next time, the noise got too big. Let's pack your headphones."

And for you

If you yelled or lost your cool, repair counts too: "I got loud. I'm sorry. I'm working on staying calm." Kids learn more from repair than from perfection.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Write one line in the trigger log after every big meltdown. Your notes become the best treatment plan you'll ever have.

IMPORTANT

When to get more help



CALL 911 RIGHT AWAY IF

- ✗ Anyone is badly hurt, or your child has a head injury with vomiting, confusion or fainting
- ✗ Your child runs into traffic or water, or is missing
- ✗ You feel you or your child are not safe

Call your child's doctor soon if

- ✓ Meltdowns suddenly become more frequent, longer or more intense
- ✓ New self-injury, or self-injury that leaves marks
- ✓ Signs of pain or illness: ear pulling, stomach issues, constipation, not sleeping, not eating
- ✓ Big changes in sleep, appetite, toileting or skills your child already had
- ✓ Your child seems very sad, anxious or withdrawn for more than two weeks

Who can help

PROFESSIONAL	HOW THEY HELP
Pediatrician	Rule out pain, illness, sleep, GI or medication issues
Occupational therapist (OT)	Sensory plan, calming tools, daily routines, home setup
Speech-language pathologist	Communication tools so your child can say “stop,” “help” or “break”
Psychologist or behavioral specialist	Anxiety, aggression, safety plans that respect your child

In a mental health crisis, you can also call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) in the U.S.

FOR YOU

Taking care of you

Parents of children with autism report some of the highest stress levels of any parents. That isn't weakness. It's the load. And your calm is one of your child's most powerful tools, so protecting it matters.

In the moment

- ✓ Breathe out longer than you breathe in
- ✓ Drop your shoulders and unclench your jaw
- ✓ Say to yourself: "This is a storm. It will pass."

Every day

- ✓ Ten minutes that are just yours
- ✓ Move your body, even a short walk
- ✓ Eat and drink: you run on fuel too

Every week

- ✓ Share the load: partner, family, respite care
- ✓ Talk to one person who gets it
- ✓ Celebrate one small win

Find your people

- ✓ Local autism parent groups
- ✓ Your child's school or therapy team
- ✓ Online groups with kind moderation

DR. VERA'S TIP

You can't pour from an empty cup, and you don't have to. Asking for help is part of being a great parent.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Fernando Vera, OT

Licensed occupational therapist and owner and clinical director of Empower Health, a clinic in Houston, TX.

Dr. Vera helps families turn hard daily moments into calmer, more connected routines. His approach is practical and respectful: understand what the nervous system needs, lower the load, and give parents words and tools they can use the same day.

He is also the author of Dr. Vera's Dementia Action Manuals, including *Stop the Chaos!*

More Calm & Connected Guides

Stop the Sensory Overload!

Clothes, noise, haircuts, stores and a home calming kit.

Stop the Bedtime Battles!

A step-by-step bedtime plan for kids with autism.

Stop the Food Fights!

Sensory-friendly eating without the battle.

Stop the Potty Struggles!

An OT's toileting plan for kids with autism.

Stop the Loneliness!

An OT's guide to helping your child with autism build real friendships.