

Is it

# SENSORY or BEHAVIOR?

If your child is demonstrating **big emotions** and **aggressive or disruptive behaviors**, you may find yourself wondering: is there a sensory cause, or is my child just in a bad mood? While it is developmentally appropriate and normal for children to have "tantrums" at times, sensory "meltdowns" are more complex and may require a different approach.

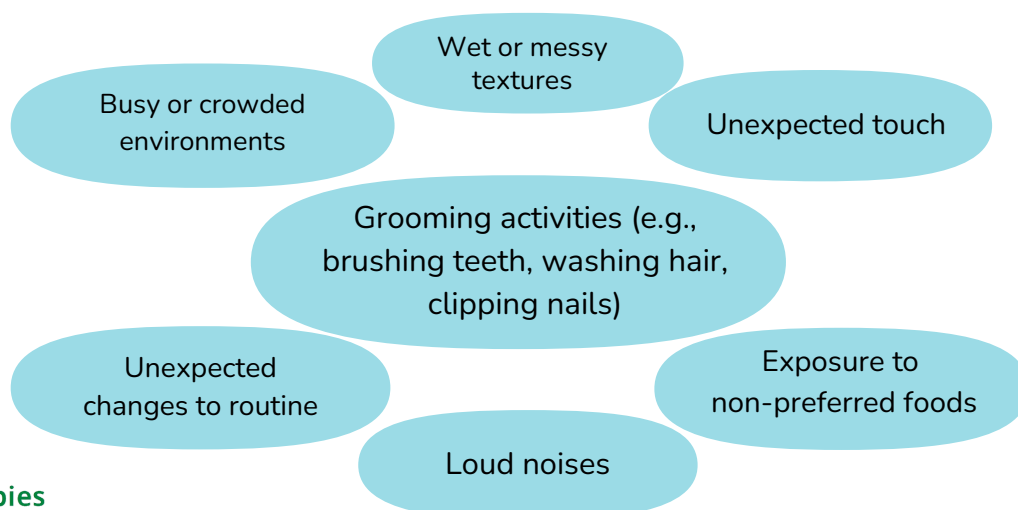
## Behavioral Tantrums

"Tantrums" are emotional responses that happen when children are **trying to express something they want or don't want** but are still learning how to calmly communicate their needs or cope with disappointment when their needs cannot be met immediately. A child having a tantrum may attempt to express his or her needs by crying or yelling, and may become aggressive toward others (such as hitting, pushing, or biting) if the need is not met right away.

## Sensory Meltdowns

"Meltdowns" are a physiological reaction to sensory overwhelm that happen when a **child's nervous system struggles to process sensory information** from the environment. Although they can sometimes look similar to tantrums (crying, hyperventilating, screaming, or aggressive behaviors towards others), meltdowns often last longer and can sometimes also involve additional self-harming or avoidant behaviors.

Triggers for sensory meltdowns can differ between children but some examples include:





## How to Spot a **Tantrum**:

- **Demand specific:** A tantrum is a behavioral demand for a specific response. A child wants something and has learned that a big reaction can lead to more immediate attention.
- **Require an audience:** Because tantrums are a means of communicating, they almost never begin when a caregiver is not nearby.
- **Can be stopped:** Most often the behavior can stop as soon as the need is met. (For example, a child screams and cries for a cookie and stops right away if given a cookie.)



## How to Spot a **Meltdown**:

- **Requires a “system reboot”:** A meltdown will generally not be resolved simply by providing a desired item or even withdrawing the initial sensory trigger. A child’s nervous system has become overloaded, and therefore needs a full reset with sensory-based supports in order to re-regulate and recover.
- **Will occur with or without an audience:** Since meltdowns are involuntary physiological responses and do not begin as a way to communicate, they will typically happen whether or not there are others nearby.
- **May involve body-focused or avoidant behaviors:** You may see your child attempt to cope with a sensory overload with self-harming behaviors such as head banging or scratching the skin. You might also notice your child hiding, covering his/her eyes or ears, or even appearing to “zone out” or “shut down.”





## Tips for Helping Your Child Recover:

During a meltdown AND a tantrum, language and logic centers of the brain are "offline," so it might not be the best time to problem solve or provide explanations. It can be helpful to limit questions or instructions and keep statements brief.

- Try offering **non-verbal communication**, such as encouraging your child to point to his/her choices. For example, you can hold out one hand and say “Do you want some space?” and then hold out your other hand and say “Or do you want a hug?” and encourage your child to touch or point at the hand representing the chosen option.
- Children who are experiencing a sensory overload may need to reset in a **calm environment** (e.g., a quiet or dim room) or use sensory supports to re-focus (e.g., listen to soothing music or play with kinetic sand).
- You can **model self-regulation techniques** for your child, like taking slow, deep breaths, counting to 10, or squeezing your hands together.

## After a Tantrum or Meltdown:

Once your child is feeling calm, it can be helpful to briefly re-connect, reflect, and help bring higher-level brain functions “back online.”

- Try a quick “I Spy” or “Spot the Color” game (e.g., “Find 3 things that are green”) to help your child “zoom out” and begin scanning his or her environment instead of focusing inward.
- Reflect with your child by briefly narrating your perspective of what happened and asking them to confirm (e.g., “You didn’t like the feeling of applesauce on your hands and you got upset, right?”).

