

## Chronic Inflexibility and Meltdowns

Instead of seeing your child as stubborn or manipulative, consider the possibility that it could be physiological temperament (executive functioning) or a lack of skill set development.

- Executive functioning is working memory + organization + planning.

Working memory is required in order for someone to think through a problem to find a solution. This is why some kids talk out of turn in class, don't comply with parental commands, don't cooperate well with others – because all of these require *working memory*. (Doesn't listen to you while the TV is on.)

- Executive functioning may play a role in the impact of emotion on logic; negative affect is a valence over logic rendering logic ineffectual. Also impacts social skills: social events are highly complex with subtle verbal and nonverbal nuances, the meaning of which may vary from situation to situation or even from person to person.
- The result of poor executive functioning is *inflexibility*.
- Inflexibility manifestations may be regarding schedules, any change of plans, smells, food, the way things feel, the way things are done.
- Manifestations: meltdowns, raging, easily angered or frustrated, black and white thinking, (“I hate you!”), aggression, disorganization.
- These children will accurately tell you that they have no idea why they do what they do (“Why did you do that?” “I don't know.”) These children have a very difficult time thinking clearly **just prior to** and **during** a meltdown.

\*\*\* It may be exacerbated by fatigue, hunger, thirst, and physical discomfort. These cause the child to be on overload.

- Child on “overload” + parental demands = acting out.
- Acting out + upset parent = full-blown meltdown.
- **Solution:** cool down (child)
- **Long term solution:** recognize and decrease overload.



## To Be Forewarned...

### Goal –

Determine in advance situations that may routinely lead to acting out.

- This should be the #1 tool you use to decrease meltdowns.

- **Thirst; hunger; fatigue; physical discomfort;** boredom; getting up in the morning; getting dressed; surprise; particular sounds, lighting or clothing; homework, change of plans.

### Step 1

Notice **early warning signs** of frustration.

### Step 2

**Intervene early** (before acting out occurs).

- Early interventions include: **Empathy;** soothing touch, speak softly, distraction (something enjoyable, something that requires little thought, nothing complex); humor; problem solve (help the child find an alternative – a solution to the dilemma; logic (you will have to walk the child through a logical sequence.)

### Step 3

Decrease demands for flexibility.

### Also -

- Keep your cool - Don't inadvertently fuel the flames of an impending meltdown.
- Be flexible. Inflexibility on your part will increase likelihood of a meltdown.
- Pick your battles carefully. This is truer than with other kids. Is this so important that you are willing to endure a meltdown? If not, let it go.

## Principles of “Reteaching”

1. Use fewer, clearer commands.
  - Speak in behaviorally specific terms. (Instead of saying: “Clean up your messy bathroom.” Say “Hang your towel on the towel rack.”)
2. Use non-verbal commands when possible.
3. Issue commands only once or twice. Compliance is expected quickly. Don’t “nag” as this may lead to a meltdown.
4. Teach the child that you (the parent) won’t back down. This does not mean you should be rigid. This is where compromise comes in.
5. Behavior modification may not work as well as expected when used with a child who is developmentally compromised in the areas of flexibility and frustration tolerance.
  - Because they lack the capacity to “shift” to the parents’ agenda, even when positive consequences are provided.
  - The child already knows what adults expect. So positive consequences won’t teach this. Many inflexible children want to behave, so a motivator won’t work.

### Remember, This is What Works:

1. Anticipate meltdowns.
2. Be realistic about how much frustration tolerance your child has. *This will change from day to day.*
3. Don’t have your own meltdown. This makes it worse. Be clear headed.
4. Don’t take it personally.
5. Don’t insist your underdeveloped child be more flexible.
6. Read early warning signs. Take action. “I’m tired.” “I’m hungry, thirsty” “I don’t want to.” Any intense response is a signal.

### Don’t Forget ...

**Priority #1** Restoring sanity to your household. Beginning to help your child become more flexible and reducing meltdowns must be the immediate priority.

## Assessment of 3 Levels of Undesirable Behaviors

Level 1 – non-negotiable. You are willing to endure a meltdown over this. Safety issues, harm to people, animals, possessions, sneaking out, drugs, and alcohol.

Level 2 – negotiable (for now) These are important but you are not willing to endure a meltdown. These will be worked on at a later date, when your child has more skills. Homework, swearing, chores, hygiene.

Level 3 These are not that important.

### Managing Level 1 Behaviors

You are the authority and there are some things that your child HAS to do just because you say so. This is true of behaviors at this level. Once these behaviors are mastered we will go on to Level 2.

### Managing Level 2 Behaviors

Help your child think. Communicate clearly. Use fewer words and non-verbal communication. *Compromise.* It is good to compromise with your child – remember that this is something you want your child to learn how to do. Teach by doing. Compromise is your way of getting the most important parts of what you want without a meltdown. “Summarize” the disagreement. This can help your child when he/she may not be able to think clearly.

### Who’s in Charge Here? You!

You decide:

Which level a behavior is at.

Whether an acceptable compromise has been reached

Whether your child is capable of following through with a suggested compromise.

### What To Do When You See A Meltdown Coming

Ask yourself: “Is this important enough for you to endure a meltdown?”

If “No,” is it Level 2 or 3?

### 3 Rules of Communication

1. No sarcasm.
2. No one-upmanship. “He’ll never be able to follow these rules.”
3. No speculation/mind-reading. Each person should speak only for himself/herself.

\* When someone breaks a rule, simply point it out **without judgment**

#### How to Address a Specific Issue

- Don’t - over-generalize. “Why don’t you do ever do your homework?”
- Do – use gentle language. “What can I do to help you with your homework today?” This is less likely to illicit defensiveness and arguing.
- Don’t – issue ultimatums. Even if you win the battle, you will lose the war.
- Do – compromise.
- Don’t use sarcasm. This can be frustrating for children who are inflexible.
- Do – speak clearly.
- Don’t – catastrophize.
- Do – take it 1 day at a time.
- Don’t – interrupt your child. Your child may already have difficulty sorting out his/her thoughts. This will only make it more difficult.
- Do – be patient.
- Don’t – allow your child to “split” parents, as in “divide and conquer.”
- Do – maintain a united front. Disagreements about parenting should ALWAYS be behind closed doors.

## The Devil Is in the Details

- ID specific situations that **routinely and predictably** cause your child significant frustration.
- Address specific factors that contribute to the inflexibility and meltdowns.

### Step 1

When your child is prone to a meltdown, are there primary interactions that trigger meltdowns?

Mom, dad, teacher, peer, coach, etc.

Setting? Home, school, soccer, etc.

Tasks? Reading, writing, getting ready for school, for bed. after school, weekends, during homework, mealtime, bored.

Are there topics, sounds, clothing that induce meltdowns?

### Step 2

Is this a high priority? If it is, does your child have the skills to master this at this time? If not, can your child meet these demands if given help?

Rule #1 - No one performs at exactly the same level everyday. This is especially true of the inflexible child.

Rule #2. – Have realistic expectations about skills training.