

Sensory Overload

CHEAT SHEET



ADVOCATE-ALLIANCE

THE TANTRUM (BEHAVIOURAL)

Trigger: Denied a want or given a boundary.

Goal: Trying to achieve a specific outcome.

Audience: Requires an audience to be effective.

End: Usually stops quickly when the goal is met or denied.

Strategy: Hold the boundary and ignore the behaviour.

THE MELTDOWN (NEUROLOGICAL)

Trigger: Too much sensory, emotional, or cognitive input.

Goal: No goal. The nervous system is in a state of fight-or-flight.

Audience: Will happen even if the child is entirely alone.

End: Must run its physiological course to reset.

Strategy: Reduce input, create safety, and co-regulate.

IN THE MOMENT: DO

Reduce input: Dim lights, mute screens, and clear the room of extra people.

Create physical safety: Move hard objects or clear a path to a safe zone.

Offer silent presence: Sit nearby, keep your body relaxed.

Model regulation: Take deep, audible breaths.

Triage: Direct regulated siblings to a different space with a quiet activity.

IN THE MOMENT: DO NOT

Demand verbal responses: Speaking requires too much cognitive energy. Use thumbs up/down.

Force physical contact: Touch can feel like physical pain. Wait for them to seek it.

Teach a lesson: The thinking brain is offline. Save the debrief for later.

RECOVERY PHASE

Hydrate: Crying dehydrates. Offer cold water through a straw (sucking regulates).

Nourish: Provide a predictable, safe food to ground them.

Transition: Offer a low-demand activity (a preferred fidget, a familiar movie, a dim room).

Reset Yourself: Co-regulating is exhausting. Step away, splash cold water on your face, and take a breath.

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