



## **SENSORY MELTDOWNS**

### **WHAT IS A SENSORY MELTDOWN?**

- A reaction to stimuli or something in the environment that is usually beyond a child's control which causes the body's fight or flight (sometimes freeze) system to kick in.
- Often mistaken for a temper tantrum.
- The difference between a tantrum and a sensory meltdown is that tantrums have a purpose. A child will stop a tantrum once their "want" is met.
- Sensory meltdowns do not cease just by "giving in" to a child.

### **COMMON CAUSES OF SENSORY MELTDOWNS**

- Sensory overload (the most common leading cause)
- Sensory deprivation
- Change in routine
- Inability to communicate wants/needs
- Difficulty in transitioning
- Lack of sleep
- Hunger/thirst

### **WHAT DOES A SENSORY MELTDOWN LOOK LIKE?**

Some of the things you might see in a sensory meltdown (and remember that no two meltdowns will look exactly the same)

- Hitting, kicking, biting, spitting, pushing
- Running away/escaping situation
- Crying/whining
- Trying to hide under something
- Burying self in parent/teacher's arms
- Avoiding eye contact
- Curling up in the fetal position
- Covering eyes or ears
- Shutting down...not speaking or moving

## **RESPONDING TO SENSORY MELTDOWNS**

- Remain calm.
- Remember that this is a neurological response and not something the child can control.
- Remove the child from the environment to a place with very little sensory stimuli.
- Try to talk as little as possible. The part of the brain that processes language is “out of order” during a meltdown.
- Best to use a quiet, calming and assuring voice with short phrases such as: everything is okay, just breathe, I’m right here.
- Provide calming sensory tool such as noise cancelling headphones, fidgets, calm music, a weighted blanket, vibration, etc.
- The child will come out of the meltdown when their system is ready. This isn’t something that can be forced.

## **PREVENTING SENSORY MELTDOWNS**

Not all sensory meltdowns can be prevented, but there are things you can do to reduce the intensity and frequency of them.

- Obtain information from child’s parent/guardian about sensory triggers.
- Discover/define other sensory triggers specific to the setting you work in with child.
- Give needed breaks if you sense an increase in anxiety.
- Be sure to include routines that child can be aware of and count on.
- Give lots of lead-up and warning before transition times.
- Give water breaks.

## **POST SENSORY MELTDOWN**

Debriefing after a meltdown can be a positive step for both child and adult. It may help:

- Identify what led to the meltdown.
- Discover self-regulation strategies or other coping strategies to help overcome sensory meltdowns the next time they occur.
- Define & discover triggers.