



Meltdown & Shutdown Response Card

Quick-reference for parents, carers, and teachers

Print this card and keep it accessible — on the fridge, in your wallet, or in the classroom. Use it as a quick reminder when things escalate.

Meltdown — What It Looks Like

- Shouting, screaming, or crying
- Physical aggression — hitting, kicking, throwing
- Running or bolting from the space
- Intense emotional dysregulation
- Unable to hear or respond to instructions

Meltdown — What Helps

DO

- Lower your voice and slow down
- Remove demands completely
- Create space — stay nearby but give room
- Say very little: "I'm here. You're safe."
- Wait it out — do not try to fix or reason
- Ensure physical safety of everyone

DON'T

Raise your voice. Repeat instructions. Issue consequences. Bring in other adults. Block their exit. Touch without consent. Ask "why" questions. Make threats.

Shutdown — What It Looks Like

A shutdown is the nervous system's other stress response — going inward rather than exploding outward. It is less visible than a meltdown but equally significant.

- Withdrawal, going very quiet, or becoming unresponsive
- Blank staring or appearing "switched off"
- Moving to a small, enclosed, or quiet space
- Inability to speak or respond to questions



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- Refusal to move or engage with anything
- May follow a meltdown or appear without warning

Shutdown — What Helps

DO

- Reduce all demands immediately
- Lower all sensory input — dimmer lights, quieter environment
- Sit nearby without speaking or making requests
- Offer something gentle: water, a blanket, a familiar object
- Allow as much time as needed — do not rush recovery
- Follow their lead for reconnection

DON'T

Try to "snap them out of it." Repeat their name or touch them repeatedly. Encourage them to "just try." Expose them to more people or noise. Set time limits on their recovery.

After Both States — Recovery

- Offer water, food, or sensory comfort
- Reconnect briefly and warmly — no debrief yet
- Resume routine gently when they're ready
- Discuss what happened only when fully calm — ideally hours later

Key principle Both meltdowns and shutdowns signal that the nervous system has been overwhelmed. They are not choices, and they are not failures. Your calm, consistent response builds the safety that prevents the next one.