

## Meltdowns and Mental Health Amidst a Pandemic

Stress may be at an all-time high in your home. Perhaps there's been a job loss, illness, disruption of schedules, and way too much on your plate. It is possible new concerns have surfaced with your children, and because you're spending so much time together, it has become glaringly obvious. It is possible this has been an underlying issue for a long time and the pandemic has exacerbated it, or perhaps, the onset is new. Here are some things you can monitor for to determine if you should seek assistance.

### **Meltdowns:**

Emotional regulation is hard for all children and is a learning process. For children with underlying needs, it may be next to impossible, despite repeated teaching and immense patience. When you disrupt a child's entire schedule and life as they knew it, the frequency of meltdowns may increase to a level that becomes unmanageable. While this may be 'normal' for a period of time, it should improve through processing their circumstances and implementing new routines.

- **ADHD:** Severe temper-tantrums and frequent meltdowns can be characteristic of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. A child who acts like they are driven by a motor and are always on the go, has difficulty concentrating on one task, or can hyper-focus on a given task despite trying to gain their attention also exhibits this underlying need.
- **Anxiety:** There is so much uncertainty in our world today, anxiety is not uncommon. However, a child experiencing anxiety may be more prone to emotional outbursts or meltdowns because of unrelated and extenuating circumstances. They may have big reactions to small problems because they were anxious about other things prior, just trying to hold it all together.
- **Autism:** Children with autism often have difficulty with flexible thinking and desire consistent schedules. Because this is not necessarily possible amid a pandemic, this can be very upsetting to a person with autism. They may exhibit fear of the unknown and anxiety because they do not know what to expect. Additionally, due to lacking social skills, they may not understand appropriate responses to stress, or even know how to communicate their needs effectively. Therefore, meltdowns may be more severe and frequent in a child with autism.
- **Depression:** Children who suffer with depression-like symptoms may react inappropriately to stress because even the seemingly mundane tasks in a day start to feel impossible. Changing clothes and taking a shower can seem insurmountable for someone struggling with depression. As a result, a child with depression may experience big reactions to small problems because everything seems more daunting and therefore, stress-inducing.

- Learning Disabilities: If you notice that your child struggles most with meltdowns during the school day or while doing homework, it may be the result of an underlying learning disorder. Most children have spent some of their schooling in a virtual setting by now and it's possible you're seeing behaviors now that you haven't seen before because they were going to school. Look for patterns, is the meltdown coming during math or reading? Perhaps writing is a trigger. Then, it is important to check in with your child's teacher and consult with them. It takes a village! You do not have to do this alone.
- Sensory Processing Disorders: When a child perceives sensorial experiences at a heightened level, it is physically exhausting and emotionally draining. For example, lights may feel brighter, sounds may be heard louder, physical touch may cause pain or uncomfortable sensations, etc., for a child struggling with SPD. As a result, they are often constantly overwhelmed, and any additional stimulation may lead to big reactions to small problems.

### **Tips for Moving Forward:**

- Discuss the pandemic with your children at a developmentally appropriate level.
- Allow children to share their feelings about it.
- Validate the child's feelings and don't tell them, "everything is going to be fine," as it diminishes their feelings.
- Acknowledge the safety precautions your family is taking to 'stay safe' and discuss them with the children.
- Seek help if you need it. There are many telehealth options, if it becomes necessary.
- Keep your stress levels low through prayer, being in God's word, and plugging into a support system.
- Know you are not alone!

