

A RECIPE FOR ADDRESSING Tantrums & Meltdowns

Serves: 1 overwhelmed preschooler | Prep time: ongoing, all year | Best made calmly

INGREDIENTS

- A calm, regulated adult nervous system (you go first)
- A quiet, safe space nearby (not isolation — proximity)
- Few words, low and slow
- Patience for the full stress cycle to pass
- A simple plan for once the storm has passed

PREP (BEFORE IT HAPPENS)

- Track patterns: hunger, fatigue, transitions, sensory load
- Build in predictable routines and visual schedules
- Practice naming feelings during calm, connected moments (e.g., words, visuals, AAC devices)
- Practice using words and replacement behaviors (e.g., taking turns, asking for help, making choices)
- Know your own triggers — regulate yourself before duty
- Agree with co-teachers on one shared, calm response

DIRECTIONS (IN THE MOMENT)

- 1. Regulate yourself first** — Take a breath and soften your body before you approach. Your nervous system speaks before your words do.
Why this works: A dysregulated child's brain unconsciously reads your face, posture, and tone for safety cues (neuroception). A calm adult body is the first, fastest signal that the environment is safe.
- 2. Stay close, stay quiet** — Move near the child without crowding. Use very few words: "I'm here. You're safe."
Why this works: During a full meltdown, the thinking brain (prefrontal cortex) is offline and a flooded child cannot process language or logic. Presence co-regulates; reasoning cannot.
- 3. Don't try to reason or negotiate yet** — Skip explanations, bargaining, or questions until the peak has passed. Just ride it out alongside them.
Why this works: Talking to the logical brain during a stress-hormone surge doesn't land — it can even prolong the meltdown. Wait for the body to come back down first. A stress cycle takes time to fully release so don't worry that it's not ending quickly.
- 4. Watch for the shift** — Notice when the crying softens, breathing slows, or the body relaxes — the nervous system is downshifting.
Why this works: This is the vagal system moving the child out of fight-or-flight and back toward a calmer, more connected state — the window where connection can help. Continue to model breathing and a warm, understanding face. This is when you can coordinate with another adult to get a coping tool (e.g., squishy) or you can try offering it to the child to see if they are ready.
- 5. Reconnect with warmth** — Offer comfort: a hand, a soft voice, or simply sitting together. Let them feel finished, not rushed.
Why this works: Felt safety with a trusted adult is what allows the nervous system to fully settle — rushing this step can re-trigger the stress cycle.
- 6. Talk about it later, briefly** — Once fully calm (even minutes or hours later), name the feeling simply: "You were really mad when it was time to clean up."
Why this works: The thinking brain only comes back online after the body is regulated. Naming feelings afterward builds the vocabulary and self-awareness for next time

THE SCIENCE IN BRIEF

- Tantrums and meltdowns are developmentally appropriate for preschool children. We should expect them daily.
- A tantrum is a stress response, not defiance — the child's alarm system (fight/flight/freeze) has taken over.
- Tantrums and meltdowns are not children choosing to be difficult, manipulative or trying to get their way. They are just part of being a small human who hasn't developed the skills that older children and adults have.
- A child cannot "think" their way out of a meltdown — access to the reasoning brain is temporarily offline.
- Co-regulation comes first: a calm adult's nervous system helps settle the child's before words or logic can help.
- Every calm, connected response, repeated over time, is what gradually builds the child's own self-regulation skills.

CHEF'S NOTES

- Avoid: "Use your words" mid-meltdown — the words aren't accessible yet.
- Avoid: forced isolation, shaming, or making the child "earn" comfort.
- Avoid: raising your voice, commenting on the behavior or talking about the child's behavior to other staff in a negative manner.
- A tantrum that ends in connection, not punishment, teaches the nervous system that big feelings are survivable.
- If meltdowns are frequent, prolonged, or the child can't be soothed by a trusted adult, loop in your director or a behavior specialist.
- If students are having tantrums, it does NOT mean you are failing as an educator, it means they are children.

INSTEAD OF SAYING...	TRY SAYING...
<i>"Stop that!"</i>	"Freeze your body — show me stillness."
<i>"Use your words."</i>	"Take a breath. I'm here — tell me what happened."
<i>"Calm down."</i>	"Your body looks upset. Let's breathe together."
<i>"Because I said so."</i>	"Here's why: it keeps everyone safe."
<i>"You're being bad."</i>	"That choice isn't safe. Let's find a safer one."
<i>"Don't hit!"</i>	"Hands are for helping, not hitting."
<i>"Stop crying."</i>	"It's okay to feel sad. I'm right here with you."
<i>"Why can't you just listen?"</i>	"It looks like that was hard to hear — let's try again."
<i>"Say you're sorry."</i>	"How can we help your friend feel better?"
<i>"You're fine."</i>	"That looked like it hurt. Let's check on you."

