

**Autism Seminars**  
for Families

# Managing Anger

Supporting families to manage anxiety,  
distressed behaviours and meltdowns

## Seminar Booklet



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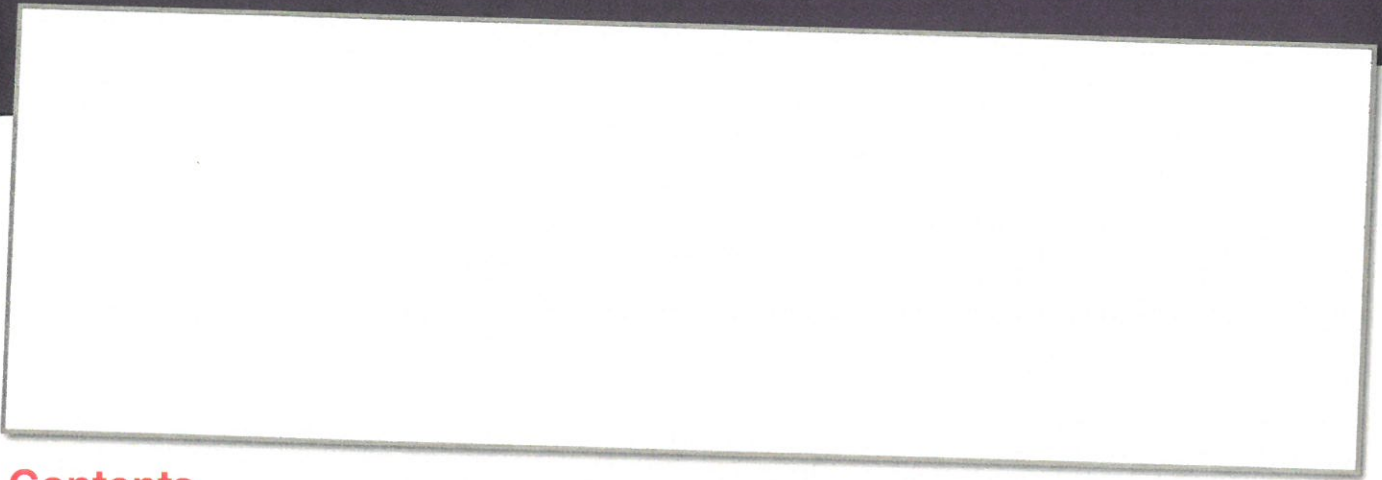
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This Seminar Booklet is designed to accompany the 'Managing Anger' seminar.

These seminars are delivered by individuals who have purchased the NAS Facilitator Resource Pack. The materials in the pack, including the PowerPoint presentation and Seminar Booklet, have all been written and developed by The National Autistic Society (NAS) but the seminar itself will not necessarily be delivered by an NAS employee.

The seminars and booklets have been based on the highly successful *help!* Programme that was developed by the NAS in 2002.

This seminar that you are attending today is being delivered by:



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This is a seminar aimed at parents who have a child with a diagnosis of autism, whose children are experiencing difficulties with managing their emotions, which can result in difficulties with anger, anxiety, distressed behaviours and meltdowns.

The aim of the seminar is to support families with managing distressed behaviours and potential meltdowns. The seminar is called 'Managing Anger' as this is the term that many parents use when referring to their child's distressed behaviour. We use the term 'anger' throughout the seminar, but it is important to recognise that that children with autism may display a range of distressed behaviours linked to anxiety, confusion or frustration, much of which is displayed in a way that appears very much like anger. We have chosen to use the term 'anger' throughout to encompass many of these issues.

# What is anger?

Anger is a normal reaction as well as a useful survival instinct.

It can be expressed verbally, physically or be internalised and can be directed at self, others or objects.

When people are angry their body can often react by becoming more physically alert and ready for 'fight or flight'. This is a primitive reflex that brings about physiological changes to our bodies that make us ready to fight or run away, both of which are useful survival mechanisms.

This fight or flight response can occur in both the child who is angry and a parent who is faced with their child's anger.

Some of the physical effects of a 'fight or flight' response include:

- > reduced mental ability to reason
- > increased heart rate
- > shallow and faster breathing
- > increased sweat production
- > tighter muscle tone
- > increased adrenaline (a naturally-occurring hormone and neurotransmitter)
- > narrower attention focus, which means we may miss important information.

We need to be aware of these bodily changes so the 'thinking' part of the brain can make decisions to stay in control of our reactions. You may be able to use this information to explain about anger reactions to your children.

## Why more anger?

Children with autism can often seem to have more anger than the typical child.

This is not because they are naturally more aggressive than anyone else. Their angry responses are due to the frustrations and stresses they face in life and difficulties in expressing feelings in socially acceptable ways.

There are many reasons why your child may feel frustrated, stressed and angry. Some of these are outlined below.

### Vulnerability, confusion and jealousy

Many children with autism feel vulnerable and confused by daily events. They are unsure why other children and adults behave the way they do. They may find it hard to trust other people due to past experiences of being misunderstood.

Some may feel jealous of other children and may wish they could be as popular or as skilled socially. They may wish they could be as good at sports as other children or just be able to hold easy conversations and fit in, as most children can.

### Anxiety, stress or sadness

Children with autism generally experience higher levels of anxiety and stress as a result of living in a world in which they are in the minority. They may be afraid of others judging them for their difficulties or differences.

### Coming to terms with their diagnosis

Although the diagnosis often brings relief, understanding and other benefits, your child may be angry about the diagnosis, especially if it was a later diagnosis or it was not presented in a positive way. Some children deny the diagnosis which can make supporting them harder. Other children may have limited understanding of their differences.

### Misinterpreting other people's intentions

Due to their difficulty in evaluating other people's motives, children with autism sometimes think other children or adults are attacking them personally.

At times, children with autism can be teased or bullied by others. Some children will not react to negative actions or comments from others until several hours, days or even weeks after an incident.

### Sensory differences

Many children with autism have difficulties processing sensory information from the world around them, affecting their sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch, balance and body awareness. This can mean they are hypersensitive or hyposensitive, find it difficult to filter out sensory information or have problems with self-regulation (being at the right level of arousal for the situation they are in).

An assessment – sometimes called a sensory profile – of these difficulties may help to find out which of your child's senses, if any, are affected. If sensory needs are not met, it can lead to upsets, outbursts and meltdowns.

### Inability to recognise and/or express thoughts and feelings

Some children with autism find it difficult to recognise emotions in other people and in themselves. It also seems that many children with autism find it hard to understand and express more complex feelings such as embarrassment or sadness, so these feelings often get expressed as anger. They may not understand the feeling is anger, and may not realise they are getting angry until it is too late to do anything about it. Because of their difficulties with social understanding, they may not realise that they need to tell other people how they are feeling, they may assume the other person knows.

## Emotional and social immaturity

Children with autism are often considered to be socially and emotionally younger than those not on the spectrum. They may show a 'patchy' developmental profile, meaning that they may be very skilled in certain areas but show difficulties in other areas. Sometimes, their abilities in certain areas can make it difficult for people to see the huge challenges they face in other areas.

*"The single tip that has made most difference to us was being told by his psychologist our son is six or seven years behind socially. It helps us understand him now when he flares up in anger, he is reacting like a younger child."* **Parent of young adult with autism**

## Adolescence

Adolescence brings changes in hormones, development of sexuality, and changing relationships with parents and other children, all of which can confuse as well as interest a child with autism.

Adding the complications of adolescence to all the other reasons they may feel upset or confused, it is little wonder that many teenagers with autism need support with managing their anger.

## Anger in children with autism can be difficult because...

- > it comes to the surface quickly
- > it happens more often
- > it happens with less control
- > it can be expressed physically as well as verbally.

## Our responses

When coping with distressed behaviour, as adults we need to recognise and manage our own responses.

When we are faced with distressed behaviour, our behaviour often takes a predictable path:

### Child stress/anger during incident



### Adult stress/anger

When faced with their child's angry behaviour, parents have reported a range of emotions, including feeling:

- > angry
- > frustrated
- > violent
- > embarrassed
- > powerless
- > burnt out
- > scared
- > lonely
- > guilty.

If their child's difficult behaviour happens when they are out of the house, many parents report feeling even more judged and embarrassed.

If your child is verbally and physically aggressive on a regular basis, you can easily feel as if you are failing as a parent. It is vital that you are not hard on yourself.

How you see your child's behaviour has a big impact on your stress level. So remind yourself that you are a good parent and you are doing your best in a difficult situation. In other words, try to see anger less as a threat to your parenting ability and more as a common behaviour for children with autism.

Your child is struggling with life for all the reasons outlined in the introduction. And even if you do everything 'right' as a parent, a child may still sometimes behave in ways that upset and challenge you.

## Make a note

Look at the sentences you've been given and discuss:  
Do you ever feel or think this way?

What would you say to another parent who said this?

# What is a low arousal approach?

A low arousal approach is one that is generally non-confrontational. It uses clear, calm communication. The approach aims to create an uncluttered, calm home and school environment and carefully considers the child's sensory needs.

It works best if all the adults in your child's life take a low arousal approach, but there is no overnight solution. It is important to aim for consistency. So taking a little time to agree on how you will tackle difficult behaviour will often be rewarded by fewer outbursts.

Dealing with aggression is difficult and parents often find themselves losing their temper with their children. This will happen, so it is important to remember that what matters are the messages we give, not the daily ups and downs.

## Communicate clearly

Clear communication is a really important part of managing anger. Misunderstandings, unclear expectations and an overload of words can make a child with autism frustrated, which can lead to anger.

- > Give clear, simple instructions. For example, "first 15 minutes homework, then 10-minute break".
- > Use fewer, but better chosen words.
- > Give more time to process information. Use the six-second rule (give the information, wait approximately six seconds to allow processing time, then if necessary repeat the information using the same words).

## Provide structure

Creating structure for your child can help reduce anxiety and angry reactions.

- > Make sure your child knows what is going to happen daily
- > Use visual supports and timetables
- > Have clear places for things and use labels
- > Give your child time alone to recharge.

## Use rewards

Rewards can be used to encourage the positive behaviour you want to see. Each family will have different reward systems and what works for one child won't work for another.

A reward is defined as whatever makes the appropriate behaviour happen more! For example, time with you, money, food, praise, games, TV/ internet time, time alone with a special interest, later bedtime, etc.

It is a common mistake to make rewards too difficult to achieve. It is also often best to reward little and often (though the little rewards may add up to a longer term reward as well).

Do make sure rewards are achievable and don't reward with too much or you will soon run out of rewards!

Encourage or reward your child's attempts at social behaviour, e.g. "that was really good the way you shared your game!"

## Reduce confrontation

Some children with autism seem to prefer non-verbal methods of communication and find them less confrontational. The spoken word seems to increase annoyance for some children.

Thinking about other methods of communication may be useful at times, for example using email, text, post-its, notes, 'being helpful' cards, wipe boards, rules on walls, etc. For example, one social worker did his first two interviews with a young person by mobile phone!

- > Visual supports
- > Clearer expectations
- > House rules
- > Family contracts.

## Does shouting ever work?

All or nearly all parents have shouted at their children at some point, and it is important to say that, in very rare circumstances, it can work for some. Occasionally parents have said that when their son or daughter has done something seriously wrong or dangerous, shouting has been the best tactic to really get the point across. But generally, shouting is not a successful tactic to use with your child.

Some of the dangers of shouting are that:

- > children with autism may mirror emotional atmosphere - so they will just pick up on your anger and 'throw it back' at you
- > being shouted at may reinforce a negative self image
- > some young children with autism will not really process anger - they may just see the red face and wild gesturing of their parent as quite amusing!
- > some children with autism have hypersensitive hearing and so shouting may really hurt their ears
- > some children with autism may find it frightening.

Be ready to apologise if you do shout unnecessarily. This will send a positive message to your son or daughter that it isn't the end of the world when we lose our temper, and that it is mature to be able to say sorry. In other words, you will be showing your child what they can do if they lose their temper. You need to be aware, though, that expecting a heartfelt apology for a meltdown is sometimes unrealistic since your child may not even remember it.

## Choose your battles!

If your child has major difficulties following rules and is often confrontational, being firm and standing your ground may work, but it is best to reserve this for times when it is really worth it and you are sure you won't lose face. Usually, it is best to aim for a win-win situation and avoid a meltdown.

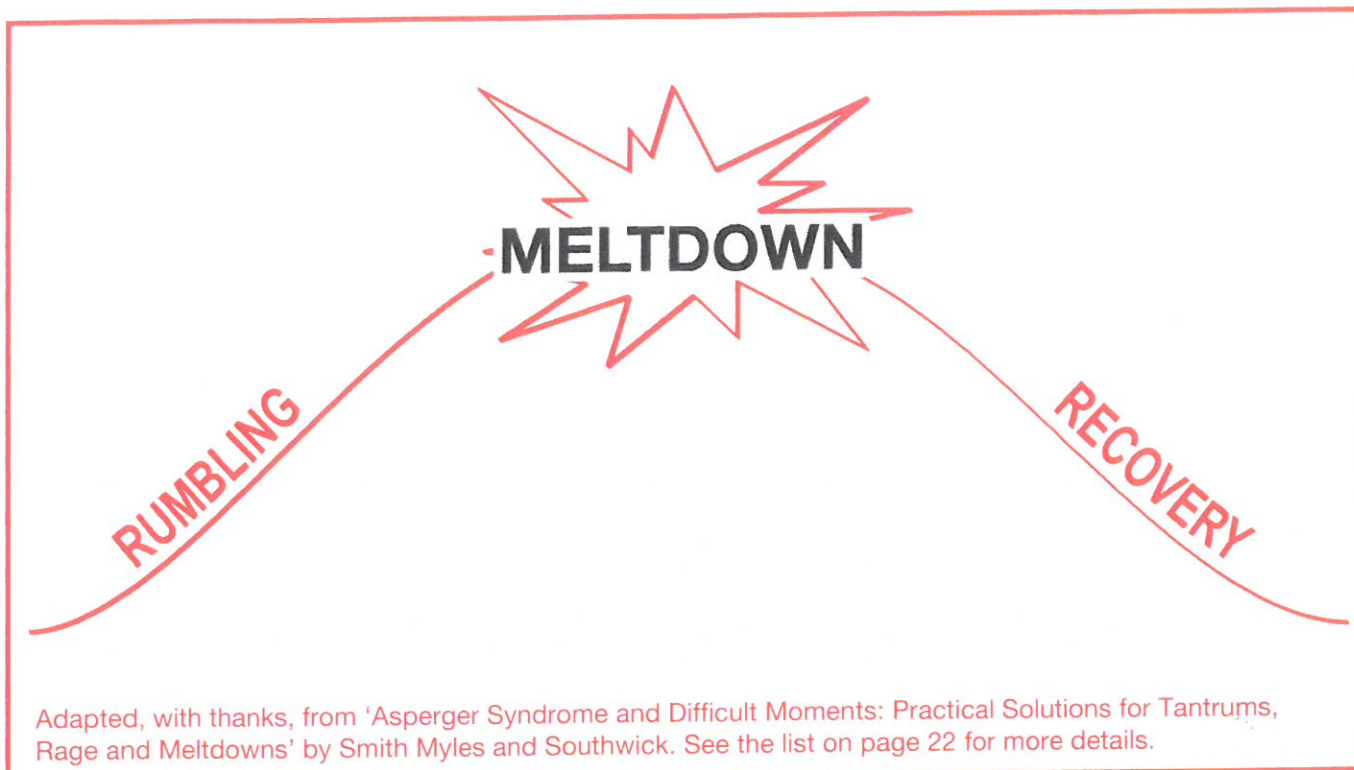
*"I was told years ago only to fight the battles with my two that were important. To decide what the important battles are, then, under no circumstances do you give in. Granted, it all gets worse before it gets better, but once they know that, no matter what, you are not going to give in, then I have found it can and does work."* Parent of two children with autism

### Make a note

Is there a battle that you (or someone else) regularly have with your child?

Is there any way around this?

# Coping with meltdowns



Not all children with autism have major meltdowns, but many have very confrontational or aggressive outbursts. A low arousal approach is best whatever the degree of anger.

## The 'rumbling stage'

The 'rumbling stage' or 'build-up' are terms used to describe times when your child is becoming more stressed – and it may lead to a meltdown if no action is taken. Sometimes it is very hard to spot signs that tell you your child is in the rumbling stage. A few children may not show any signs of being in the rumbling stage – they just seem to explode without warning.

*"When I am stressed I shut down and my face gives away nothing."*  
Young adult with autism

## Things that can push your child into the rumbling stage

There are many things that may push your child into an increased sense of stress, anger or frustration. You may be able to identify some of the more obvious things and plan to avoid or better manage these – this will help you to prevent meltdowns.

Some of the more common reasons that may push your child into the rumbling stage or straight into meltdown are:

- > things not making sense - needing more information
- > not feeling in control
- > plans changing without warning
- > being asked to do things that are too difficult
- > being asked to do things that seem pointless
- > being asked to do things too many times
- > not being listened to
- > promises being broken
- > entering new social situations
- > too much sensory stimulation
- > too many people around them
- > too many words being spoken at them
- > having to wait
- > not getting what they want
- > having to stop doing something they enjoy
- > losing arguments or games
- > making mistakes
- > being criticised
- > getting teased or bullied
- > being left out
- > feeling vulnerable
- > speaking about a topic that upsets them
- > situations related to their phobias or fears.



### Possible signs of the rumbling stage

It is important to be able to spot signs that your child is in the rumbling stage. If you are able to spot these signs, you may be able to prevent a meltdown by using diversion, distraction or by changing how you

communicate. Different children will have different ways of showing us that they are getting stressed and closer to meltdown. These are some of the possible signs parents have reported when their child is about to lose their temper:

- > pacing up and down
- > fiddling
- > increase in obsessive behaviour
- > rocking in their chair
- > repetitive, self-calming behaviour (often referred to as 'stimming')
- > talking to themselves
- > going white in the face
- > going red in the face
- > biting their nails
- > becoming childish or giggly
- > getting hot feet or ears
- > making noises like an animal or growling
- > flapping hands slightly
- > clenching jaw or fist
- > being very still
- > not feeling well
- > losing balance and co-ordination
- > having fixed eyes or being wide-eyed
- > making facial gestures
- > being more or less chatty, or argumentative
- > showing more or less eye contact or staring
- > frowning a lot
- > showing flared nostrils
- > looking down more
- > having tears in their eyes
- > dilated pupils
- > making negative comments about themselves
- > foaming at the corner of the mouth
- > chewing the inside of their mouth
- > an increase in grimacing or another particular facial expression.

### Make a note

What signs could mean that your child is becoming more stressed and anxious?

Lined writing area for taking notes.

## How to stop rumbling turning into meltdown

Every parent will find their own way to try to prevent a meltdown when their child seems to be heading towards one.

Different strategies will work at different points in the rumbling stage. For example, using humour or gently reminding your child of their options may work very early on in the rumbling stage. But if this tactic is used later, it may actually have the opposite effect and tip the child into meltdown.

Below are some of the more common tactics parents have used over the years to try to prevent or reduce meltdown. These tactics are all along the lines of using a low arousal approach.

*Remember that if your child is close to losing all control, the priority is to avoid meltdown. The time for imposing discipline, making constructive criticism or other learning has gone, and now your attention must focus on simple damage limitation - saving face for everyone.*

### Divert, distract or change tack

- > Stop arguing – this is always a good tactic as arguing often make things worse.
- > Use silly, obvious humour – this can work for some (for others it will make them more likely to go into meltdown). It is often best to make the humour at your own expense and to make sure you catch your child early on in the rumbling stage.
- > Remind your child what happens if they do stay calm, and of any potential reward systems or consequences.
- > Talk about something they are good at and remind them you love them.
- > Try and change the subject.
- > Give them time on their favourite interest, topic or toy.
- > A walk, drive or cycle ride – but try not to talk if they don't want to.
- > Reduce sensory distractions, e.g. background TV, stereo, strong smells, bright lights, too much movement.
- > Build in more opportunities for sensory stimulation that they enjoy.
- > If possible, compromise. For example saying, "OK, we can do it quickly together, then let's have a sandwich" or "OK, I will do X if will you do Y". Remember this is not about backing down, it is about spotting the rumbling signs and avoiding a meltdown situation.
- > Offer a quick snack.
- > If you are out with your child, remember to take things with you that will help to prevent a meltdown (magazine, snack, handheld computer game, etc).
- > Suggest they use any other self-calming techniques and direct them to these. For example self-regulating movements ('stimming'), favourite music, trampoline, exercise bike.
- > Time alone can be the most important form of stress reduction, so allowing your child to 'exit' to his or her bedroom can be a useful tactic.

With a younger child, you may need to take their hand and lead them gently, for example saying, "Calm time" or "Break time". Some older children may be taught to recognise the signs of rumbling and take themselves to their room or other safe place, but it can take time.

It's important not to make this time alone seem like a punishment, that you are backing down or that it is 'time out'. It is simply the best option for when we are stressed – to have some time alone. For example saying, "You need to have a break from us because we are making you stressed."

### Adapting our communication

- > **Make less eye contact** - If you glare at someone, they may become more aggressive. Using less eye contact may help to lessen the confrontation.
- > **Keep your voice at a lower pitch and volume** - Usually your voice will get higher and louder when you are being confronted; try to be aware of your voice pitch and volume and keep them lower to lessen the confrontation. Try using a quiet voice or a whisper so they have to shout less to hear you.
- > **Use fewer words** - Generally, we use too many words when talking to people with autism. This is especially true during a highly stressful situation, if they are close to a meltdown. Many parents report that they use no words at all if their child is in meltdown as they are unable to process the meaning of words at that point.
- > **Use simple signs and gestures** - Some parents find that using basic sign language or simple gestures can help when their child is close to a meltdown. For example, a sign for 'chill out in your room'. Agree with your child in advance what the signs mean.
- > **Try to make few requests** and think about how you phrase them, or their timing. If you can see a child is rumbling, avoiding making the request until later.
- > **Use slower, controlled breathing.** Controlled breathing helps to reduce the body's stress levels, making it easier to cope with confrontations because the body isn't reacting as if it is in a 'fight or flight' situation. You and your child can try it. It is one of the few things that is guaranteed to calm your body.

- > **Use body language to show you are listening.** Most parents find that saying, "We'll talk when you are calm" doesn't work. By letting your child rant and not interrupting them (so long as it is not unnecessarily abusive), your child may feel you are listening to them, which may stop them getting more angry.
- > **Slow down your movements,** relax your posture and don't tower above the child.
- > **Keep your distance and avoid touch.** Sometimes it is tempting to try to touch your child to reassure them or to calm them down. This is usually not a good idea. Step back, avoid crowding them and think about your exits from the room, if necessary. Some children cannot visually focus during a meltdown so they may walk or run into you without realising, unless you leave plenty of space around them.
- > **Remove any audience.** If brothers and sisters are in the room, try to get them to leave (unless your plan is to help the child having the meltdown to leave). Either way, the important thing is to remove

an audience. This is for several reasons. The first is safety. The second is to avoid sending too many mixed messages to your child or letting them get wound up even further. Thirdly, the fewer people present, the less your child will feel like they're 'losing face'.

- > **Repeat to yourself, "I can pretend to be calm!"** Repeating key phrases in your head may help when confronted with aggression.
- > **Go at your child's pace.** If your child is about to have a meltdown, it is best to leave other things until they calm down. It may mean making a phone call to say, "Sorry we are going to be late", and then going back to help your child. Usually, trying to rush them will make things worse.

### Remember

Even if your child is using abusive language or threatening violence, remind yourself that by using these low arousal techniques, you are at least doing the right thing, even if sometimes it is extremely unpleasant to be on the receiving end.

Here is a basic controlled breathing exercise that you can use:

- Start off by slowly breathing out once. Then as you slowly breathe in, place your hand on your stomach and you will feel it rise and fall slightly with each in and out breath. Hold for a count of three then breathe out slowly through the mouth for another count of three. Repeat this three to six more times and your body will start to relax.

- You will need to demonstrate this technique to your child so they fully understand what to do. When explaining this technique, it may help if you say,

"pretend your stomach is like a balloon". This will help them see how their diaphragm should rise and fall. You need to make sure they breathe in and out with control and not too quickly or too deeply, as these are common mistakes.

- You might like to create a prompt card with a picture of something your child likes to smell and a picture of bubbles with some text about breathing in (like smelling your favourite smell) and breathing out (like gently blowing bubbles). This will act as a visual reminder of the controlled breathing technique.

## Example of a 'rumbling plan' for home

### Rumbling plan - John

#### Usual triggers

- > Tiredness.
- > A 'good day' at school.
- > Anything new at home.
- > People talking during his favourite TV programmes.
- > People smelling of cigarettes.
- > Being asked questions without preparation while he is in middle of something.
- > Not being given a warning of the end of an activity.
- > Having to eat meals with the rest of the family.
- > Food types mixing on the plate.
- > Giving him a dinner he has not chosen.
- > Not having his red plate to eat from.

#### Signs of his rumbling stage

- > Swearing more than usual.
- > Trying to get into his brother's room and annoy him.
- > Increase in facial tics.
- > More fiddling.
- > More snappy.

#### Rumbling stage strategies

- > Check how stressed he is feeling, on a scale of one to five.
- > Drink and/or snack.
- > Time in bedroom.
- > Chill-out music on.
- > Offer going out – walk, run, bike or car ride.

## Example of a rumbling plan for school

### Rumbling plan - Jack

#### Key things to avoid as they cause anger

- > Being told off in front of classmates.
- > Not being able to sit near the front.
- > Classroom instructions not being clear and simple.
- > Being asked a question unless he has his hand up.
- > Being rushed.

#### Check if he is displaying any of the following behaviour:

- > Placing his 'take a break' token on the edge of his desk.
- > Getting out of his seat.
- > Being argumentative.
- > Calling out.
- > Being very quiet and fiddling more than usual.
- > Muttering to himself.
- > Swearing.

#### If he shows any of the above behaviour, try one of these tactics:

- > Ask if he needs a break and let him go out of the classroom for five minutes.

- > Suggest he goes to Reception with a note.
- > Give him some books to take to another teacher he knows.
- > Suggest he goes to the quiet room.
- > If none of these tactics work, ask him politely to leave: "Please leave the classroom and have a ten-minute break in the quiet room."

#### Some important dos and don'ts

- > Make sure a teaching assistant goes with him if he is in a very agitated state.
- > Stay calm and remember he has great difficulty understanding his own feelings and can't express them as well as other children.
- > Don't raise your voice.
- > Don't confront him.
- > Acknowledge he is looking angry or stressed, but do not ask him why.
- > Ask him in a friendly way, "How can I help you?" or "Is everything alright?"
- > Think about removing the other children from the class if he goes into meltdown, leaving one adult with him, at a distance.

## Make a note

What helps to avoid a meltdown?

Are there three things you can go home and try?

## Reaching meltdown

A meltdown happens when a person loses control for a period of time, possibly resulting in damage to property, self or others. The damage to self and others may be physical or verbal.

Meltdowns can vary from child to child, and how you manage them will be very individual to your child and your family.

We know that experiencing a meltdown can be upsetting and frightening for all those who are involved or who witness it. Once your child has reached the point where they will have a meltdown, whatever you do, it may be about trying to let it happen as safely as possible.

### Having a meltdown plan

Many parents have found that having a meltdown plan helps with managing the meltdown. It won't stop meltdowns happening, but it will help to have agreed in advance what everyone involved will do, so the meltdown can be managed as safely as possible. It may also help with reducing the duration and impact of the meltdown.

It is vital to combine the rumbling and meltdown plan and communicate them to all the people involved (including school, grandparents, siblings or neighbours).

### Key things to include in a meltdown plan

- > Triggers for stress or anger
- > Physical or verbal signs that your child is close to meltdown
- > Words to use or avoid
- > Stay with or leave alone
- > Guidance about touch
- > Environment.

### Make your home safe

Sometimes, it is necessary to think about making your home safe to prevent injury. You might want to consider:

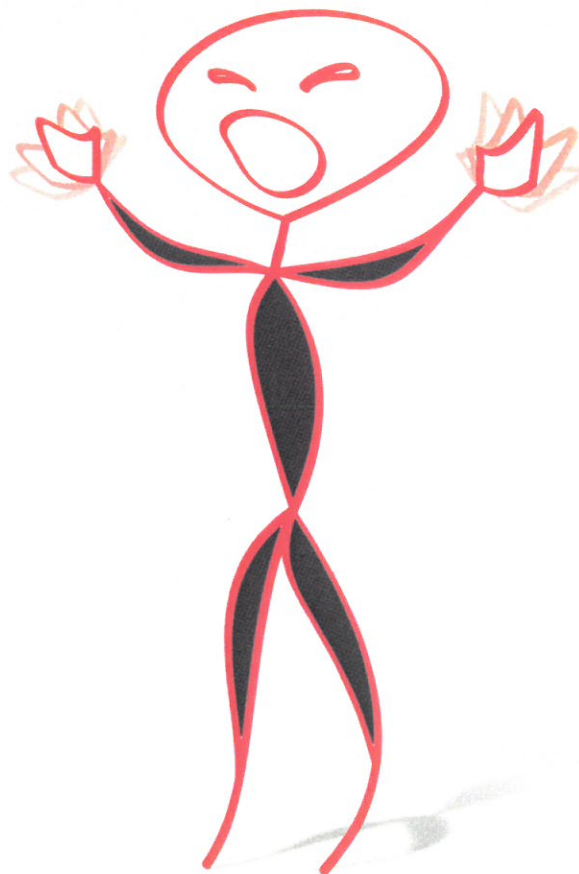
- > removing breakables and pictures from walls (maybe store in loft for a few years)
- > adding soft edging to tables
- > having curtains that easily come away from the rail if your child pulls these down regularly (maybe using velcro)
- > using melamine instead of china, and plastic glasses instead of glass ones
- > hiding treasured items or important documents under lock and key
- > taking out insurance for items your child is likely to break

- > tying a towel around door handles to stop your child slamming doors
- > locking cupboards and doors to keep siblings and their possessions safe
- > having a secure lock on the front door if your child is likely to run out during a meltdown and could be in danger
- > creating a safe meltdown area with cushions or pillows, where your child can be directed to.

Some children threaten to be violent. In these circumstances, it is best if you lock away any knives, scissors, potato peelers, lighters and matches, as the safety of your family is important. If you find part of your meltdown plan is actually making the situation more dangerous, stop using that strategy. Always get professional support if you or any family member is at risk of physical harm.

Some parents have had to resort to placing locks on their own bedroom doors for times when their child becomes physically violent towards them and walking away just provokes further violence. Parents who find themselves in this situation may want to try and seek further support from the statutory services, including Social Services or the Health Service.

Although the long-term aim is to try and use a low arousal approach and the strategies discussed during the rumbling stage, there may still be times where you cannot avoid a meltdown.



## Example of a 'meltdown plan' for home

### Meltdown plan - John

#### Mum's plan

- > If John is abusive or shouting, but not physically attacking, stay in the room with him. Don't argue, just sit safely, little or no eye contact.
- > If verbal rant/meltdown carries on more than few minutes (and if safe to do so), leave the room. If he follows, say, "OK I can stay in the lounge with you" and return to room.
- > If physical attacks or threats, say, "I need to let you have some time" and retreat. Go into bathroom if necessary.
- > Come out if no noise for several minutes. Don't try to talk to him for at least half an hour.

#### Dad's plan

- > Get brother and sister out. Say, "Let's go out for a bit". Stay calm and don't shout back.
- > Look in if the meltdown carries on more than five minutes. If Mum says nothing, Dad to leave again. If Mum says, "I need a cup of tea", this means Dad take over.

Report all major incidents, serious physical threats and/or injuries:

Social Services emergency (out of hours) team number: **[insert phone number here]**

Social Services daytime team number: **[insert phone number here]**

## Example of a meltdown plan for all environments

### Meltdown plan - Melissa

Melissa has had several outbursts recently, during which she has hit herself or others or just been very upset and angry.

1. Remember NOT to intervene if Melissa slaps herself, as this will make things much worse and she will hit out and scratch whoever is with her or hit walls, mirrors or windows, which could be very dangerous.
2. Firmly tell her what you want her to do. Melissa needs support and encouragement to help her control herself at these times. Try saying "hands down" so she won't lash out or "sit down" so she is in one place where she can start to calm down.
3. Sometimes it is worth trying to distract Melissa by making silly noises or trying to make her laugh, but this depends on how upset she is and if you can catch things early enough.
4. Don't shout or tell Melissa to shut up or be quiet as it will make things much worse. If Melissa has gone past the point where you are able to reason

with her, you must make sure she is safe and let her calm down in her own time. This could take five to 20 minutes.

5. Don't try to intervene physically or discuss the problem with her directly, however hard this may be for you. Give Melissa the space she needs without putting her, or others, at risk of danger.
6. Don't leave Melissa until she is completely calm. She shows she is getting calmer when she starts saying things like, "I feel sad" or "Melissa is crying". Do not intervene before this or she will start up again.
7. Repeat any phrases Melissa may say to herself that reassure her things are OK. For example, "It's OK Melissa, it's alright Melissa."

#### Key people for further advice:

Mrs Smith: [insert phone number here]

Mr Jones: [insert phone number here]

## Make a note

What plans or tactics do you already use when faced with a meltdown?

What will be your meltdown plan?



## Recovery

The third stage of the meltdown is recovery. How children react after a meltdown will vary greatly, depending on how severe the meltdown is, their age and understanding, and how others behave around them. Some children seem to recover quite quickly, but many take longer.

*“He was screaming at the top of his voice and threatening to harm himself with a knife, then five minutes later he asked me if we could go for lunch at his favourite café. It was as if nothing had happened in the first place.”*

*“She was shouting and throwing things at me, including her dinner; then she got really upset about the fact that everything was on the floor and about the scratch on my arm from where the plate had hit me, and it took me ages to console her.”*

There are several things to bear in mind in helping your child to recover.

### Leave plenty of time to recover

The most common mistake after a child has a meltdown is to put pressure on them too soon. So even if your child appears to have got over the meltdown quite quickly, it is best to allow them plenty of time to calm down. This allows their brain time to make sense of what happened and their body to metabolise adrenaline. They may need to sleep, be quiet or be alone – some children take over a day to recover.

Your child may feel worried that they have ruined their relationship with you or feel embarrassed. If so, you need to approach them carefully.

Children vary in their need for physical contact after a meltdown. Some will need cuddles for reassurance; others will need you to give them plenty of time alone.

### Important for you to recover

Many parents have reported that although their child may appear to recover quickly from a meltdown, they are often experiencing a range of emotions. Some parents have said they have felt upset, angry, frustrated or worn-out. It is important to think about how you are going to manage your own feelings after the event.

### Use the meltdown to see what lessons can be learned

It is not always obvious what caused the meltdown. Some parents suggest they find it useful to discuss this with their child after they have fully recovered. You may find this helpful.

Feeling over-stimulated, embarrassed about something, worried or scared may be expressed as anger in your child, so it is worth asking a few questions to find out more.

If your child can tolerate it, when they are calmer, bring up discussion about the meltdown. If the child is able to communicate what made them angry it can help you and them in the future. It can also be useful to talk about how you can help them during a meltdown. It's usually best to try and work together to solve the problem. And it helps if your child understands you are on their side. For example, “Does it help if I stay out of the room when you feel like that?”

Try using a visual reward chart to encourage your child to use strategies to help them before and during a meltdown. Tick off whenever your child uses strategies to prevent meltdowns.

One parent felt she had reached a breakthrough moment when her son was mature enough to begin answering questions about his feelings towards meltdowns:

**Parent:** “How does your body or head feel just before you have a meltdown?”

**Child:** “My head hurts...”

**Parent:** “OK, when your head starts hurting like that next time, that's when it's time to stop doing what you're doing and go to your room.”

For another parent it was an important moment when her son began to understand the impact his behaviour had on others:

*“The feeling remorseful after he has done something wrong is a new thing which we consider a huge breakthrough. He says he really doesn't want to do these things, and doesn't know why he does.”*

**Parent of 11-year-old with Asperger syndrome**

Some parents have found working through steps and choices in a visual way can help with developing strategies to use in the future.



John happy



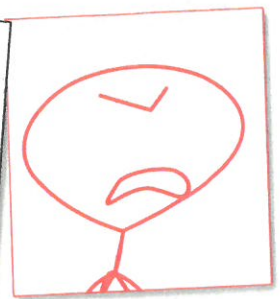
Sister whistling



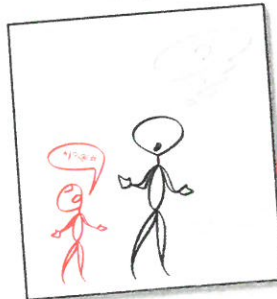
John feels angry



John shouts and hits sister



John feels angry



John tells Mum



Mum sorts it  
John happy

## Make a note

What works best for your child after a meltdown?

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What do you do after your child has a meltdown?

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# Helping your child to manage their feelings

Many children with autism have limited understanding of their own and other people's feelings. One of the things we can do to reduce their general level of stress and anxiety is to try and give them ways to express their feelings.

## Ways to communicate feelings

The ways in which we can try and teach children to communicate their feelings will vary depending on your child's level of understanding and willingness to participate.

### Visual ways to communicate

These can vary from simple symbols to let someone know how they are feeling through to complex visual rating systems.

> Write or draw how you are feeling on a piece of paper

> Have pictures of feelings/faces to discuss moods on the wall so all the family can say which 'face' they are feeling.

> Time out/chill out/break cards.

> Door signs – useful for the child to use to let others know how they are feeling e.g. 'Do not disturb' or 'I am in a bad mood'.

> Introduce rating scales for your child to rate their mood:

- Traffic light systems (e.g. green = happy / red = angry)

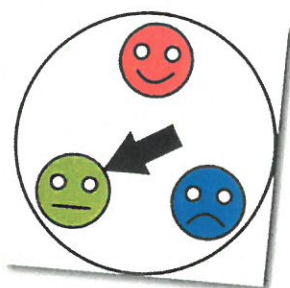
- Numerical scales (e.g. 1 to 5)

- Linked to an object (e.g. stepladder or body)

- Linked to a special interest (e.g. Star Wars or Doctor Who).

> The book 'The Incredible 5 Point Scale' by Kari Dunn Buron has some useful ideas.

> Some children may like to use different colour wrist bands or hair ties to let others know what mood they are in. For example using the traffic light system: "red means keep away from me, amber means you can talk to me but be aware I am stressed, and green means I am in an OK mood – you can talk to me".



### Introduce ideas for all the family

Introducing some of the ideas above to your whole family might help your child understand them and want to join in with them. Many children find it hard to understand that other people have different emotional states to them, so it is also a useful way to try and teach this.

Some families have tried using visual supports for all members of the family - children and adults. This can be particularly useful for children with limited verbal skills.

### Talking about your worries

It may help to try and set aside a specific time to talk about worries with your child. Building this into your daily or weekly routine may help.

Some children can be encouraged to write a diary or blog.

Use a sheet for writing down worries that has a 'beyond my control' box at the bottom of the page and write in it about those worries or stresses that are 'beyond our control'. This is something that will be explained in the seminar.

### Using different means

Different children will benefit from talking about their worries in different ways. Some may find it useful to talk through things like puppets or pets; others may benefit from having something to tell the worry to, like puppets or worry dolls.

Some children may not like to discuss things face to face but would be happy to talk about things over the phone, via text message, email or instant messaging.

### Talk about the good things

As your child may have low self-esteem, it is important to remind them of the things that they are good at or that they enjoy.

Your child may need a prompt card with alternative positive thoughts to replace their worries.

Use Social Stories™ or photo books to remind your child about things that went well.

### Stories or books

There is a variety of books aimed at explaining about emotions and anger to children (see 'Useful reading' at the end of this booklet). You might also find Social Stories™ useful to explain about different reactions to anger.

## Possible ways to relax

Some children with autism can find it hard to relax, and they may not respond well to conventional relaxation methods like massage or aromatherapy because of sensory sensitivities. Finding a way for your child to relax that suits their needs and tastes can help them to manage anxiety and enjoy life. Here are some ideas.

- > Chill-out time, time alone.
- > Physical activities such as walking, bike-riding, swimming, yoga, tai chi.
- > Multi-sensory toys.
- > Muscle relaxation or controlled breathing.
- > Deep-pressure (using sleeping bag, cushions or weighted items).
- > Massage.
- > Trampoline or rocking chair.
- > Technology (computer games, MP3 players).
- > Headphones or earplugs to block out background noise or voices.
- > Spending time with pets.
- > Remembering positive events together – this can offset their tendency to dwell on negative things (e.g. looking at photos or their special interest together).
- > Spending time doing or talking about their favourite topic or special interest.
- > Reading books, magazines, comics.
- > Doing crosswords, word searches, sudoku.
- > Aromatherapy.

## Possible safe ways to express feelings

Although the long-term aim is to reduce anxiety and avoid meltdowns, some children may still have high levels of anxiety and may need to learn how to release those feelings safely. This release may be emotional or physical.

If your child needs to release their feelings in a physical way, it's important to set boundaries that they can understand. There may be some activities that your child does that release stress, but only when they do them for a short period of time (e.g. listening to loud music for 30 minutes).

Here are some ideas that parents have used in the past.

- > Physical exercise.
- > Multi-sensory toys.
- > Cushion, teddy, beanbag.
- > Using a punch bag, punch gloves or jab pads.
- > Writing out all your anger - then ripping up the paper.
- > Shouting, talking, ranting!

Make a note

## Additional support

If you have a child with autism, there may be support that you can access from your local statutory services and from local autism organisations or other voluntary agencies.

### The National Autistic Society (NAS)

The NAS has a range of information and advice to support people with autism and their families.

See the 'NAS contacts' handout for more information or visit the website at [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)

### Local support

There may be statutory agencies that can offer advice and support.

In the UK, your child should have their social support and care needs assessed by your local authority. Requesting the assessment in writing is always better than requesting it over the phone.

The NAS website has information sheets which explain this in more detail as well as a sample letter that you can adapt for your own situation and use to request an assessment:

England and Wales: [www.autism.org.uk/17378](http://www.autism.org.uk/17378)

Scotland: [www.autism.org.uk/17740](http://www.autism.org.uk/17740)

You may also be able to access NHS services such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) through a referral from your GP.

## And finally...

The 'Managing Anger' seminar can give you ideas about why your child may have difficulties with their anger, and some ways in which to try and manage this.

Some important messages to take away, that have come from parents who have attended the NAS *help!* seminars over the last few years, are:

### Be a detective

All behaviour happens for a reason, and if we're trying to change or teach new behaviour, we need to start by looking at the reasons behind a behaviour.

### Don't give up –changes in your child's behaviour can take a while

A low arousal approach is a long-term approach. It may not change your child's behaviour overnight, but clear and calm communication along with consistency are all aiming towards reducing your child's overall level of anxiety and anger.

### Remember you are doing a difficult job as well as you can

Your child has a diagnosis of autism and this means that a lot of their behaviour may be different and more challenging than the behaviour of children without autism.

### You are the most important resource your child has... so look after yourself!

It is important to take care of yourself as well as your child. When you have a child with autism, you can find that they place a lot of demands on your time. Making sure you try and look after yourself to will enable you to continue supporting them. The idea of chill-out time is just as important for you, and for the rest of your family, as it is for your child.

Next steps

## Useful reading

*'Autism: understanding and managing anger'* (Andrew Powell)

*'Managing Family Meltdown: The Low Arousal Approach and Autism'* (Linda Woodcock and Andrea Page)

*'Understanding Behaviour'* (Fiona May)

*'Asperger Syndrome and Difficult Moments'* (Brenda Smith Myles and Jack Southwick)

*'Asperger Syndrome and Adolescence: Helping Preteens and Teens Get Ready for the Real World'* (Therese Bolick)

*'Challenging Behaviour and Autism'* (Philip Whitaker)

*'No More Meltdowns'* (Jed Baker)

*'Mental health and autism: A guide for child and adolescent mental health practitioners'* (Patrick Sims)

*'Asperger Syndrome and Sensory Issues'* (Brenda Smith Myles, Katherine Tapscott Cook, Nancy E. Miller and Louann Rinner)

*'Building Bridges through Sensory Integration'* (Ellen Yack, Paula Aquilla and Shirley Sutton)

## Useful books for young people with autism

*'The Incredible 5 Point Scale'* (Kari Dunn Buron and Mitzi Curtis)

*'A "5" Could Make Me Lose Control'* (Kari Dunn Buron)

*'When My Worries Get Too Big'* (Kari Dunn Buron)

*'The Red Beast: Controlling Anger in Children with Asperger's Syndrome'* (K.I. Al-Ghani)

*'Angry Arthur'* (Hiawyn Oram and Satoshi Kitamura)

*'The Huge Bag of Worries'* (Virginia Ironside)

*'The Social Skills Picture Book for High School and Beyond'* (Jed Baker)

*'My Book full of Feelings'* (Amy Jaffe and Luci Gardner)

## About Autism Seminars for Families

This seminar has been delivered to you by an individual who has purchased the Facilitator Resource Pack for *Autism Seminars for Families*. The materials in the pack, including the PowerPoint presentation and Seminar Booklet, have all been written and developed by The National Autistic Society (NAS).

Your seminar facilitator will be able to give you information about any other seminars that they can offer you.

Make a note

# Autism Seminars for Families

## About The National Autistic Society

We are the leading UK charity for people with autism (including Asperger syndrome) and their families.

With the help of our members, supporters and volunteers we provide information, support and pioneering services, and campaign for a better world for people with autism.

Around 700,000 people in the UK have autism. Together with their families they make up over 2.8 million people whose lives are touched by autism every single day. From good times to challenging times, The National Autistic Society is there at every stage, to help transform the lives of everyone living with autism.

*We are proud of the difference we make.*

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Supporter care: **0808 800 1050**  
Email: [nas@nas.org.uk](mailto:nas@nas.org.uk)  
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