A Family Services Guide

What is an Autistic Meltdown?

Understanding overwhelm and how to support someone through it

Supporting autistic children, young people, adults and their families across Barking and Dagenham, Havering and Redbridge

What is an Autistic Meltdown?

A genuine state of overload

A meltdown is an intense, involuntary response to a build-up of overwhelming sensory, emotional, or cognitive input.

It is not a tantrum, it is not attention-seeking, and it is not something a person chooses or can simply "snap out of". During a meltdown, the brain and body are in a genuine state of overload and the person temporarily loses conscious control over their responses.

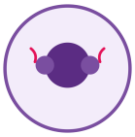
What a meltdown can look like

Crying, shouting, screaming

Or an inability to speak.

Hitting, kicking, biting

Or throwing objects.



Covering ears or eyes

Rocking, or pacing.

Running away

From the situation.

Being unable to answer questions

Or process language.

Common triggers

Sensory overload

Noise, light, crowds, smells, textures.

A build-up of small stresses

Across the day (“cumulative overwhelm”).

Unexpected change

To routine or plans.

Difficulty communicating a need

Exhaustion from masking

Or camouflaging autistic traits.

Too many demands

Being placed at once.

The three stages

Recognising the stages

Rumbling

Early warning signs – fidgeting, pacing, going quiet, repeating a question, seeking reassurance.

Meltdown

The peak – loss of control described above; the person is not able to reason or negotiate at this point.

Recovery

Exhaustion, embarrassment, or needing to withdraw and recharge; this can take minutes or hours.

How to support someone during a meltdown

Stay calm

Keep your own voice and body language low-key.

Reduce demands and sensory input

Dim lights, lower noise, give space.

Keep language minimal

Avoid asking questions or giving instructions.

Stay nearby to keep the person safe

Unless asked to move away.

Allow full recovery time

Afterwards, before discussing what happened.

Do not try to reason, negotiate, or give consequences during the meltdown itself.

Remember

A meltdown is a sign that a person has reached their limit – it is a response to overwhelm, not a behaviour choice. The most helpful response is compassion, safety, and reducing demands, followed by working together afterwards to understand and reduce future triggers.