

Ep #134: Autism Meltdowns Q&A



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Lisa Candra

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You are listening to episode 134 of *The Autism Mom Coach*, Autism Meltdowns Q&A.

Welcome to *The Autism Mom Coach* podcast. I am your host, Lisa Candra. I am a lawyer, a life coach, and most importantly, I am the full-time single mother of a teenager with Autism. In this podcast, I am going to share with you the tools and strategies you need so you can fight like hell for your child without burning out. Let's get to it.

Hello, everyone and welcome to the podcast. I am so glad you are here. Before we get to today's Q&A, I want to let you know that I am doing a four week challenge in October designed to help you stress less as an Autism mom. This challenge is for you, no matter how old your child is. For the first four weeks in October, I am going to share with you a tip and a strategy to help you stress less and I am going to help you implement it.

Here's how it's going to work. Every Sunday you will get an email from me with a tip or strategy followed by my podcast on Wednesday where I will delve deeper into the topic and provide you with some actionable steps that you can implement, but that's not all. I'm not going to leave you to implement this on your own, I am going to host an open coaching call each Thursday at 7:00pm Eastern where I will coach you on the topic and answer your questions.

If you want to participate in this challenge, all you need to do is join my mailing list. You can do that right now by going to my website, theautismmomcoach.com, wait a couple of seconds and there will be a pop up, put in your name and your email address and you will be all set.

Alright, let's talk meltdown Q&A. These questions were submitted by moms for the open coaching call on meltdowns that I held last week. And the questions are so good because these are scenarios that all of us have encountered at some point in some way or another. So, I wanted to share these questions with you along with my answers.

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But before I get to that, I just want to point out that how we handle an Autism meltdown or a behavior is multifaceted. It's not just the actions, the steps that we take, it's the how we do it. The how we do it is just as important, if not more so because the energy behind how we do it, our children will pick up on that. So, if we're anxious or angry or frustrated, they will pick up on it and it will make the actions we are taking less effective than we would want them to be.

So, I want you to keep this in mind because as I go through this Q&A, you might be thinking, well, I already do all of those things, but they're not working. And I would just challenge you to get curious with yourself about the how behind what you do. Is it possible that some of your own anxiety or frustration is creeping into what you are doing, and perhaps having an escalating effect? This is not accusatory, please know that. This was 100% the issue with me.

I very much knew exactly what to do in response to some of the things that my son was doing, but the how I was doing it, that was where I was tripping up big time, but the how was another story. I could be very short tempered with my answers, my anxiety, my own frustration would be very apparent to him and he would react to it. So again, this is all to say, responding to a meltdown or behavior, it's not just about what you do, it's also about how you do it.

Also, when we're talking about meltdowns and behaviors, the actions our children are taking or not taking, I like to think of them in terms of information. Whatever our children are doing or not doing in these situations is communication of some sort and it's our job as parents to decipher this communication. This is why for Autism parents, data is king. I completely understand that there is nothing less appealing than collecting data about the low points of your day or your life with your child. I resisted it too.

I did not want a record of what I saw as my own failure. However, this data can be so helpful in identifying the cause of the meltdown, problem solving, tailoring intervention and also identifying skill deficits for both you and your

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child when it comes to managing big emotions. It's really important to understand why they are doing the behavior that they are doing, because the why behind the behavior will dictate your response. Your response will vary based on that information.

For instance, if your child's having a meltdown over sensory overload, you're going to respond to that much differently than if they're having a meltdown because they don't like hearing the word no. Alright, let's get to the questions.

Question one. Question one comes from a mom of three boys, her youngest boy, six years old, has Autism. And almost every morning, when it's time to get dressed for school, he has a meltdown. What can I do? So, in terms of data, we already have a lot of data just in this question. We know exactly when the meltdown happens. It happens in the morning. So, we want to use this information to understand the why behind the behavior. IS there a sensory issue with the clothing, perhaps the clothing is uncomfortable or it has tags?

I know my son wanted to wear shorts and rain boots to school in the winter. And so, he would protest when I would put pants on him. So, you want to figure that out. If it's a sensory issue, you need to look into the textures of the clothing, to find clothing that might be more comfortable, usually something that's 100% cotton. Maybe this means eliminating the tags. If it's the type of clothing, then working with your child ahead of time to pick out the clothes the night before. Give them some choice in this situation.

And have a backup outfit ready in case they change their mind that morning because I see this with so many of my clients, they will pick out the outfit the night before. And then the next day the child will just decide, no, not that one and so have the backup ready.

If this is not a clothing issue, I would rely highly on the morning routine schedule. And for every parent of a child with Autism, no matter how old they are, I think a visual chart is so helpful. So, by having a highly visual morning routine chart, you can help your kiddo understand what's expected

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in what order. And so, from this chart you might be able to detect what the problem is.

Perhaps every morning before it's time to get dressed, your kiddo is on the iPad, so maybe it is the removal of that preferred activity to do something he doesn't really care about. Maybe that's what's bothering them. If that's the case, then you can give a five minute warning for the iPad, just to let them know in a couple more minutes that you're going to be transitioning. Now, for some kids, that five minute warning is not helpful. So maybe you reverse course, if you get dressed, then you get the iPad.

That way your kiddo has the incentive to get dressed so they get the preferred activity versus interrupting the preferred activity to do something that they don't really care about. Additional tips I've used for my son over the years is setting up rewards for completing tasks and wherever possible gamifying things. My son, especially when he was younger, was really into those different games where they had levels and coins. So, I would gamify things for him, make a token system. So many tokens would equal some sort of reward or incentive or a prize.

Another thing that worked really well with my son is, I would create social stories around the characters that he liked at any given time. So, this could be anybody from Curious George to Darth Vader. He always got a kick out of me putting characters in a situation that he was facing and making light of it. For whatever reason, he found that entertaining and that somehow softened the blow when he had to do things that he didn't love to do, like homework or brushing his teeth or getting into bed.

And now, finally, because the questioner said that this happens almost every morning, it is important that you allot time in your morning for this to happen, you need to time how long an interruption this is. So, if this is adding five or ten minutes onto your morning, you need to allot for that in your morning. Now, this is not you letting him get his way or get away with it, this is reality. If you don't allot for this time, you're going to be creating so much more pressure for yourself.

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So, for instance, when Ben was younger, I would take the train from South Jersey into Philadelphia for work every day. I had a very specific time that I needed to be on the train in order to ensure that I walked into my office at the time that I wanted to be there. So, I had to work backwards from that time. I had to allow for things like dropping off my son in the morning and him not wanting to get out of the car, that usually took five minutes at the most.

But every morning I chose to allot for that time because I didn't want the pressure of the day that he decides to do it, that I had the extra anxiety about rushing to the train station, getting a parking spot and running like mad to the train.

Alright, question two. My daughter's meltdowns often involve self-injurious behaviors like banging her head. What should I do? Okay, self-injurious behaviors, these can be really triggering for parents, I know that first hand, but still back to basics. You need to understand the purpose of the behavior. Sometimes this behavior is for attention, and sometimes it's a way to release frustration or anxiety. So, it's important that you know the difference, and here's why.

Around the age of 12, my son started to hit himself in the head and he had not done this since he was two years old, and when he did it, I lost my ever loving mind. It freaked me out and he saw that. He saw how I jumped out of my chair, how he had my 100% attention, how upset I was and how catering to him I was about it. And from that interaction, my son knew, hit self in face, get mom's 100% attention. He had proof of concept, he was correct.

And for the first several times that he did this after the first time, that's exactly, I would just jump up, "What's happening? Are you okay? Do you need more therapy? What should we do? Maybe we'll go to school late." Making accommodations. I was freaked out by this behavior, I found it so startling. But I started to notice, he wasn't really hitting himself that hard, or sometimes it would look like he was even about to hit himself, but he was making sure I was looking.

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So, I did my own little experiment where he hit himself in the head, not very hard and I pretended not to see it. And don't you know he came up to me and said, "I just hit myself." I said, "Oh." He's like, "But I hit myself." I'm like, "Okay, just stop doing that." I said, "We talked about that. That's not an appropriate way to get attention. If you need me for something you can use your words." "But mom, the last time I hit myself, you got really upset and you did X, Y and Z."

And so just from that I was like, "Oh my God, he knows exactly what he's doing. He's doing this to get my attention because he knows it gets my 100% attention and it gets him what he needs. And at that point, it was really just having my 100% attention. So, what I started doing was ignoring it or I would say, "I know why you are doing that. You are doing it to get my attention because you've gotten my attention that way before but this is not appropriate. Try again." And I have to say, once I called him out, that behavior decreased very quickly.

But please know, I'm not making light of this. If your child is hurting themselves and you can't stop them because they're bigger than you, the way my son was, calling 911 is the option. Getting another adult to intervene is an option. But if you know that they're doing it for your attention the way my son was, and you can communicate to them in a way that they understand that that's not the way to get your attention, and if there's another way, that is the way to begin to curb the behavior.

Now, there were other times with aggressive behaviors, whether it was towards him or focused towards me, where I was very clear, "If you hit me or if you hit yourself, I will call 911." And so, setting that boundary ahead of time so they know exactly what to expect. Attention seeking is not the only reason our children hit themselves. There could be a medical issue.

I've had a client recently where her child was smacking himself and he was having a gastrointestinal issue, never done this before. She knew very clearly that there was something else going on and so she got him checked out by the doctor. So again, you're going to respond to a behavior differently depending on the purpose of the behavior.

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I've seen it with my son, with his severe OCD, where you can tell this child is being tortured, where he can't get the loop out of his mind and I've seen him hit his head really hard against the wall and it is heartbreaking. And this is out of that frustration and feeling defeated. And so, in these situations I would love on him and validate him and comfort him however I could, because he was in pain, because he was suffering.

So just to sum this up, if you're dealing with a younger child you can physically control, I would safely remove them from the situation and gently restrain them from preventing injury. That might mean holding them close in a bear hug or using a weighted blanket or something to calm them. If it's for older children or larger children, just somebody you cannot physically handle, if it's attention seeking, I would call them out. I would say, "I know you want my attention, but this is not appropriate."

And then redirect them to a more appropriate way of getting your attention. If you want to talk to me about your anxiety, all you need to do is ask. If you're upset because you don't have the iPad, I know you're upset that I took the iPad away, but hitting yourself is not going to get it back. So just making it very clear to them that the purpose for which they're doing this behavior is not going to get them what they want.

Depending on the duration and the intensity of the behavior, giving a clear warning and a consequence, "If you do this again, I will call the police. My job is to keep you safe. If you are not able to be safe, I will call 911." If it's due to frustration, validate their feelings, "I can see you're really frustrated right now." Offer some comforting words, "Feel angry, but it's not okay to hurt yourself." And provide alternatives like a stress ball or a punching bag or pillows or deep pressure, a weighted blanket, suggest a hot shower.

In all cases, remain calm and consistent in your response. And again, I know how hard this is when your child is hitting themselves, because this is very triggering to a parent. However, your emotional state can have a big impact on their ability to regulate their emotions. And if they see that you are really amped up by what they're doing, one, they're going to know this has my parents' attention. This is how I get their attention.

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If they see you really amped up by their behaviors and losing your own control, this is going to escalate them. And it's also again, going to reinforce to them that engaging in this kind of behavior is the way to get my parents' attention. Because unfortunately a lot of times in these situations, attention is attention, good attention or negative attention.

Sometimes our kids just want our attention, not because they're bratty attention seekers, it's because they're out of control. They don't know what to do. They're wanting help and they don't know how to ask for it appropriately. And so, when they're asking for it inappropriately like this, we need to be able to communicate to them that this is not an appropriate way of getting our attention.

Alright, the final question comes from the mom of a daughter. This mom says, "My daughter is an angel in school and hell on wheels when she gets home. What can I do about this?" Alright, so first of all, this is really normal and common in kids, especially kids with special needs. Children with special needs are working very hard all day long to keep it together in school. And it sounds like this daughter is keeping it together, so she's probably masking a hell of a lot.

There's probably a lot of things that are happening throughout her day where maybe she's pushing down her feelings and she's just getting through it. And so, when she gets home she explodes. Makes perfect sense because home is her safe place. So just knowing this, knowing that it's normal, knowing it's because your daughter has been working so hard all day. Knowing it's because she's been overwhelmed and now she's just letting it out, hopefully just all of that will let you come to this from a place of more compassion for her. Because when you have more compassion, be more patient with her.

Here are some things that I recommend for any parent of any child with Autism, whether or not they're having the coke bottle effect or not, but especially if they are. Whether you're picking them up from school or they're coming home on the bus, do not pepper them with questions as soon as they walk in the door, give them some quiet space. Keep the

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verbiage to a minimum, “Hello. Nice to see you. Here’s your snack,” kind of a thing. They don’t need the additional sensory overload and pressure to answer questions, or really maybe even to relive things that felt unpleasant.

So, give them the space. I know so many of my clients are wanting to know, what was their day like? What happened? They’re not telling me anything. And so, they pepper their child with questions. You can ask them a question or two, but don’t do it when they walk in the door, give them some time.

Next, try to create an after school routine for them so they know what to expect when they come home. Maybe this looks like snack and quiet time, time in front of the iPad, whatever they need to do to decompress. And to the extent possible, put them in a place that is calming, maybe this is their room, maybe it’s a playroom. Perhaps you have some choices available for them on their schedule of things that they can do to decompress. Maybe it’s jumping on a trampoline, taking a shower, or just even a nap.

Just be patient with your child and know that they are letting off steam because they’ve been [inaudible] all day and they’ve been working really hard. The more compassion you can bring to the situation, the easier it will be for you to stay calm. And just like you are giving them space, give yourself some space. If they come home and they’re yelling and screaming for a bit in their room, you don’t need to be right outside of the room. You can take a walk.

You can get away yourself, because if you’re anything like me, whenever I heard my son in his room yelling or crying or screaming, I wanted to go in there, address it right away and make it go away. And that usually just made things worse. So, if your child is decompressing, give yourself that chance to walk away and decompress too, because that will help you stay calmer for them.

Alright, that is it for the Q&A. I hope this was helpful. If there are any questions that you have that I haven’t answered, please let me know. You

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can send them to me at lisa@theautismmomcoach.com. Alright, that is it for this week's episode. I will talk to you soon.

Thanks for listening to *The Autism Mom Coach*. If you are ready to apply the principles you are learning in these episodes to your life, it is time to schedule a consultation call with me. Podcasts are great but the ahas are fleeting. Real change comes from application and implementation and this is exactly what we do in my one-on-one coaching program. To schedule your consultation, go to my website, theautismmomcoach.com, Work With Me and take the first step to taking better care of yourself so that you can show up as the parent you want to be for your child with Autism.