

Witnessing Meltdowns

Meltdowns can be loud, chaotic, and frightening. Siblings may witness screaming, property destruction, elopement, or self-harm behaviors such as head banging or biting.



Even if siblings appear calm, repeated exposure can cause:

- Anxiety or hypervigilance
- Nightmares or sleep issues
- Fear of setting someone off
- Feelings of guilt
- Perfectionism
- Modifying their own needs to keep peace
- Emotional numbing or shutdown



TIP

Keep Reminding Siblings

“Your job is to stay safe, not to manage your brother/sister.”

What can help:



- Honest, age-appropriate explanations of what is happening
- Reassurance that meltdowns are not anyone’s fault
- Reminders that bad days happen, but so do good days
- Teaching about sensory overload and an overwhelmed nervous system, and how their sibling cannot control this
- A predictable plan for “meltdown times”
- Logging or journaling feelings and worries

Encourage them to identify and acknowledge their feelings:

- *“Did that startle you? It did me, too. It’s normal to feel startled when big sounds and feelings happen.”*
- *“It’s okay to feel anxious and talk about our feelings.”*
- *“I can see you’re feeling upset. It’s okay to feel upset or confused, and it’s good to talk about how we feel!”*

Planning ahead:

- Maintain your assigned safe space where siblings can go.
- Provide noise-cancelling headphones, comfort items, or distractions.
- Arrange for another adult to be present during high-risk times if possible.
- Remember, keep proactive communication going.

