

# *Managing Your Adoptee's Meltdowns in Public and at Home: Just in Time for the Holidays!*

*By Arleta James, PCC*



"Meltdowns," "temper tantrums," "rages," "fits"— or whatever name they go by in your home—they aren't fun! Outside of the home, they can be just plain embarrassing! They lend to chaos! The day's routine or shopping excursion can be interrupted at any moment by the child who "goes off."

These temper flare ups can be sparked by many issues. Below we'll look at the most common reasons for fits to occur, and we'll incorporate plenty of solutions to manage these meltdowns!

## ***Sensory Processing Disorder***

Sensory processing disorder is the new name for Sensory Integration Dysfunction or Sensory Integration Disorder. We receive and perceive sensory input through sights, sounds, touch, tastes, smells and movement. Difficulty taking in or interpreting this information can result in a vast array of difficulties. Many children with an early history of neglect, abuse, institutionalization or pre-natal drug/alcohol exposure are at risk for this disorder. Their brains operate in "overload mode"—too much input is received and cannot be interpreted. They become overwhelmed with their environment. Thus, Sensory Processing Disorder may provide the answer to why your child melts down, as well as other questions like, "Why does my child take excessive risks—jumping and crashing onto and into anything?" "Why can't my child do puzzles, write well, or find the coordination for riding a bike or hitting a ball?" "Why does my child cry or cover his ears with every loud sound—even those noises that occur daily?" "Why doesn't my child like to be touched or can't be touched enough?" "Why will my child only eat mac and cheese?" "Why can my child only tolerate certain clothes? What is it about tags and the seams on socks that set her off?" "Why doesn't my child like anything 'messy' or Play Doh, or making mud pies?"

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**Obtain Professional Help:** Visit Sensory Processing Disorder to learn the answers to the above questions and more! Sensory Processing Disorder can be treated via an Occupational Therapist with Sensory Processing training. This therapy can lend calming to the child throwing even very frequent fits! The Occupational Therapist can offer day-to-day solutions as well—weighted vests, earphones, listening to relaxing music via a headset, etc. If Sensory Processing Disorder is underlying your tantrums, help is available!

**Create a “Keep Calm Plan”:** The child with sensory overload may need breaks from the constant barrage of stimuli his or her brain receives. So, this holiday season, or anytime the home or public environment is full of sounds, sights, crowds, and so on, take a few minutes and move to a quiet place. One parent may excuse himself to run out for a gallon of milk. The child on the verge of a meltdown can go along. Move to the spare bedroom (child’s bedroom if at your own home) to play quietly with the child for a few minutes. Step out of the mall and sit in the car. Share an Auntie Annes pretzel. This isn’t a punishment. This is an overload prevention technique.

If you are at the home of a friend or family member, this may be more difficult. You may need to contemplate the invitation in the first place, or decide—prior to the event—how long you will be able to stay. Let your host know in advance your arrival and departure times. You don’t have to provide an explanation. Consider that one parent can leave the event early, while the other stays with the typical kids. While this isn’t ideal either, it does offset the backlash that is sure to occur!

**Keep in mind that it takes just as much time to handle the fit as it does to take a break!** In our daily hustle and bustle, we often want to push to get things done. Ask yourself, “Is this task, errand, etc. really worth the meltdown that will happen? Maybe that last Christmas present could best be purchased online and shipped directly to the recipient. Often, parents know the length of time their child can handle the mall mobs, a birthday party, an extended family gathering and so on! Set your watch or phone to sound the “meltdown imminent alarm.” Then, stop and carry out the “keep calm plan” you created ahead of time.

Your “keep calm plan” ensures success. A series of successful experiences helps the family have a more positive emotional climate. When parents, brothers and sisters aren’t stressed out or angry by the traumatized adoptee’s behavior, all events (and daily life!) are more enjoyable!

### ***Think “Younger” —Parent at the Social and Emotional Age***

Pre-adoptive trauma interrupts development. Your 10-, 12-, or 14-year-old isn’t really his or her chronological age. Likely, they are years younger with regard to their emotional abilities. Parenting at the child’s actual social and emotional age—instead of their chronological age—is another consideration. What would you expect of a 3-, 4- or 5-year-old at a museum? In Disney World? At holiday gatherings? If your 13-year-old is really socially and emotionally age 4, expect that he may become overwhelmed when there is a flurry of activity.

Again, build in breaks and make a “keep calm plan” as described above.

Parenting at the social and emotional age may quell those fears about the adoptee playing with his or her cousins this holiday season. Certainly, a 4-year-old would need some adult assistance when it comes to board or electronic games. If you see a problem occurring, you can move toward the game and join in. Often, an adult presence offsets the argument or tantrum that is looming. Or, you could suggest a cookie break. Snacks offer a nice way to interrupt play just long enough that all the kids will settle. Play resumes when the cookies and milk are devoured!

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## ***Triggers: Fits Come Out of the Blue!***

We've put up two blogs related to triggers: *Traumaversaries: Lessening the Impact of Adopted Children's Annual Triggers*, and *As Mother's Day Approaches: The Role of Triggers in Adoptive Families*.

Triggers take the brain to a memory. The feelings associated with the memory well up. The traumatized adoptee who can't express feelings, acts out behaviorally. For some adoptees this will mean a fit! The feelings explode and spew out all over—the home, the grocery store or the local Wal-Mart!

Kids—who have experienced trauma—get triggered easily and often! Frequently, we can identify the situations or times of the year in which a trigger will occur. In such instances, we can make a “trigger management plan” as described in the two previous blogs mentioned above.

However, triggers can also occur out of the blue! There will be no advance warning! Once the trigger occurs, the traumatized adoptee's brain is off re-experiencing a previous time and place. The child is in a state of hyperarousal or dissociation. That is, your son or daughter isn't totally present with you. In such cases, you and your family will simply find yourself in the midst of a fit.

We must also understand understand that a trigger can cause the adoptee to regress developmentally. The child returns to an earlier developmental stage. Older children can revert back to their toddler years. We all know how toddlers tantrum! This phenomenon was explained in our previous post, *Progress vs. Dieting: The Two have Much in Common*.

- ***You must learn to keep calm.*** Yes, this is hard! Yet, it can be done. If you have a child that has fits—occasionally or frequently—make a note and put it in a prominent place. The note should say, “I live with a child who is learning to regulate his or her feelings.” Keeping cognizant of the fact ensures that the tantrum won't take you so off balance.
- ***Implement a paradoxical intervention.*** At ABC of Ohio, we have kids who meltdown in a heartbeat! As they are greeted in the waiting room we state, “Do you want to have a fit now or later?” Parents could ask, “Do you want to have your fit at Wal-Mart or JC Penney's?” “Would you like to ‘go off’ after school or after dinner?” A paradox is meant to be this short and simple. ***The goal is to call the behavior to the child's attention. The aware child is less likely to engage in the unwanted behavior.*** Give this a try!
- ***Limit your verbal engagement in the midst of a meltdown.*** Threats, warnings, bribes, etc. only drive the brain to a higher level of dissociation or hyperarousal. Thus, the fit is heightened. Lecturing or reasoning isn't going to be helpful either. Remember, the child isn't totally in the present when in fit mode. In essence, it is like you would be trying to reason with an intoxicated person! Your goal is to continue on your way. That is, proceed down the aisle quietly. Stop to inspect items as you proceed. See if the child will follow you in a more peaceful, less destructive manner. If you feel a need to say something, state calmly, “We'll be moving to the next aisle when everyone is ready.” Some kids' brains will hone in on a single statement. That is, the child's brain will lock onto your calm. In turn, it will relax and settle down. Repeat the sentence a few times. Remain patient. You may be looking at items in lane 10 for a while! Sometimes, waiting the tantrum out—at home or while shopping—may be the best solution.
- ***Carry a disposable camera.*** Take a few pictures of the tantrum. This is “joining in.” Joining in is always delivered with fun! It is a way to confront the behavior without anger. Anger fuels the ensuing explosion! When we perpetuate temper outbursts, we encourage the brain to remain stuck in its rut! We reinforce the pattern of behavior. When we do something different, we help the brain learn a new way to operate. Taking photos is

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unexpected. It brings the brain—child—back from the triggered state. When your son or daughter is calm, you can show the photos to him or her. Children who see themselves in this type of emotional state don't like the way they look. Many will work to correct the behavior. Please remember, looking at the pictures is a teaching moment. It is a "visual" way to help the child understand his behavior better.

- "No", "now" and "don't" can trigger a tantrum! "No", especially, reminds the child of all the previous "no's." "No, I'm not going to be your foster mom anymore." "No, you can't live with your birthmom." Of course, many previously traumatized children haven't learned to accept "no" yet. **So, say "yes" as often as you can.** "Yes, I'll buy that toy when I have enough money. That just isn't today." "Yes, you may have a snack when we finish up here at Target."
- **If possible, arrange to have your spouse, or another trusted adult come pick the child up.** Removing the upset child is a viable solution. It allows everyone else to go on! Even if the meltdown has ceased by the time your husband or wife arrives, remove the child. Say what you mean, and mean what you say!
- **If no one is available to remove the child from the situation, consider if you and the child having the tantrum need to exit the situation.** This may be true if safety is a problem. The child throwing things may hurt another child or adult. There will be times that you need to re-schedule your plans. Certainly if any breakage has occurred, determine the child's restitution.

### ***Get Off on a Good Note***

Decide which battles can start the whole day off poorly. Clothing, choices about what to eat for breakfast and so on, can be averted on the days the family needs to go places and get things done! Getting off on a good note can set a better tone for the whole day! During the holiday season, the shoppers won't be looking at your daughter's plaid green pants and striped blue top. They will be looking for the bargains! Tomorrow, you can worry about these things! For today, accomplish what you need to.

A wonderful adoptive Mom recently commented to me, "I always have my son snuggle in bed with me 15-20 minutes on the morning of a jam packed day. This nurture is relaxing, and he remains peaceful and pleasant throughout the day." This Mom is wise and correct. Increase the nurture you give your traumatized adoptee during this holiday season and everyday! See Nurture: The Ring that Holds All the Keys—Part One and Part Two.

### ***What about the Brothers and Sisters?***

The adoptee's behavior can ruin family time. Certainly, brothers and sisters are adversely affected by meltdowns that interfere with activities of interest or importance to them. When child care is available, consider it as a viable option for the troubled child. No one feels good when a family event, shopping spree, a sporting event, etc. goes awry. It is okay to leave the adoptee with a history of trauma behind from time to time (not all the time!) Likely, the adoptee can have a lot of fun with the sitter. This can be a win-win situation.

Simply acknowledging the behavior can be effective. "I was so embarrassed today when your brother started having his rage. I bet you were too." Providing this ripple—conversation starter—helps the brothers and sisters release pent up feelings for their adopted sibling. This is essential for their emotional well-being. It is also important because it allows them to be calmer during poor behavioral times. Their feelings don't explode along with those of the adoptee!

One family I know offers a small treat to their typical sons and daughters during the adoptee's temper outbursts. The little rewards are kept in a basket which appears along with the fit. To this Mom, it is her way of saying, "I know your brother can be difficult and I understand." The Mom reported that she overheard a typical son saying to his adopted brother, "Could

you have a meltdown today? Mom just put some great treats in the basket!" The adoptee replied, "I'm never having a fit again!" —and he hasn't! This creative solution has offset meltdowns in many families to date!

Parents want to find ways to facilitate the flow of information, and set aside the time necessary to maintain their relationship with the healthy kids in their family.

In conclusion, this post offers more than a dozen ways to avert or manage meltdowns. If you still need more ideas, check out the "Readings and Resources" to the right. There are ways to bring peace and joy to your holiday season—and everyday!

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