



MINIMISING MELTDOWNS AND GETTING  
KIDS TO CO-OPERATE

# CHEAT SHEET

## Mindful Parenting Solutions

Getting children to co-operate is up there with the biggest challenges in parenting! **Feed the Parent** is here to help with this simple Cheat Sheet. When your kids get stubborn or start to melt down, take a deep breath, check out this list of options, **use your intuition about the underlying cause**, then calmly implement!

## Get the Background

**Important** – please read my blog post [Minimising Meltdowns and Getting Kids to Co-operate](#) for the background to this Cheat Sheet. It explains why these strategies are the best path for calm and connected parenting (rather than creating conflict with yelling, time-outs or other more aggressive approaches).

## General Guidelines

1. Communicate with your child at their face level whenever possible.
2. Always have non-aggressive body language - no hands on hips or finger pointing!
3. Always use a calm, kind voice that is not louder than your normal voice.



## Challenge #1: Refusing to Get Dressed

### Likely Underlying Causes:

A: Control

OR

### Strategies:

- Let them choose what to wear (you can take some extra more suitable clothes along with you for later, if need be!). Or let them choose where to get dressed.

B. Doesn't want to go out or move to the next phase of the day (finds transitions hard)

- Connect with them and get them smiling/laughing before trying to get them dressed.
- Check in with them, empathise with their feelings and try to respond to their needs, while still moving towards the goal.



## Challenge #2: Refusing to Eat a Meal

### Likely Underlying Causes:

A: Control

OR

### Strategies:

- Before cooking, give them a choice of 2 meals or sides to choose between.
- Involve them in preparing the food (eg putting on pizza toppings.)

B: Not Hungry

OR

- To test if they are hungry or not, ask if they want dessert – if they say no then they aren't hungry! If they say yes, then go to A or C.
- If they aren't hungry, don't try to make them eat. Either leave it and come back to it later, or accept they will miss the meal (no big deal if it's only occasional).

C: Over-tired

- Help them to eat (for pre-school age) by feeding them. • Distract them by reading a book or telling a story. • Offer 'easier' (but healthy) food if you can't get them to eat the meal and you know they are over-tired eg porridge. If this only happens occasionally, it won't become a habit.



## Challenge #3: Not Responding When Asked a Question or Asked to Do Something

### Likely Underlying Causes:

A: Absorbed in Play (Not Listening)

OR

### Strategies:

- Walk up close to them, kneel down to their level and put your face close to theirs (gently). Wait until they see you and then smile and ask again.

B: Overwhelmed or Over-tired (not able to listen)

As above.



## Challenge #4: Still not doing what they are asked to do (after you've engaged as above and they have heard you!)

### Likely Underlying Causes:

A: Control

OR

### Strategies:

- As above but then find out what their needs are and give them something they want but in a way that works for you too (eg; Finish the game then bath time).
- If they still won't act, distract them by joking with them, creating a game (eg a race) or chatting about something exciting, then gently guide them to the next activity.

B: Doesn't want to move to the next phase of the day (finds transitions hard).

OR

- Walk up close to them, kneel down to their level and put your face close to theirs (gently). Wait until they see you and then smile and ask again.
- If they still won't act, distract them by joking with them, creating a game (eg a race) or chatting about something exciting, then gently guide them to the next activity.

C: Feels rushed or pressured by you

- Ensure you ask clearly but kindly, and without repeated nagging (just say it once firmly).
- Ensure you give them time to finish their activity before moving on – eg "It's dinner time in 5 minutes so please finish up your game and come to the table." Give a 2 minute reminder.



## Challenge #5: Not staying in bed, Not going to sleep (calling out etc.)

### Likely Underlying Causes:

A: Separation anxiety/fear of being alone  
OR

#### Strategies:

- After the bedtime routine you can either: i. Stay with them until they fall asleep or ii. Tuck them in and leave the room. Return each time they call out persistently (wait 1 min), tuck them in again, kiss them and leave the room saying "it's time to sleep now, I'm just out in the living room". Repeat each time they call out .
- Separation anxiety is temporary so as they grow up you'll be able to wean them off your presence to get to sleep.

B: Wanting time with Mum or Dad (attention)  
OR

- Spend lots of one-to-one time with your child during the day or at bedtime – including lots of chatting and affection. Talk about what you will do together the next day.
- Then proceed with the above process if need be.

C: Too Over-simulated to Sleep

- Ensure a consistent & calming bedtime routine – include calm bathtime, story-time in bed, affection with Mum/Dad. Keep the house quiet and the lights dim. Ensure no screen time 2 hours before bed. Ensure child is not consuming stimulants like cola, coffee/tea, excess sugar or chocolate.



## Challenge #6: Throwing or Deliberately Making a Mess

### Likely Underlying Causes:

A: Over-stimulated  
OR

#### Strategies:

- Come close to them non-aggressively. Tell them in a calm voice that throwing is not OK. If possible connect with them by making them laugh, cuddling etc.
- Remove them from the over-stimulating situation.

B: Wanting Attention  
OR

- Come close to them non-aggressively. Tell them in a calm voice that throwing is not OK. If possible connect with them by making them laugh, cuddling etc.

C: Reacting to a specific issue that has upset them

- State what you can see is happening and show that you understand what's bothering them (eg "I can see you are upset. Are you sad because Danny took your toy away?"). Engage in a dialogue with them until they calm down.



## Challenge #7: Hitting, Angry Shouting, Biting

Likely Underlying Cause:  
Overwhelmed with their emotions  
(anger)

### Strategies:

- Make sure everyone is safe first. If your child continues to hit, hold their arms if you need to so no-one gets hurt.
- Once they have stopped hitting, go down to their level and speak gently to them – state what you can see has happened and their visible emotions (eg "I can see you are upset. Was that because of X?").
- Get them to sit with you or on your lap so you can talk with them. Move away from others if need be.
- Non-aggressively talk it through with them. State that hitting/biting is not OK and explain who they have hurt.
- Only after they have calmed down ask them to say sorry to whoever they hurt. Ask them to think of something they can do to help that person feel better.



## Challenge #8: Meltdowns and Tantrums

Note: Tantrums are where the child has lost all emotional control and cannot be calmed, whereas 'meltdowns' are upsets where it still may be possible to calm them.

Likely Underlying Causes:  
A: Overwhelmed with their  
Emotions  
OR

### Strategies:

- You can try to **head off a meltdown** as follows: i. Get down at their level and ask what's the matter. ii. State what you see – eg "You seem upset. You wanted to play with Billy and I wouldn't let you." iii. Try to talk with them about it – empathise and ask questions. iv. Try to find something they do want and distract or satisfy them with that (eg a different game). v. If the upset was triggered by you setting a limit or saying No, don't give in to the demand (unless you realise your limit was unreasonable or unkind). Be consistent with limits.
- If a **tantrum** occurs anyway, do this: i. Just sit with your child and let them know you're there for them. **Do not disappear**, as they need the support to handle their full-on emotions. Keep them physically safe. ii. Don't try and pick them up unless they want you to hold them. iii. Wait patiently until the crying has finished then hold and soothe them. iv. Remember, a young child can't be rational about their emotions so **don't expect them to control themselves**. v. Ignore your discomfort about what other people think – every parent has been through this too! Focus on comforting your child.

B: Over-stimulated or Over-tired

- Try to avoid a meltdown or tantrum occurring by removing them from over-stimulating environments and going home early.
- Avoid them getting over-tired by not doing too much when you know they might be tired.
- Overstimulation can be due to excess sugar or stimulants like cola or excess chocolate so avoid these at all times!

# Explaining the Underlying Causes

- 1. Control** – Children have so little power over their lives, it's a normal part of growing up to seek more control – and, in fact, a good trait to develop if you want a strong, determined child who is not passive in life! Find ways to help your child feel more in control of their life (especially about the small things), while still ensuring you make the decisions that matter.
- 2. Overwhelmed with their emotions** – children find their big emotions like anger, sadness, hurt or fear to be new and scary and they don't have the skills to handle them, and so get easily overwhelmed. Their coping mechanism is to cry, shout, hit or otherwise externalise the feelings.
- 3. Over-stimulated or Overtired** – lack of sleep or tired from a big day means children cope even less with their emotions. Children can get over stimulated from a big day out, but can also be affected by stimulants like sugar, cola or chocolate.
- 4. Separation Anxiety** – it's healthy for children to want to be with their parents as it means they are well-bonded, so learning to be apart can be challenging for many children. Most kids aged below 2 or 3 will not want to be separated from Mum or Dad, and periods of stress or change will intensify separation anxiety for many children.
- 5. Finds transitions difficult** – some children who are more sensitive find it hard to move from one activity or place to another and need more help and patience with this.
- 6. Wanting Attention** – children need a certain amount of connected time with their parents and, if they don't get enough of this, will try to find ways to get more attention from parents. During times of stress this can be exacerbated.

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