

ARE THEY TANTRUMS... OR SOMETHING MORE? A PARENTS' GUIDE



Discover why sticker charts and time-outs often fall flat - and how to truly understand your child's behaviour so you can help them thrive.

ARE THEY **TANTRUMS...** **OR SOMETHING MORE?** **A PARENTS' GUIDE**

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Simple, digestible, practical information to help parents understand and support their children with big emotions.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

If you're reading this, chances are you're feeling stretched, worried, or even a little lost when it comes to your child's behaviour. First of all, you're not alone - every parent faces tough moments - and I want to reassure you that this guide isn't about being a "perfect parent".

Struggling with big emotions is a normal part of growing up for every child - and parenting isn't about getting it right every single time (because no one does!)

Here's the thing: It might not feel that way when you scroll through social media.

Between the picture-perfect posts and "parenting hacks", it can seem like everyone else has it all figured out. But here's the truth: no one's life is as polished as it looks online. Real parenting is messy, complicated, and full of trial and error - and that's okay.

That's why this guide isn't about quick fixes or shortcuts that promise to "solve" your child's behaviour overnight. Instead, it's for parents who want real, lasting solutions - approaches that help you understand what's driving your child's behaviour so you can give them the support they need to thrive in the real world.

You've already taken the first step just by downloading this guide. Now let's dive in and start making sense of your child's big feelings, one step at a time.

To your success,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "S. Currgan". The script is cursive and fluid, with a large 'S' and a stylized 'C'.

Simon Currgan

Important: It is not intended that anyone uses these materials to diagnose children with medical or psychological conditions. This is strictly reserved for medical and mental health practitioners.



WHAT A TANTRUM IS (AND ISN'T)

Let's start with the big question: What exactly is a tantrum?

We've all been there. Your child is on the floor of the supermarket having a full-blown explosion because their sock "feels weird" (again). Or they're screaming at you during the school pick-up because you said they can't play football with their friends on the way home.

And now you're getting stares from other parents, trying to keep your cool, and wondering, "Why is this happening?"

Here's the thing: Not all tantrums are the same.

Some are exactly what they seem - outbursts of frustration or a child testing limits. These are a perfectly natural part of growing up, and all children will have moments like these from time to time.

But sometimes, what looks like a tantrum is actually something much deeper.

A different kind of tantrum.

If your child's behaviour feels extreme (long-lasting meltdowns, screaming, hitting, or shutting down completely), there could be something more going on.

Maybe they're struggling with sensory overload, anxiety, understanding social situations or have difficulty processing their emotions.

And if these outbursts seem to happen more often than for other children, or last much longer, and you've already tried things like sticker charts and time-outs and they didn't work... that could also point to something else driving their behaviour.

Here's the most important part.

What's causing these kinds of tantrums isn't "bad behaviour" or "bad parenting." It's because your child's brain is working differently - or needing help to manage big emotions.

So... what's the difference?



Tantrums

A tantrum is usually about frustration in the moment. Maybe your child didn't get the toy they wanted, or they're tired, or they don't want to do their homework. These kinds of outbursts tend to be short-lived and fade once the child gets what they want, realise the strategy isn't working, or simply tire themselves out.

Children are often (to some extent) in control of tantrums. For example, mid-tantrum they might stop to watch your reaction to what they're doing, checking whether their actions are having the desired effect.



Overwhelm

Overwhelm happens when your child experiences strong emotions they simply can't handle or regulate.

This can stem from all sorts of challenges: anxiety, difficulty managing social situations, sensory overload, or struggles with change. Each of these has its own unique triggers, but the common thread is that your child's emotions have taken over, and they're no longer able to cope in the moment.

This is called **emotional dysregulation**. In this state, they're not making active behaviour choices. They're reacting to an internal emotional storm they don't know how to calm.

What about meltdowns?

The term "meltdown" is often used to describe when a child becomes overwhelmed with anxiety to the point of complete emotional collapse. For example, this might happen if they're socially anxious and taken to a crowded place like a supermarket or a busy playground.

It's a term more commonly used in relation to autistic children or adults, though anyone can experience meltdowns in moments of extreme anxiety or sensory overload. Unlike tantrums, meltdowns aren't deliberate or manipulative; they're an uncontrollable response to an overwhelming situation.



WHY THIS MATTERS

When your child feels overwhelmed, understanding the difference between “just a tantrum” and a deeper struggle helps you respond in a way that genuinely supports your child.

As a parent, it’s not about getting that call right every single time (no one does that in the real world!) But it is about pausing to ask, “What’s really driving this behaviour?” Then meeting your child where they are emotionally and helping them work through those big feelings.

And you can only do that if you’re thinking about the “why” behind their behaviour. Those reasons are called **underlying causes**. We’ll dig into some common reasons behind these behaviours next, but for now, I want to leave this key idea with you:

When kids get overwhelmed, it isn’t a reflection of your parenting. It’s a clue to what’s going on emotionally, under the surface.

Common underlying causes

In the section that follows, we're going to look at four common underlying causes that drive children to experience emotional overwhelm or meltdowns.

Those four causes are:

- ADHD
- Anxiety
- Autism
- PDA (Pathological Demand Avoidance)

Important:

The purpose of this section is to help you link the behaviours you see at home with **possible** underlying causes. So you can start making **potential** connections.

This guide **isn't meant to be a diagnostic tool** - childhood behaviour is complex and can have many causes. I've focused on just four conditions here, and due to space, I've only included the most common ways these might show up at home, not an exhaustive list.

Additionally, **every child is an individual**, and conditions can affect children differently.

If, after reading this, you feel one of these conditions might apply to your child, consider speaking with a medical professional to explore whether a diagnosis could be helpful.

How this is done depends on where you live. If you're not sure, your local GP or your child's school should be able to point you in the right direction.





ADHD KEY FACTS

ADHD stands for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, but don't let the long name put you off - it's not as complicated as it sounds.

ADHD affects how a child's brain processes things like focus, organisation, and controlling impulses and emotions. Think of it as their brain being wired a little differently, which can make everyday tasks feel extra challenging.

Children with ADHD aren't being "naughty" or trying to push your buttons - it's often that their brains are working at 100mph, and they struggle to pause, focus, manage emotions or switch gears when they need to.

And here's something important to know: kids with ADHD are often deeply sensitive. They care about how their actions affect others and can be really hurt by negative comments from adults or other children - even if they don't show it right away (or pretend not to care).

Common myth

Lots of people think that, to qualify for a diagnosis of ADHD, you must be hyperactive (i.e. have to have lots of energy and be "on the go" all the time). But that's not true. Children with ADHD can be affected by just the "attention deficit" part of ADHD, or the "hyperactivity" part, or both.

HOW ADHD MIGHT LOOK AT HOME

1 Big energy - everywhere!

Your child might always seem to be on the go, like a whirlwind, or like they've got a motor inside them, that's constantly running. They could struggle to sit still during meals, fidget constantly, or move from one activity to the next (even one they enjoy) without finishing anything.

2 Forgetful moments

"Where are your shoes?" might feel like your daily mantra. Children with ADHD can forget things easily, like instructions you gave them two minutes ago, or where they put their school bag. They may also have difficulty juggling information they need to complete tasks (this is called your working memory).

3 Impulsive actions

Your child might interrupt before someone's finished speaking, grab something without asking, or run in the road without looking. It's not deliberate - they're just acting on their first thought, before they've had a chance to think it through. This element of ADHD can make it look like they live "in the now."

4 Big emotions

ADHD often comes with intense feelings. Your child might have dramatic reactions to small setbacks, like spilling a drink or losing at a game, and struggle to calm down once they're upset. Kids with ADHD can often get stuck in this state for a long time.

5

Struggles with focus

They they might get super-absorbed in activities they love (hello, hours of Minecraft!) but find it almost impossible to focus on tasks they find boring, like tidying up or doing homework. Kids with ADHD often have a strong dislike of activities that involve patience or close attention to detail.

6

Sensitive to rejection

Children with ADHD can be incredibly sensitive to feeling criticised or left out, even when no one meant to upset them. At home, this might look like your child overreacting to a small comment, like, "You forgot to tidy up again," or becoming really upset if they think they've let you down or they've made a mistake. They might say things like, "You don't like me," or "I can't do anything right," even when you're trying to be supportive.

WHY THIS MATTERS

If you're seeing some of these behaviours at home, it's worth considering whether ADHD could be part of the picture. Remember, it's not about labelling your child - it's about understanding how their brain works so you can support them in a way that truly helps.





ANXIETY KEY FACTS

Anxiety is something we all feel from time to time - like that nervous flutter before an important meeting at work, or the worry that creeps in when something feels out of our control.

But for some kids, anxiety goes much deeper. It's not just a passing feeling - it's a constant buzz in the background, shaping how they see the world and respond to everyday situations.

When a child struggles with anxiety, even small things can feel overwhelming. It's like their brain is on high alert all the time, scanning for danger - even when there's nothing to worry about. And that can make them appear to overreact to situations out of the blue.

Worries vs anxieties

It's normal for kids to have worries - like feeling nervous about a test or meeting new people. But anxiety is different. It's when their worries grow so big they limit your child and stop them from doing things they'd like to do (like meeting up with friends, going to school or attending a party). Anxiety becomes a roadblock, holding them back from fully participating in their world.

HOW ANXIETY MIGHT LOOK AT HOME

1

Avoiding certain situations

Your child might refuse to go to school, shy away from social events, or even cling to you at drop-off. It's not that they don't want to try - it's that the fear of what could go wrong feels too big for them to face. If you put them under pressure to participate, those fears may then escalate and overwhelm your child.

2

Big reactions to small things

Anxiety can make little hiccups - like spilling juice or forgetting homework - feel like the end of the world. These reactions aren't about being dramatic, they're about the overwhelm that anxiety creates. Remember, the behaviour you're seeing is just the tip of the iceberg, with a mountain of emotions lying hidden beneath the surface.

3

Frequent "what if" questions

"What if I mess up?" "What if my friends don't want to play with me?" "What if I can't do it?" These constant worries can take over their thoughts and stop them from enjoying the moment. Children affected by anxiety also often fixate on feared events that may happen in the future.





5

Physical complaints

Anxiety doesn't just live in the mind - it can show up in the body too. Your child might complain about stomach aches, headaches, or feeling sick when they're worried about something. Often, they won't understand those feelings are being caused by their thoughts - they'll believe they are genuinely sick.

6

Irritability or meltdowns

Anxiety can drain a child's ability to cope, leaving them feeling frustrated or snappy. It's not that they're angry at you - they're just overwhelmed and don't know how to express it or manage it successfully. Many children also find it hard to put their fear into words, making it hard to explain their feelings.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Understanding how anxiety shows up in your child's behaviour helps you see the "why" behind their struggles. The next steps are not about "toughening them up" or pushing them through - it's about helping them feel safe, supported, and understood.



AUTISM KEY FACTS

Autism is a complex condition, but essentially, it's a different way of seeing and experiencing the world.

It's not an illness or something to "fix" - it's simply a unique brain wiring that shapes how a child processes information, interacts with others, and navigates their environment.

For children with autism, the world can sometimes feel overwhelming or confusing. They might struggle with social situations, routines, communication or sensory input (like loud noises or bright lights), which can lead to behaviours that look puzzling or challenging from the outside.

How one child experiences autism can be very different to another child. That means there's no "one size fits all" approach to supporting autistic children and we have to think clearly about their specific needs.

The strengths of autistic children

Autistic children often have incredible strengths that make them shine in their own unique ways. Many have an amazing ability to focus deeply on things they're passionate about, or see problems from new perspectives, or have a deep capacity for loyalty and care for those they trust. Celebrating your child's strengths helps them feel confident in who they are and how they navigate the world.

HOW AUTISM MIGHT LOOK AT HOME

1 Love of routines

Your child might have a strong preference for routines and find it difficult to cope when plans change unexpectedly. Even something small - like serving dinner in a different bowl or walking a different route to school - might cause them upset or anxiety. Some children might also struggle to leave an activity incomplete.

2 Sensory sensitivities

Autistic children could be sensitive to noise, lights, textures, or smells. For example, they might refuse to wear certain clothes because they "feel scratchy" or cover their ears at the sound of the Hoover. Sensory needs can go both ways - some children are **hypersensitive**, finding everyday sounds, lights, or textures overwhelming, while others are **hyposensitive**, seeking out more intense sensory input like jumping, spinning, tasting or touching everything around them.

3 Difficulties with social interactions

Autistic children might struggle to make eye contact, take turns in conversations, or understand unwritten social rules (like how much personal space to give someone, or when to join in with a conversation). They may prefer to play alone or seem unsure how to join in with other children. As a result of this, your child may experience anxiety about social situations - like school - or misread social situations with friends or family.

4 Difficulties understanding language

Your child might take longer to respond to questions or seem confused by instructions, especially if they're long or complicated. They may also interpret things literally - like thinking, "It's raining cats and dogs" means there are animals falling from the sky.

5

Meltdowns

When overwhelmed, your child might experience meltdowns (big, intense reactions) or shutdowns (becoming quiet and withdrawn). These aren't tantrums - they're a sign that your child's brain is overloaded and can no longer cope. Meltdowns are frequently sparked by anxiety.

6

Not reading other people's emotions

Your child might find it difficult to understand what others are feeling, thinking, or needing. This can make it hard for them to show empathy in ways people expect, like recognising when someone is upset or knowing how to respond. But that doesn't mean they don't care - autistic children often feel deeply for others. They just express it in their own way - or struggle to put it into words.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Understanding autism helps you see the world through your child's eyes. It's not about "fixing" them - it's about learning how they experience life, so you can support them in a way that feels safe, is respectful and empowers them to succeed in life.





PDA KEY FACTS

PDA (or Pathological Demand Avoidance) is a specific type of autism that presents quite differently to other forms of the condition.

Children with PDA experience extreme anxiety when they feel pressured to do something - even everyday requests like “put on your shoes” or “tidy up your toys.” For them, these demands can feel overwhelming and impossible to handle, triggering a fight-or-flight response.

It’s not about being defiant or stubborn - it’s the way their brain processes demands, leading to heightened anxiety - that drives their behaviour.

School and PDA

Children with PDA often find school incredibly challenging because of the constant demands it places on them - everything from following a timetable to completing work can feel overwhelming. This anxiety can lead to children being resistant to going to school, with frequent complaints of feeling unwell, morning meltdowns or the child simply refusing to leave the house.



HOW PDA MIGHT LOOK AT HOME

1 Resistance to everyday requests

Your child might refuse even simple instructions, like brushing their teeth or getting dressed, and seem to dig their heels in more as you push. This resistance often isn't about the task itself - it's about the overwhelming pressure they feel to comply.

2 Life feels like a negotiation

To avoid demands, your child might try to distract you with humour, negotiate delays ("Can I do it later?"), appearing to get distracted, pretending not to hear, or suddenly needing to do something else. These strategies are called "social manipulation" - and they're a way of coping with the anxiety demands create.

3 Meltdowns when pressured

If demands feel unavoidable or too intense, your child might have a meltdown, with shouting, crying, or even running away. These moments often come after attempts to avoid the situation have failed, leaving them feeling trapped, distressed and unable to escape the anxiety-provoking demand.



5

High need for control

Your child might insist on doing things their way, like deciding the order of daily tasks or setting their own rules. This behaviour isn't about being bossy - it's about creating a sense of safety by having control over their environment. This reduces their anxiety and helps them feel safe.

6

Demand avoidance even for things they enjoy

Interestingly, children with PDA might even resist activities they typically love, like playing a favourite game, if they've being "told" to do it. For them, the anxiety about the demand outweighs the enjoyment of the activity.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Understanding PDA helps you see that their behaviour isn't about "won't," but "can't." It's not about discipline - it's about helping your child feel safe, supported, and in control of their world.

NEXT STEPS

Understanding the “why” behind your child’s behaviour is a huge first step.

What you’ve likely discovered is that when behaviour is emotionally driven, tools like sticker charts and time-outs just don’t cut it.

That’s because sticker charts are for addressing chosen behaviours, like tidying up toys or remembering to say “please,” but they’re not designed for emotionally driven behaviours rooted in anxiety, overwhelm, or unmet needs.

Time-outs, on the other hand, are a reactive strategy that stop the behaviour in the moment, but they don’t address the feelings or underlying causes driving it. This can leave your child stuck in a cycle of heightened, unhealthy emotions.

The good news? With the right strategies, you can help your child feel safe, understood, and better equipped to manage their emotions. It’s not about “fixing” them - it’s about meeting them where they are and giving them the support they need to thrive.

This guide is just the beginning. The next step is to explore practical, needs-focused strategies that help you and your child move forward together.





Get In Touch

Supporting a child with their emotions is a journey, and we're here to help. We're constantly developing **new resources, expert insights and practical strategies** to make things easier for you and your child. So if you have any questions - or just want to stay in loop - visit growpoint.co.uk. Because we'd love to continue supporting you and your family on your path towards emotional success.