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Home is Where the Meltdowns Are: How to Address After-School Restraint Collapse

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"My son's kindergarten teacher said he did great at school today, but he completely lost it as soon as we got home! He was practically bouncing off the walls, clinging to me while I was trying to cook, and then he had a giant meltdown at dinnertime. What gives?" If this scenario sounds relatable, then I have some comforting news—parents of the world, you are not alone!

Counselor Andrea Loewen Nair calls this phenomenon "after-school restraint collapse," but she's quick to point out that it's not just an issue for grade-school kids. Grown-ups who need to "blow off some steam" after work, teenagers who shut down and refuse to answer their parents' questions at the end of a long day, and preschoolers who immediately fall asleep in the car after getting picked up from daycare may all be experiencing this "collapse." Let's learn more about how to address it.



What is After-School Restraint Collapse?

After-school restraint collapse ("ASRC") happens when an individual has reached his or her personal capacity for dealing with stress, frustration, unfamiliar situations, or the need to suppress natural behaviors. For young children, the world is full of rules to follow, and their brains are not yet developed enough to automatically control their impulses.

School can be particularly challenging: kids are expected to sit quietly in their seats, avoid wiggling, only eat and use the bathroom quickly and at convenient or scheduled times, walk quietly in straight lines, raise their hands and wait to speak, pay attention, and learn a lot of new information every day. Recess may be short or non-existent (especially for older students), and lunch times can be rushed and chaotic. There may be very few opportunities for free play, socialization, movement, or child-led choices. The demands of this level of structure can be challenging for all kids, but it can especially affect the following groups:



- **Younger children:** lack impulse control and the ability to easily keep their emotions "in check" (these skills come with age, guided practice, and experience)



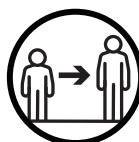
- **Children dealing with big transitions:** the start of a new academic year or school; parents going through a divorce; coping with grief, loss, or family instability



- **Those experiencing burn-out:** individuals who are stressed from hectic schedules or classes that are too challenging



- Children who are neurodivergent (autism, ADHD) or highly sensitive (see [Handy Handout #661](#)); those who have learning disabilities or have issues with sensory processing, anxiety, or emotional regulation



- Kids or adolescents going through growth spurts, developmental "leaps," or hormonal changes

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Free informational handouts for educators, parents, and students
(page 2 of 3)

What are some signs of ASRC?

-Active behaviors:



- Having a tantrum or meltdown/neuro-crash (see [Handy Handout #668](#) for more information)
- Refusing to participate in scheduled activities, chores, or homework
- Appearing moody, irritable, clingy, or whiny

-Passive behaviors:



- "Shutting down" or retreating to avoid others
- Feeling extremely tired or falling asleep
- Zoning out



How to help:



- **Meet basic needs:** Kids who are hungry, thirsty, hot/cold, tired, wearing uncomfortable clothes, or not feeling well are more likely to "lose it." Provide an afternoon snack, eat dinner earlier, or let them change into a preferred outfit when they get home from school. Make sure kids are getting enough sleep at night by sticking to a bedtime routine and making bedrooms a "screen-free" zone.



- **Decompression time:** Plan for daily relaxation or free time after school to give kids a chance to unwind with the activities of their choice. Some kids—especially introverts—may need quiet alone time. Others may want to play with siblings or friends.



- **Quality one-on-one time:** Sometimes, kids act out when what they really need is connection and attention. Set aside daily time to "unplug" and spend one-on-one time together: play with them, cook and eat dinner together, or wind down together before bed by reading a story or talking about the day's highs and lows.



- **Routines:** Establish and stick to a predictable schedule when possible, especially during the school week. Try not to over-schedule kids with too many structured after-school activities by building in time for rest and free play.



- **Get moving:** Provide time for unstructured, sensory, or gross motor (large movement) play in the afternoons. Kids need to move their bodies to release pent-up energy.



- **Go outside:** Playing outside or exploring nature often provides a calming and regulating effect. See [Handy Handouts #650](#) and [651](#) for more information.



- **Statements v. questions:** Some kids become anxious and overwhelmed if they are peppered with questions about their day right after school. Instead, try making statements that invite more conversation if and when the child is ready. You can try saying things like, "I know you had music class today—maybe you can show me what you learned on the drums later," or, "You worked so hard on that presentation for ELA today. I hope it went well!"



- **Offer structured and limited choices:** Providing choices gives kids a sense of agency and independence, but sometimes having too many options is overwhelming. You can try limiting options such as providing two healthy snacks to choose from or asking your child if he'd rather go to the playground or go for a neighborhood walk at home.

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Free informational handouts for educators, parents, and students
(page 3 of 3)



- **Partner with and educate your child:** Teach your children to recognize what is going on with their emotions and energy levels. This increases self-awareness and interoception, or the ability to sense and understand what is happening inside our bodies. You can do things like point out, "I can tell you're getting frustrated because you're tired and hungry. Should we take a break and have a snack?" Also, work with your child to come up with strategies for how to unwind after school during a time when he or she is well-rested and focused. Finally, help neurodivergent kids build self-confidence and avoid masking, which can cause additional stress and tension to build up throughout the day (see Handy Handouts #658 and 659 for more information).

Can't stop the meltdown? Coregulate!

Just know that sometimes you won't be able to stop ASRC before it results in a meltdown. Remember that self-regulation, impulse control, and learning to respond appropriately to big emotions are all learned skills that come with guided practice and age/brain development.



- **Recognize that home is their safe zone:** Part of the reason that some kids often hold it together all day and then "lose it" once they get home is because home ideally represents safety and is a place where they can just let it all out. Children need to know that they will still be safe and will receive unconditional love, even if their external behaviors are not ideal.



- **Stay calm:** It's not uncommon for parents to be triggered by their child's seemingly irrational behavior, but it's important to avoid joining your child's chaos. Promote coregulation by modeling calming strategies and providing comfort measures for your child. Try to stay in close proximity to your child as he or she works through their feelings so that they don't feel abandoned and ashamed. You can provide non-verbal comfort such as a hug if the child likes physical touch. Model appropriate behaviors like taking deep breaths or doing physical exercise to "blow off steam" when you're starting to get frustrated and angry. Learn to recognize your own triggers and know when you might need to step away if your child continues to escalate in a way that is becoming dangerous for either of you.



- **Don't take it personally:** Remember that your child is probably not trying to cause you any stress. For example, you can reframe the thought, "She's really giving me a hard time," to something more like, "She's really having a hard time."



- **Wait to talk it out:** Don't try to have big discussions or rationalize with kids when they are in the middle of a "collapse." Wait until they are calm, regulated, rested, and well-fed to discuss what happened and strategies for preventing future meltdowns.

Resources:

Big Little Feelings. Facebook. September 6, 2023. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=599875445647201&set=a.553674070267339&type=3&mibextid=WiMSqg>.

Fabian-Weber, Nicole. "After-School Restraint Collapse: Why Kids Fall Apart at Home and What to Do About It." Care.com. August 25, 2023. <https://www.care.com/c/after-school-restraint-collapse-why-kids-fall-apart/>.

The Occupational Therapist. "Questions Aren't Connections." Facebook. September 6, 2023. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=623590836600602&set=a.423429526616735&type=3&mibextid=WiMSqg>.

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