

The following article was published in  
**SEN Magazine**  
*the UK's leading magazine for special educational needs*



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# Managing meltdown

In her second article about parenting a child with ADHD, **Alison Thompson** shares her top tips for coping with challenging behaviour

**C**oping with a child who has any special need that impairs his behaviour can be stressful, emotional and hard work. My son Daniel was diagnosed with ADHD when he was six, following a permanent exclusion from primary school. His behaviour was incredibly challenging at times. He found it impossible to focus or concentrate for more than a few minutes at a time – unless it was on his games console. He threw tantrums of epic proportions when he couldn't get his own way or was tired or frustrated. He could be aggressive and violent, lashing out at anyone or anything in his path. Yet when he was calm he was happy, caring, funny and a pleasure to be with. What we needed was a range of tools that would encourage his positive side and manage his more unwelcome behaviours. The following are some of the techniques we have found useful when dealing with the challenging behaviours we lived with every day.

## Routine

A firm routine is one of the most important things you can put in place to help your child. In my experience, kids with ADHD don't cope well with change and are at their best when they know what to expect, so having set times for daily activities is essential. Make a poster that outlines your daily routine: breakfast, getting washed and dressed, playtime, dinner time, bath time and so on. Use pictures if you need to. Talk your child through it so he understands what will happen and when, and then stick to it as far as possible.

## Consistency

You need to be as consistent as possible in managing your child's behaviour. Set the rules, make sure your child knows what kind of behaviour is and isn't acceptable and be consistent. Don't punish a behaviour one day and let it go the next, as your child will just become confused. You might find it useful to list the unacceptable behaviours on a poster on the wall. If you give consequences for bad behaviour then make sure you are prepared to enforce them – and enforce them quickly. A child with ADHD will not remember what they did wrong if the punishment doesn't happen till later, or the next day.

## Reverse reward charts

If you find that traditional sticker-type reward charts don't work with your child, try the reverse method. Fill a jar with objects – we used glass beads but they could be anything really – and every

*Don't punish a behaviour one day and let it go the next*

time your child misbehaves or breaks the rules take an object out of the jar. At the end of the day or week convert any objects left into pocket money or small treats. Somehow, being able to see the starting total and watch it decrease seems to be more effective than trying to add to a chart.

## Ignoring silly behaviours

Many ADHD behaviours are annoying more than anything else and the best way to deal with them is often to ignore them completely. If you ignore things like talking in a silly voice, walking in circles and banging toys together, you may find that your child will lose interest and stop more quickly.



Being left on his own can help the child to calm down, but make sure the location is safe.



Children with ADHD can prove inflexible when changing activities.

### Giving praise

Giving praise has so many benefits. Apart from helping children's self-esteem, it shows them the difference between good and bad behaviour, helps to set boundaries and rules and reinforces the behaviours that you do want to see. Praise your child for everything that goes right, however small. Be specific with your praise – don't just say "Well done" or "That was good"; point out exactly what it was that went well. When your child misbehaves, always make it clear that it is the behaviour you are angry or disappointed about, not the child.

### The distraction method

When a child gets into a loop of disruptive or defiant behaviour, sometimes all it takes is something to distract them momentarily because that gives their brain the chance to switch from one pattern to another. Try changing the subject completely, agreeing with the child, having a tantrum of your own (not recommended in the supermarket) or throwing something completely random into the conversation.

### Handling meltdowns

The best thing to do when a child has a meltdown is to leave him to calm down, because the more people try to

help, the more out of control and angry he is likely to get. Often just backing away and giving him space is enough to avoid a complete meltdown. However, it's not always possible to leave a child alone to calm himself, either because the location is not safe or there are other people around who could get hurt. In these cases, do whatever you can to remove your child to a place of safety or, if that's not possible, just try to keep people away as much as you can. Better still, learn the signs that your child is heading for a meltdown and try to deflect it. Find some way of changing what's going on to see if you can avoid an explosion. It doesn't always work, but distraction can be very effective in the right circumstances.

### Dealing with inflexibility

Children with ADHD often find it difficult to go from one activity to another and this can cause meltdowns. Giving them a countdown can make a huge difference to how they manage change. For example, when you arrive at the park tell your child that you will be there for an hour, then remind him you'll be leaving in 30 minutes, fifteen minutes, ten, five and so on. This way, your child will have time to switch their brain from one activity to another and will be more willing to cooperate.

### Choosing your battles

When you have a child with ADHD, it can seem that your entire day is spent reprimanding him. If you punished your child for every single bit of bad behaviour, he would probably spend most of his life in time out. I've learned to pick my battles carefully. For example, while I've never been happy with my son using bad language at home, it is the lesser of many evils compared to some of the other behaviours he's shown. Focus on the behaviours that are the most worrying and work on those first. Taking on too much at once will just weaken your resolve and have slower

*Learn the signs that your child is heading for a meltdown and try to deflect it*

results. I've learned that it's best to ignore some things, in some situations; my son knows that while he can get away with some things at home, they're not acceptable in other settings.

Dealing with challenging behaviour is never easy but having a variety of techniques and tools at your disposal does make a difference. Try to understand that there is nearly always a reason why your child is behaving badly; you may not be able to see the trigger or understand how important it is to them but just knowing there is one helps. Once you begin to understand that your child isn't misbehaving deliberately but is responding to something that's upset him – however silly that thing might be – it's easier to deal with. Each day is a new one, so don't linger on your child's past behaviour. **SEN**

**In the next issue of SEN Magazine, Alison looks at how Daniel coped with mainstream schooling, the drawbacks of home tutoring and his success at special school**

### Further information

Alison Thompson is the author of *The Boy From Hell: Life with a Child with ADHD*:  
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