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## After-school restraint collapse is a real thing— here's how to deal with it

There's a reason your kid is an angel at school or daycare but a hot mess at home. It's called after-school restraint collapse. Here's how to deal with it.



BY COLLEEN SETO | SEP 4, 2019



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When Parker Kraychy started **grade one**, his mom, Kristi Kraychy, heard nothing but positive reviews about his behaviour. He was a total angel, said his teacher; he worked hard and listened well. Naturally, Kraychy was pleased—but she could hardly believe it. That's because Parker was routinely a hot mess at home after school. Angry, yelling meltdowns were an almost-daily occurrence for months.

If this sounds familiar, it's because it's a real phenomenon. After a long day at school or daycare, many kids totally lose it when their parent picks them up or when they get home. There's even a name for it: **after-school restraint collapse**.

It happens, says Andrea Loewen Nair, the London, Ont.-based counsellor and parenting educator who coined the term, because kids hold it together all day and only release their **true emotions** when they get to a safe place. Some kids become weepy, while others scream, throw things and become generally unreasonable. Older kids might act rude and disrespectful, hurling insults at you and their siblings.

Some children are more susceptible to after-school restraint collapse than others. "More sensitive and intense kids, and kids struggling with learning and social skills, will be more likely to be affected," says Vanessa Lapointe, a parenting educator and registered psychologist in Surrey, BC. "More chill kids can have their days too if it was a particularly challenging day, or they are extra tired or getting sick." It can last all school year but is more common in the first few months, and Lapointe says it tends to subside as kids fully adjust to the change in environment and schedule, and feel less physically and emotionally spent at the end of the day.

### Why after-school restraint collapse happens

At school, "Kids do what they need to in order to 'be good' or keep the peace," says Nair, who is also head of London, Ont.-based Infinity School. "After they've done that all day, they get to the point where they just don't have the energy to keep this restraint, and it feels like a big bubble that needs to burst."

Managing the challenges that happen at school wipes kids out, says Lapointe. “Kids have to hold it together all day long at school. There are all sorts of expectations, disappointments and challenges to manage, and all of this without your loving presence nearby. It can be exhausting.”

Lapointe adds that some kids melt down simply because they are tired or over stimulated, particularly if they’re making the transition to **full school days**. That was the case with Kraychy’s daughter, Rylie, who started kindergarten when Parker started grade one. She’d come home super tired, and would cry and hide in her room if she was asked to do something. “Her meltdowns were clearly linked to fatigue and less of an emotional breakdown,” says Kraychy. “If I didn’t ask her to do too much, didn’t tease her and stuck to a simple routine with a healthy snack and kindness, she was okay.”

But the after-school restraint collapse meltdown is often about more than just fatigue, thanks to something psychologists call defensive detachment. “Your child really needed you, and you weren’t there,” explains Lapointe. “Now you’re there, but the initial flood of relief is quickly subsumed by a tidal wave of defensive detaching—they’re angry and push you away. It’s like when a parent and child reunite after the child has gone missing in a grocery store. The parent will have a few seconds of clutching relief as they hug their child and then bam! Defensive detachment kicks in with anger as they admonish their now-found child.”

As a teacher herself, Kraychy wasn’t surprised by her children’s behaviour—but she wasn’t prepared for Parker’s daily tornado of emotion, either. “I understood what was happening,” she says. “The ‘good kids’ at school use a lot of energy being well-behaved and navigating the complexities of social behaviour. They wait until they’re safe at home to unleash all the pent-up emotions with someone they trust and love. Even knowing this, it was hard to deal with every day.”

It’s important to note that these outbursts are not **tantrums** where your child is testing boundaries or trying to get their way. The after-school restraint collapse is exactly that—a collapse, or meltdown, because your child is so emotionally overwhelmed that they can no longer keep it together.

## How to handle it in the moment

You’re home and your kid is freaking out. What next? Make lots of room for the blow-out and validate your kid’s emotions, says Lapointe. “As they shout, throw and generally lose it, just go alongside and say, ‘It was a long day, wasn’t it?’ or ‘I’ve got you,’” she says. That’s obviously not easy when you’re managing more than one kid, and if you’re also trying to get a snack or dinner prepared, but try to find a way.

Kraychy would let Parker release his energy and emotions however he needed so long as he wasn’t hurting himself or others. Still, letting the meltdown happen can feel like a Herculean task. “Try not to get triggered by it or take it personally,” says Kraychy (who acknowledges how hard that is to do when insults are being flung at your face).

Nair recommends trying to find a way for your kid to decompress at the end of the day, whether it’s **riding a bike**, a tickle fight, telling jokes, listening to music or simply doing nothing. This daily decompression activity can become a ritual, and help both you and your child make your way through the intense emotions. “We humans love our routines,” says Lapointe. “We love the safety of having a script for exactly how things are going to go. These kinds of scripts provide a boatload of safety during an emotional storm.” What about screen time as a decompression method? Lapointe says it’s OK as a last resort if it seems to work for your kids—as long as you fill them up with some human connection first.

## Can after-school restraint collapse be prevented?

Thankfully, there are ways to mitigate this after-school agony. Nair recommends getting in the habit of reconnecting positively when you see your kids after school. “Greet your child with a smile and a hug instead of questions about homework.”

She also suggests giving your child some time and space after pick up. “If you’re driving, put on the radio and stay quiet. If you are walking, say little or just comment on the nice little things you notice,” she says. “This isn’t the time for big conversations.” She learned through her personal experience with her son’s restraint collapse to steer away from play dates or scheduled activities right after school so that he could have time to regroup.

Like any of us, kids are often more irritable when they’re hungry and tired. So it’s a good idea to just go ahead and feed your kids rather than asking if they are hungry. It’s a safe bet they need **replenishment after school**, so set out water and healthy snacks like veggies, fruit and cheese. If your kid is in daycare or after-school care where snacks are served, don’t assume they can’t possibly be hungry.

Above all, both Lapointe and Nair emphasize staying connected during the day. “Send yourself to school with them,” says Lapointe. “Write notes for their lunch box. Fill their hands full of kisses. Keep a picture of you and them together in their backpack.” If your kids feel like you’re with them, supporting them through the day, they’re less likely to feel vulnerable, and later, angry with you for not physically being there.

Try to fill them up with your attention before school, too. “Give your child more of you in the mornings before school,” says Lapointe. “Set your alarm 15 minutes earlier and use that extra time to snuggle in a rocking chair or read a story. Just do something together full of the spirit of connection and care.”

## The meltdown aftermath

You could easily substitute school for work in after-work restraint collapse when you think about how many of us have come home from an exhausting day of work and freaked out at our partners or children for no apparent reason. In fact, some adults don’t seem to ever shake the after-work jerk syndrome.

So don’t be disappointed, if, despite all your efforts, after-school meltdowns still sometimes occur. “In most cases, if the meltdown still happens, it needed to happen,” says Lapointe. Talking about it afterwards may not make much of a preventative difference, but kids can often feel badly about their outbursts so it’s important to reassure them that it’s okay.

Wait for your kid to completely **calm down**, says Lapointe. “You want to close the loop so they know you love them no matter what, and plant the seed of ability for next time. You can say, ‘I love all the parts of you—even the meltdown part! The next time you feel like you’re going to blow up, take a deep breath. Tell me with your words what’s up.’” Let them know they are loved and move on. Don’t dwell on the meltdown behaviour. If you want to know if anything precipitated a meltdown, Nair advises waiting for your child to come to you. “Give your child the lead to start talking when he or she is ready. When that happens, you can inquire about any emotionally intense moments that may have happened during that day.”

“Let your kids know that home is their safe zone, and help them learn how to communicate their frustrations,” adds Kraychy. After the heat of the moment passes, she helps Parker identify his feelings so they can talk about what made him feel so upset. Then they come up with ways to cope and help him from feeling so overwhelmed. After some investigation, she discovered that Parker has such high expectations of himself at school that if he thought anything was less than perfect during the day, it was almost traumatic for him—but he’d hold in that devastation until he got home. To manage this, they came up with an interesting strategy. “We actually encouraged Parker to see if he could make a mistake at school to show him the world didn’t end if he wasn’t perfect at school—that it’s okay not to be perfect.”

It all comes down to your kids feeling safe and supported, particularly when they’re vulnerable and you can’t be with them. Lapointe says to stay connected, and keep them brimming with “messages of enduring, no-matter-what, love and acceptance.”