Even with the best preparation and antecedent management strategies (as discussed in a previous information sheet) meltdowns/tantrums are going to happen. While stressful for both the child and the adult, these meltdowns/tantrums can actually be educational for the child. If managed correctly, they allow the child to develop his/her coping skills to calm him/herself down as well as learn more appropriate behaviors to get his/her needs met.

One way to understand meltdowns/tantrums is to divide them into stages. These stages are the Rumbling Stage, Rage Stage, and Recovery Stage (Myles & Southwick, 2005). These stages, as illustrated below, can last varying amounts of time, from seconds to hours. Interventions will differ depending on what stage the child is in.

**Rumbling Stage**
This stage looks different for each child. Some children may begin engaging in more verbal or physical stims, increase his/her tone of voice, become more fidgety, or become socially withdraw. During this stage there is the opportunity to intervene and prevent the child from progressing to the Rage Stage. This is the time to ensure that the antecedent management strategies are being implemented and to implement some other, more immediate interventions. It is important that the adult remains calm and uses limited words (as it can become more overwhelming for the child).

- *Increasing proximity to the child*
  - Moving closer to the child or a light physical gesture like putting your hand on the shoulder can help him/her refocus
- *Redirecting and prompting communication*
  - Suggesting a different activity
  - Prompting him/her to use words (pictures or signing)
- *Referring him/her back to the picture schedule*
  - Helpful if the child is becoming upset over wanting to do something different
- *Allowing him/her to go for a walk*
  - Asking him/her to be a “helper” and bring a note to the office
- *Teaching a signal the child can use to communicate his/her needs*
  - Using an “I need a break card,” or a predetermined gesture such as the time-out sign
Rage Stage
This stage is where the child has escalated to more severe behaviors. The child typically engages in destructive, aggressive, and self-injurious behaviors; throwing and breaking things, hitting, kicking, biting others and self, and head-banging. During this stage the child is completely out of control and these behaviors are not done willfully or maliciously. The most important thing to keep in mind is this is NOT the time to try and talk to or reason with the child (just think about when you are really upset, does someone talking to you make you feel better or worse?). Once this stage begins it needs to run its course and the adults focus should be on maintaining everyone's safety.

This is the time to remain quiet, manage the environment, and ensure that everyone is safe without giving the child attention. Managing the environment (without talking or interacting) may mean

- Moving objects away from the child so they cannot be thrown at others
- Walking the child to a less stimulating environment
- Putting a mat or pillow under the child’s head if he/she is head-banging
- Blocking the door by standing between the door and the child

While ensuring everyone’s safety, you can then "ride out" the tantrum. At this point, you have to allow the child to calm down independently (with you being there to ensure everyone's safety but not giving any attention). While it may appear counter intuitive, the more attention you give to the child during this stage (talking, trying to redirect, prompting, threatening consequences) the longer the stage will last and the more intense the behaviors will become.

Recovery Stage
As the child is calming down from the Rage Stage, you will start to see changes in his/her behaviors. These changes may look like the child becoming quiet, beginning to talk and apologize, laying on the floor quietly, or beginning to clean up. This is not the time to scold the child for his/her previous behaviors (or even discuss them), but rather this is the time to support him/her and praise him/her for cleaning up, calming down, and resuming his/her previous activities. It is important to provide a lot of positive attention for the positive behaviors.

Once the tantrum is over and regular activities have been resumed (or later on that day), the sequence of events can then be processed (by both the adults and child if the child is cognitively able) to determine what triggered the tantrum and if there are antecedent strategies that can be put into place to prevent it from occurring again.

References

This resource is provided for informational purposes only. Information should not be used as a substitute for professional assessment and judgment.