

AFTER-SCHOOL RESTRAINT COLLAPSE

Why does your star-student child turn into a screaming banshee at the ring of the home-time bell? Camilla Rankin finds out

ALARM BELLS STARTED ringing for mom of two Kirsty Asad, when her daughter Ameena (then seven years old) fell apart after school. Every. Day.

"She would cry, scream, shout, hit out aggressively or just completely ignore me and run to her bedroom – she just couldn't handle anymore instructions or expectations," Kirsty recalls. "This behaviour would last for two to three hours every single school-day afternoon. I was concerned that she might be behaving like this at school too."

But, says Kirsty, when she talked to her teacher, she was surprised to learn that Ameena was a "star" pupil.

"She was said to be always helping, always caring for others and always working really hard. No signs of any

behaviour problems at all. So, I just blamed myself – maybe I had somehow raised her differently to her sibling or she was picking up on my own stress," she says. Sound familiar? After-school meltdowns are more common than you think, and no, it is not your fault. It is a real phenomenon with a real name – after-school restraint collapse.

These almost never happen during school hours. They only surface when your child gets into the car or walks around the corner from daycare. Some children become weepy, others start to yell angrily, throw bags, books and toys around, pick fights or become unbearably rude and unreasonable.

Homework? Soccer practice? Playdates? Ha! Not a chance.

A CASE OF UNMET NEEDS

Lizzie Sartain is an educator with a special focus on special needs and disabilities and explains that all meltdowns are an "inability to express feelings in a socially acceptable way".

"They are your child's way of saying 'please help me' – and those after-school tantrums are no different.

"There is an unmet need there; something during their school day is too difficult," she explains. And, she adds, the key is to work out what that need is – physical, emotional, neurological or educational – and meet it before it surfaces. "It is too late during the tantrum," she adds.

For many children, falling apart after school is simply a case of hunger

or tiredness. This is especially true at the beginning of the school year, for children starting school or moving into "big school" for the first time, or for those starting at new schools – your child needs time to adjust to the new environment, expectations and longer schedules. Lizzie says she was able to ward off after-school tantrums in her girls by simply having a sandwich and drink ready for them when she collected them.

"For the first couple of weeks or months of big school, try cutting out all extra-murals and playdates for at least the first term, to give your child a chance to adjust to the demands of 'big (or new) school,'" she says.

Also make sure that your child is getting enough quality sleep by instigating a regular bedtime and cutting out any screentime for at least an hour before lights out.

She says it should take a couple of weeks to settle into the new routine, and then the tantrums usually subside.

In true after-school restraint collapse, however, the unmet need can be either emotional, neurological or educational (or a mixture), and these can be trickier to work out.

EMOTIONALLY SPEAKING

After physical needs, an unmet emotional need is the most common cause of these meltdowns.

Canadian psychologist Vanessa LaPointe explains it like this: "Children work very hard to manage all that is expected of them at school. Their day is full of excitement, disappointments and challenges (social, sensory and academic), and they negotiate all these experiences without your help nearby – it can be overwhelming."

Vanessa says the feeling of anger that bubbles up in your child is called "defensive detachment".

"Your child really needed you, and you weren't there, and when, at the end of school, you are there, they let you have it!

"The initial flood of relief that you are now there is quickly taken over by a surge of defensive detaching – they're angry and push you away," Vanessa explains. "It's like when a parent and child reunite after the child had gone missing in the supermarket. The parent will have a few seconds of clutching relief before the anger takes over and the parent scolds their found-again child."

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MAKE A CONNECTION

Helping your child manage these conflicting feelings starts by making a real connection with them as soon as you greet them.

Put your phone away, and try avoiding being in conversation with the other parents at that moment. Use eye contact, a smile, a deep hug or a kiss on the cheek.

You could also say something positive: "I am so happy to see you", or if your child is already in meltdown mode, say something like: "It's all going to be okay." Then give your child the time and space to reset by walking or riding home, having a tickle fight, wrestling, a jump on the trampoline, telling jokes, listening to music or simply doing nothing – without bombarding them with "how was your day?" questions. Using laughter to blow off steam is as effective as tears are.

Avoid the temptation to use screen time as a way of decompressing. Research has shown that for most children, gaming and TV have the opposite effect: it heightens agitation and pent-up emotions.

For Kirsty, giving Ameena a snack and a cuddle when she came home, and then time to play alone before asking her to do anything like homework or chores really made a difference. "We also eventually sought the help of a counsellor, who helped Ameena learn to express herself and to give us coping strategies at home," Kirsty says.

Another great tip is to include little

notes in your child's lunchbox, leaving a photo of the two of you in the school bag, or to wake up a little earlier in the morning and spend the extra 15 minutes cuddling, or reading a book together. This way your child will feel more connected to you during the school day.

NEUROLOGICAL OR EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Some children are more prone to after-school restraint collapse than others, and in some cases, these tantrums can be a sign that something more complicated is going on for your child at school.

For some it could be a sign of a latent educational need, such as a learning disorder, dyslexia or processing issue. For others it can be a symptom of an autism spectrum condition or a sensory processing disorder – or even bullying. The feelings of frustration and fear from trying to cope and retain self-control build throughout the school day and are then released in a blowout when they feel safe again, with you, at home.

Lizzie says: "It is really important to talk to the school early, and often – make them believe you when you say your child is acting up at home, so that you can begin to understand what your child's specific needs are and work with the school to meet them."

LOOKING AT IT A LITTLE DIFFERENTLY

The Canadian-based counsellor Andrea Loewen Nair, who came up with the name "after-school restraint collapse", explains that children experiencing these tantrums are like little pressure cookers holding it together all day at school and only release their true emotions when they get to a safe place: home with you.

"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," she explains.

As hard as it is to be facing these flames, Lizzie explains that these children are actually paying you a huge compliment – they are completely secure in their relationship with you, and "often, the most disturbed children don't behave this way," she says. "Remember, you are not a bad parent; your child is not a bad child. We are all individuals, and we all deal with and express things differently – there is no right or wrong. Get some help to find what works for you and your child. **YB**