

The After School Restraint Collapse

Picture the scene: your child comes out of school and the teacher says they've behaved like the perfect child all day, but the moment you get home they have a complete meltdown. Is this scene familiar to you?! Then you are not alone! This behaviour is what some psychologists refer to as 'after-school restraint collapse' and it is not unusual.

Why does it happen?

It happens because your child has been busy managing their emotions all day as they navigate the complexities of school life. When they get home, that's their safe space to let it all out!

As adults, we do this too – conform to social norms & constraints in the workplace, whilst navigating the day's activities. It is only when we get home, in an environment where we feel completely safe, that we let this restraint go. Unlike us, children are still learning to navigate their emotions and can find this transition extremely difficult.

Who does it affect?

Some children may be more susceptible than others – perhaps those who are more sensitive, or more intense by nature. Or those who may find developing learning & social skills more challenging. A particularly challenging day, extra tiredness or illness can also impact how children feel and act.

How can I support at home?

There are a number of strategies that you can use to support your child navigate their emotions:

Decompression time

What does your child need? To let off energy at the park? A healthy snack? Quiet alone time? Try different things and see what helps. Ask your child. It is really important to have this downtime – even on days when your child may have a club

or homework to do. Watching TV, colouring, listening to music.....ask them what will help and what they would like.

Connect with your child. *Not* by asking, “How was your day? What have you done?” We may be eager to find out, but this may not be what your child needs right now. Converse with genuine emotional connection. “I’m really pleased to see you. I love spending time together before the others get home!”

Listen to them and help them feel heard

Validate how they are feeling rather than trying to control it. “I can see you are angry right now, you must have had a tiring day,” or “I can see you kicking the bin and that’s making me think you are angry right now. I’d really like to help. Shall we have a hot chocolate together?”

Help them build their emotional vocabulary, then they can learn to share what they are feeling. If they do share information about their day, listen in a non-judgmental way. Summarise what they have said, to show you understand. Really connect with what they are feeling, “That sounds like it was really hard. I would have felt that way too.” Listen to understand; not fix. Connecting in this way, is a powerful tool in helping a child make sense of their emotions in order to let go.

Build in time for connection

It could be snuggling in bed, reading a book, having a snack together. Such connection, especially when part of a routine is comforting and calming to children. When children find it hard to leave a parent in the morning, building in time for connection before school can help. This fills up their emotional reserves and helps them feel strongly attached and secure throughout the day.

Roll with it

This doesn’t mean accepting disrespect, but it does mean understanding and validating your child’s feelings and working with them to co-regulate or giving them the space they need in order to regulate for themselves. Addressing the fact they have been impolite will not help or be effective in the moment. Pick your battles and if deemed important – return to it later once your child is calm and they have had time to decompress.