

WHY IS MY CHILD SO EASILY OVERWHELMED — AND WHAT CAN I DO?

Family
Support
Newsletter

Your child falls apart over the tiniest things - the wrong colour cup, a label in their shirt, a sudden change of plan. They get “stuck” on something that seems small to you, like not being able to find the blue sock or wanting the cereal poured exactly right. One minute they’re laughing and playing, and the next they’re in tears because their sibling looked at them or you asked them to put their shoes on. It feels like their mood flips without any warning at all! If this is your child, you are not alone - many children experience the world more intensely than adults realise. Let us explore why it happens and what you can do to help.

WHY SOME CHILDREN GET OVERWHELMED MORE EASILY



- 1** Sensory overload: childrens’ nervous systems are more sensitive to sensory input. As a result, everyday experiences, such as a busy classroom or the texture of a jumper, can feel like too much. Their brain is working hard to filter, sort, and make sense of all this input that even a smallest extra demand can tip them over the edge causing an immediate overwhelm response.
- 2** Emotional overload: children often feel emotions more intensely than adults expect. For children, emotions can rise faster than their ability to regulate and communicate, often resulting in overwhelm. This is particularly true when children can’t express big feelings with words.

WHY SOME CHILDREN GET OVERWHELMED MORE EASILY



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Cognitive load and executive functioning challenges: when the brain is juggling too much at once, it can run out of capacity. Especially if the child has executive functioning challenges and struggles with planning, organising, shifting attention. They will often struggle with multi-step instructions, fast-paced environments, tasks that require lots of working memory... resulting in overwhelm and meltdowns.

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Social pressure: social situations can be exhausting - reading social cues, sharing, turn-taking, group work, navigating friendships, fear of judgement... And children navigate these all the time. Even positive social events can drain a child's capacity leading them to experience overwhelm.

5

Anxiety and intolerance of uncertainty: anxious children often live in a state of "what if...?" They worry about change, fear of making mistakes, anticipatory anxiety, feeling unsafe or unsure... Anxiety shrinks their tolerance for everyday demands and increases chances for them to feel overwhelmed.

6

Fatigue, hunger, thirst and physical discomfort: basic needs, such as hunger dips, dehydration, illness, pain, can greatly affect child's capacity for coping pushing them into overwhelm.

7

Too many demands, too little time: a fast-paced day can overwhelm even the most resilient child: rushed mornings, packed schedules, constant transitions, high expectations. Children need processing time; without it, overwhelm builds

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Trauma or chronic stress: children who have experienced stress or trauma may have a more sensitive stress response. They experience hypervigilance, difficulty calming, strong reactions to small triggers. Their nervous system is primed to protect, not to stay calm which often looks like overwhelm.



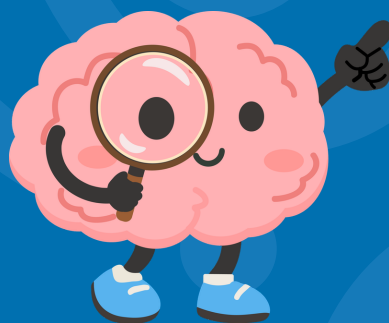
MOVE MORE
EVERY CHILD THRIVES

Neurodivergent children are also more likely to experience overwhelm because their brains often process the world with greater intensity. Many have heightened sensory sensitivities. Their executive functioning systems also tend to work harder to manage transitions, uncertainty, problem-solving, and shifting attention. All of these drain their capacity more quickly. Social situations can add another layer of cognitive (over)load - reading cues, navigating expectations, masking, or coping with unpredictability all take energy. When you combine sensory input, emotional intensity, and the constant effort of adapting to environments not designed for their neurotype, their “capacity cup” fills slower and empties faster. Overwhelm isn’t a sign of weakness or misbehaviour. It is a sign that their nervous system is working overtime to cope with a world that feels bigger, louder, and more demanding than it does for others.

WHAT OVERWHELM LOOKS LIKE (SO ADULTS CAN SPOT IT EARLY)

Keep an eye on these as they are some early signals that your child’s body is saying “I am running out of capacity.” Once you spot them, you need to act quickly.

- Sudden irritability
- Refusal or avoidance
- Clinginess
- “I can’t” or “No!”
- Hyperactivity or restlessness
- Going quiet or shutting down
- Complaints about clothes/noise/people



OVERWHELM IS CONTEXTUAL, NOT RANDOM

This means that there are usually triggers for your child’s overwhelm. Your job is to identify these triggers and spot patterns. Here are some most common times when overwhelm is likely to happen: during transitions (leaving the house, stopping a preferred activity), when plans change and require the child to .



change gears quickly, when there are too many instructions given at once, in busy, noisy environments. Overwhelm is also sometimes happen after school. This is because the child . uses all of their capacity to cope at school and arrives home with an empty fuel tank.

WHAT ADULTS CAN DO TODAY

When a child is overwhelmed, it's rarely "just behaviour" because overwhelm is a physiological response, not a behaviour choice. Most commonly, it is a capacity issue. This is because some children use more energy to stay regulated, leaving less for flexibility, listening, or coping. This capacity issue builds across the day especially if there were no "refuelling" opportunities.

When faced with an overwhelmed child try to:

- Reduce demands as soon as you see early signs: "Let's pause for a moment".
- Use sensory regulation first (deep pressure, movement, quiet space). For example, 20 sec of deep pressure (strong hugs), 20 sec of slow breathing together and 20 sec of grounding (Name 5 things you can see...)
- Give one clear instruction at a time: "Let's just focus on one thing at the time. We are just putting shoes on now, nothing else."
- Offer choices to restore control: "Do you want to brush your teeth or get dressed first? You choose."
- Use visual cues to reduce verbal load: "Let's point to the next step together so our brains don't have to remember it all."
- Slow the pace - transitions need time: "Let's take this slowly. When your body feels settled, we'll move to the next step."
- Narrate safety: "I know it is hard. And I am here. You're safe."



If you notice patterns in your child's overwhelm, think about those situations from their needs point of view: is it down to sensory, cognitive, social, physical overload or something else? Make a plan how you can meet those needs and lessen the overload. Try and persist and change the plan if/when necessary.



WHERE TO FIND SUPPORT

Overwhelm is common. It's not caused by "bad behaviour." You're not doing anything wrong - your child's nervous system just needs support. However, if you need any help with making this work for your family, please do reach out to our Family Support team on marijana@move-more.org or jen@move-more.org. We are more than happy to help you.

Both Jen and Marijana can help you with all aspects of parenting, including managing your child's worries, anger, tantrums and meltdowns, low self-esteem, morning and evening routines, starting/moving school, parental separation, fussy eating, sleep issues, toileting...



USEFUL LINKS



You can also have a look at these resources for further information and ideas:

- Child Mind Institute – Anxiety & Overload
<https://childmind.org/topics/concerns/anxiety/>
- Free Printable Calm-Down Cards (OT Toolbox)
<https://www.theottoolbox.com/category/self-regulation/>
- GoZen! – Free Articles on Anxiety & Overwhelm
<https://gozen.com/blog/>
- NHS Every Mind Matters – Children's Mental Health
<https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/supporting-others/childrens-mental-health/>
- Ambitious About Autism – Sensory Overload
Sensory overload | [What it is and how to support](#)
- National Autistic Society – Meltdowns & Shutdowns
<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/meltdowns>
- The Whole School Psych
[How to Manage Feeling Overwhelmed with ADHD Brain](#)

MOVE MORE FAMILY SUPPORT

Our Family Support provides a confidential, quality service for families seeking clear insight, practical strategies and a calmer, connected home life.

Modern family life is demanding, especially for parents balancing work with the needs of children. Move-More has supported families for years through our trusted school-based services, and we now offer a selection of services for those who want even more focused, personalised support.



Our family support specialists

- Trauma and neuroscience informed ✓
- Extensive professional & lived experience supporting children and families with ✓
- SEND -
- Adverse Childhood Experiences -
- Trauma -

WE OFFER...



1:1 PARENT CONSULTATIONS

Work privately with a member of our team to focus on specific issues and develop a strategic plan you can implement straight away. Each bespoke session builds your confidence, strengthens your parenting toolkit and supports a happier family life.

All consultations currently take place online or by phone.

OPTIONS:

- Free 30-minute call – We listen, assess your needs and recommend next steps.
- Pay-as-you-go (£60/hr) – A 1-hour consultation to explore concerns, problem-solve and plan next steps.
- Thrive Bundle (£500) – Six 1-hour consultations over 12 weeks for ongoing support and sustained change.

SENSORY PROFILES

Our Sensory Needs Practitioners create personalised, easy-to-understand sensory profiles based on parent/carer questionnaires. Each profile explains how your child processes sensory information across all eight systems, why certain behaviours appear, and what adjustments can help at home and school.

OPTIONS:

- Written sensory profile with adjustments – £75 per profile
- Profile + 1-hour consultation – £110



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