

# The Parent's Corner

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## AFTER-SCHOOL MELTDOWNS

September 2022 | By Katie McDonough, MSW, LCSW

A new school year is underway, meaning early mornings waking the kids for school, late nights spent on homework, and rushing around to after-school activities. While many of us head off to a long day of work, students spend eight hours at school, which to a child can feel like an eternity. Eight hours of being expected to mind their Ps and Qs -- to listen to teachers, be respectful, control emotions, stay on task, and retain information. Some students even attend before- or after-care (or both!) while parents are at work, totaling a potential 11- or 12-hour school day. I thought back on all the parents over the years who have brought concerns to me regarding complete meltdowns from their children when they return home from school. They throw tantrums, become clingy to parents, fight with siblings, or make messes. They are quick to become irritated or tearful. I've had parents say, "They are wonderful at school. They are on their best behavior, get all A's, get along with others. But once they get home, it's like they are a different kid!" Around the same time I was thinking about this, a fellow therapist sent me an article, and just like that, there was a name for these after-school episodes: restraint collapse.

Andrea Loewen Nair, a counselor and parent educator, writes that "It takes a great deal of energy, mental motivation, emotional containment, and physical restraint to keep ourselves at our best while at work, daycare, or school." She states that because we work so hard to control our impulses and adhere to school or work rules, this restraint quite literally "collapses" when we return home to a safe environment. Restraint collapse is thought to lessen as children get older (around 12) and gain more skills in their emotional toolbox. However, it is very common for even us, as adults, to feel the effects of restraint collapse every now and then. For kids, it may look like a loss of impulse control, or even regression to behaviors of younger children. Psychotherapist Nancy Brooks observed that children "will act younger than their age and whine, cry, throw tantrums, act needy, moody and generally have a meltdown." We may see it in ourselves too, with our after-work eating habits, being quick to snap back at a child pushing our buttons, or feeling totally drained and in need of a nap after a work day.

So, what do these experts suggest us to do? One of the most important steps is something you've already done - acknowledge what restraint collapse is. This will provide you with a greater sense of understanding when your child has these moments. Therapists also suggest giving your child a brain break when they get home. Rather than jumping right into homework, go to the park, let them jump on the trampoline or eat a snack. Of course, put boundaries on this, as I know letting your children "play one video game" will more often than not turn into 4 hours of video games, and that homework will be left untouched come bedtime. However, breaks are important, and anything active or outside will especially help as it boosts serotonin levels and provides an energy outlet. When they have their meltdown moments, listen to them. Respond with empathy and reminders that adults struggle with restraint collapse as well. Then provide them with calm-down strategies for these moments. And that also means, if we are empathizing with the children, we also have to give ourselves some grace. Don't beat yourself up about being more easily irritated after a long day at work; it's just restraint collapse, after all! :)

**As always, we are in your corner if you need extra support!**