

## Why Some Kids Fall Apart When They Get Home From School

By Amanda Morin

At a Glance

- It's common for kids to be upset or fall apart when they get home from school.

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- If it happens a lot, there may be challenges at school causing extra stress.

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- There are ways to help your child cope with overwhelming feelings at the end of the day.

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Picture this scenario: You send your child off to school happy and ready to start the day. Then after school, your child comes home grouchy and touchy—and falls apart. You reach out to the teacher to see if your child seemed on edge at school, too. But you find out your child was fine all day.

You wonder, *why does this happen?* What happened between the seemingly good day at school and what you're seeing at home? What's up with this daily bad mood? You may even wonder if it's something about *you* that makes your child come home from school so angry or upset.

Find out why kids may come home from an ordinary day at school and fall apart as soon as they walk in the door.

## What You Might Be Seeing

It's pretty common to send a cheerful child off to school—and then at the end of the day, that same child yells at you, whines, cries, or refuses to do anything you ask. And it's natural to feel confused or frustrated about it.

You may notice it as soon as you pick your child up from the bus stop or afterschool care. Eager to learn about your child's day, you ask a simple question, like "How was school today?" In return, your child snaps at you. "*Fine!*"

So, you try a little harder. "What did you do in math? Did you get a good book from the library?" But sometimes it seems like the harder you try, the grouchier your child becomes. You may get stony silence as an answer. Or a request to stop asking so many questions. Your child may burst into tears or even start throwing or hitting things.

These reactions can seem unexpected. They may feel very personal. After all, you're just trying to connect and express interest. But it's likely the outbursts have nothing to do with anything you did.

## What Can Cause Afterschool Outbursts

There are a lot of reasons why kids fall apart at the end of a school day. Going to school all day is tiring for many kids. For some, it's completely exhausting.

Think of how you feel at the end of a hard day at work. Chances are you don't *a/ways* feel good, even if you're trying your best. Maybe you had too many things to juggle and you forgot to do something. Or maybe you weren't able to take a break and recharge.

For some kids, school can feel the same way. They spend the whole day trying to sit still, focus, answer questions, and complete classwork. On top of that, there are rules, routines, and classroom expectations to keep in mind. And they have to try to get along with other students.

Like a hard day at work, all of that can be physically and mentally draining. Most of the time, adults have self-control and use coping skills to avoid taking it out on the people they come home to. Together, those skills are sometimes referred to as self-regulation.

Kids don't always have those skills yet. Many learn them just by watching other people model them. But some kids learn and think differently and don't pick up those skills as easily—they need to be taught ways to self-regulate.

Those same kids may also be more sensitive than others to all the demands of school. By the end of the day, they don't have any energy left to keep it together. They may not even know that they're overwhelmed or be able to explain that having to answer questions is going to push them over the edge.

This situation isn't all bad. It's actually good that kids who fall apart wait until they get home. It means that home is where they feel safe to express themselves. They trust that the people there will continue to love them and help them learn how to calm down no matter how badly they act.

# How to Manage Afterschool Outbursts

It's not easy to see your child get upset or angry, especially when you bear the brunt of it. It's hard for your child, too. It doesn't feel good to fall apart and not know how to get it together. It can be embarrassing to act out that way.

There are some simple things you can do to help your child cope with overwhelming feelings at the end of the day. Here are a few you can try.

**Double-check with the teacher.** Your child may not be falling apart in the classroom, but there may be things going on that are causing stress. It's OK to keep checking in with the teacher. Find out if your child is struggling in any areas, and make sure things are going well with friends and other students. You may want to specifically ask the teacher to look out for bullying or teasing. Sometimes if a child doesn't mention it to a teacher, bullying can go unnoticed.

**Offer an afterschool snack.** Some kids get "hangry," or cranky when they're hungry. Get ahead of that by making sure your child has a snack and a drink ready for afterschool. You can even pack it in your child's backpack for the trip home or to eat before afterschool activities.

**Sit with the silence.** Keep in mind how *you* feel about being peppered with questions at the end of a tough day. As much as you may want to know how the school day was, it can be better to leave the questions about school for later. Most kids need some time to chill out before talking about their day.

**Provide a friendly opening for conversation.** You don't have to ask questions to connect and let your child know you want more. You can just say, "I'm glad to see you!" or "It's good to be home with you. Let me know when you'd like to tell

me about your day.” That lets your child know you’re there and ready to listen at any time. It also reinforces that home is an emotionally safe place.

**Rethink the homework routine.** Going from a full day at school directly into homework can be hard, especially for kids who struggle with schoolwork. Try having a dedicated homework spot and time, but don’t forget to let your child just be a kid first. Reading, playing, or just doing nothing first can give your child a needed brain break to refresh and regroup.

**Find ways to help your child cope with outbursts.** You may not always be able to ward them off, but you can find better ways for both you and your child to cope. There’s a difference between a tantrum that kids can eventually get control of and a meltdown that’s beyond their control. Explore ideas for managing meltdowns and taming tantrums to create a plan that will work for your family. And learn more about the difference between tantrums and meltdowns.

Keep in mind, too, that you’re not the only family dealing with this. Consider talking to a friend or two and asking if they’ve experienced afterschool outbursts and what worked for them.

If you’re still seeing the same behavior even after making some changes, try using a frustration log to keep track of when and how your child gets upset. You may want to share what you’re seeing with your child’s pediatrician or the school. You can work together to get to the bottom of what’s happening and figure out next steps.

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## Key Takeaways

- School is physically and mentally draining for lots of kids.
  - They may not yet have coping skills to deal with frustration and feel safe to “let it out” at home.
  - Let your child know you’re there to listen and help find solutions.
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## About the Author



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