

The Coke Bottle Effect



Learning aims

- To identify things which cause dysregulation/meltdown
- To consider accommodations or adjustments which may help

What you will need

- 2 bottles of fizzy drink

Instructions

- 1 Demonstrate the 'coke bottle effect' by telling a story about a child's day, highlighting anything which is stressful/dysregulating for them. The story could be about your child or a fictional character. Invite your child to shake one of the bottles of fizzy drink every time you describe something stressful.

Example: "Suzie is woken up by a loud alarm clock; it gives her a shock. (SHAKE THE BOTTLE) 🍷
Suzie gets dressed; her clothes feel uncomfortable. (SHAKE THE BOTTLE) 🍷
Suzie starts something on her iPad, but is called downstairs for breakfast before she is able to finish it. (SHAKE THE BOTTLE) 🍷
During breakfast, the sound of other people eating really bothers her. (SHAKE THE BOTTLE) 🍷
When she arrives at school, Suzie discovers that she has been moved to a different table in the classroom." (SHAKE THE BOTTLE) 🍷



You could describe a typical day or could use this activity to plan ahead for a particular day (e.g. an event or holiday) and consider the potential stressors involved and accommodations which may help.

QUICK TIPS!

If you google 'coke bottle effect' you will find more examples.

- 2 When you feel the child in your story has experienced as much stress as they can contain, and the bottle has been well shaken, explain to your child that this amount of stress cannot just remain inside; it has to come out somehow. Demonstrate this by opening the coke bottle (please do so in a place where spillage won't be a problem!).
- 3 Explain that the coke bottle exploding represented the child having a meltdown, which was caused by the stress they encountered during the day. If your child feels guilty about having meltdowns, you could use this opportunity to address that guilt and offer reassurance. Likening it the bottle, when we experience a lot of stress/dysregulation, 'the lid has to come off sometime'.


- 4 Tell the story again, but this time your aim is to think about how you could make the day easier. You won't be able to remove every stress and challenge but can you reduce them? Use the second bottle of fizzy drink as you re-tell the story; whilst you may still need to shake it sometimes, your aim is to shake it significantly less.

Example: "Suzie is woken up by a loud alarm clock; it gives her a shock. What could help Suzie? She could be woken up more gently, by a different alarm or a family member. (NO NEED TO SHAKE THE BOTTLE)

Suzie gets dressed; her clothes feel uncomfortable. What could help Suzie? She could wear comfortable clothes. (NO NEED TO SHAKE THE BOTTLE)

Suzie starts something on her iPad, but is called downstairs for breakfast before she is able to finish it. What could help Suzie? She could be given the time to finish what she is doing, or at least get to a good place to end. (NO NEED TO SHAKE THE BOTTLE)

During breakfast, the sound of other people eating really bothers her. What could help Suzie? Background noise (e.g. music), noise cancelling headphones (or similar) or eating in another room could be helpful. (NO NEED TO SHAKE THE BOTTLE)

When she arrives at school, Suzie discovers that she has been moved to a different table in the classroom. What could help Suzie? It may be impossible to avoid all changes like this, but it could have helped Suzie if the teacher had talked to her about it first." (SHAKE THE BOTTLE BUT LESS THAN IN THE PREVIOUS STORY) 

- 5 When you reach the end of your story, open the second bottle. If you have managed to significantly reduce the stresses of the day, you should have a less dramatic result.
- 6 Discuss what a huge difference some relatively small changes can make. Encourage your child to talk to you (and other safe adults) about any changes or accommodations which may help them, now and in the future.

Therapeutic relevance

Much of the world we live in is designed for neurotypical people. The places we go, the expectations which adults have of children and even the rules which they make are often designed for neurotypical children.

This can make things very hard for autistic children.

It can cause overload, overwhelm and distress. It can lead to meltdowns. Historically the expectation has often been placed upon autistic individuals to 'develop resilience' and cope in unsuitable environments and with unreasonable expectations. Unsurprisingly this has contributed to poor mental health. It is important for children to know that they do not have to do this. They have a right to request accommodations. Indeed, under the Equality Act 2010, schools and other settings are required to make 'reasonable adjustments' so that all children have equal access to services provided.