

# Teachers at Bulukumba State Special Needs School 1's Strategies for Dealing with *Meltdowns* in Autistic Children Aged 5-8 Years

Hawa<sup>1</sup> , Ardillah<sup>2</sup> , Siti Nurhaliza<sup>3</sup> , Alfina<sup>4</sup> , Andi Nidha Eka Restuti Munawir<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Al-Gazali Islamic College, Bulukumba, [hawa060704@gmail.com](mailto:hawa060704@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Al-Gazali Islamic College, Bulukumba, [ardillahardillah6@gmail.com](mailto:ardillahardillah6@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup> Al-Gazali Islamic College, Bulukumba, [nsiti1342@gmail.com](mailto:nsiti1342@gmail.com)

<sup>4</sup> Affiliates of STAI Al-Gazali Bulukumba, [alfinadwy71@gmail.com](mailto:alfinadwy71@gmail.com)

<sup>5</sup> STAI Al-Gazali Bulukumba, [andinidhaeka@staialgazalibulukumba.ac.id](mailto:andinidhaeka@staialgazalibulukumba.ac.id)

**Abstract:** *Meltdown in children with autism refers to a condition in which the child loses emotional control due to sensory overload, changes in routine, or difficulty expressing needs. This phenomenon frequently occurs in special education settings, including at SLB Negeri 1 Bulukumba, particularly among children aged 5–8 years. This study aims to describe the strategies used by teachers to manage meltdowns and identify factors that influence their effectiveness. This research employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. The participants consisted of one classroom teacher selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis over two days (9–10 November 2024), and were analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive model. The findings reveal three main strategies: preventive strategies, including building*

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\*Correspondence: Hawa

Email: [hawa060704@gmail.com](mailto:hawa060704@gmail.com)

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*emotional rapport, adjusting learning activities to students' interests, and strengthening routines; intervention strategies, involving maintaining a calm atmosphere, reducing stimulation, and providing safe physical contact; and post-meltdown recovery strategies, including allowing emotional cooldown time, assigning light activities, and evaluating triggers to adjust individual learning plans. The effectiveness of these strategies is shaped by classroom conditions, overstimulation risks, available facilities, and communication with parents. This study highlights the importance of empathetic, flexible, and context-sensitive approaches in supporting emotional regulation for children with autism in special education settings.*

**Abstract:** *Meltdown in autistic children is a condition where the child loses emotional control due to sensory stress, changes in routine, or the inability to communicate needs. This phenomenon often occurs in learning in Special Needs Schools (SLB), including SLB Negeri 1 Bulukumba which handles autistic children aged 5–8 years. This study aims to describe teacher strategies in handling meltdowns and the factors that influence the effectiveness of their implementation. The study used a qualitative approach with a case study design. Informants consisted of one class teacher selected through a purposive sampling technique. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation over two days (November 9–10, 2024), then analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña approach. The results of the study showed three main strategies: a preventive strategy through building emotional relationships, adjusting interest-based learning, and reinforcing routines; an intervention strategy through a calming approach, reducing stimulation, and safe physical contact; and a recovery strategy through activity breaks, providing light tasks, and evaluating triggers for PPI adjustments. The effectiveness of the strategy was influenced by classroom conditions, potential overstimulation, availability of facilities, and communication with parents. These findings emphasize the importance of an empathetic, flexible, and contextual approach to supporting the emotional regulation of autistic children in special education settings.*

**Keywords:** *Autism; Meltdown; Teacher Strategies.*

**Keywords:** *Autism; Emotional Outbursts; Teacher Strategies .*

## Introduction

Meltdowns frequently *occur* in schools, including Special Needs Schools (SLB), where children with special needs receive educational services tailored to their needs. Teachers at SLBs play a crucial role in managing these situations to prevent disruptions to the learning process and children's well-being. In practice, managing *meltdowns* requires skill, empathy, and appropriate strategies, both preventatively and during the event (Yalim & Mohamed, 2023). They also emphasize that unsupportive social environments, disrupted routines, and difficult communication demands can exacerbate autistic children's tendency to experience tantrums. Therefore, understanding the emotional patterns and needs of autistic children is crucial so that parents and educators can provide a calm, consistent, and empathetic approach to help them stabilize their emotional responses (Cotescu et al., 2021).

*Meltdowns* in children with autism are generally characterized by behaviors such as loud crying, screaming, throwing objects, rolling on the floor, or even hitting themselves or others. Affitri & Irdamurni (2022) explain that these behaviors are a form of nonverbal communication in which autistic children express frustration, discomfort, or difficulty in conveying their desires and feelings through words.

The social conditions of children with special needs are not only determined by their limitations, but also by the extent to which society is able to create an inclusive and stereotype-free environment. Increasing social awareness and empathy is a key step in improving the quality of social relationships and the psychosocial well-being of children with special needs. Social conditions that are less inclusive and still filled with stereotypes not only impact the social interactions of children with special needs but can also affect their emotional stability (Wardiansyah et al., 2021).

Autism is a neurobiological developmental condition characterized by a number of specific characteristics resulting from differences in the nervous system, which impact an individual's growth, communication skills, and social interactions. Children with autism often exhibit less or poorer eye contact and impaired use of gestures and facial expressions; studies of 9-month-old infants have shown marked social-communication differences in those later diagnosed with ASD (Muna & Fatiya, 2024).

Emotional outbursts, or *meltdowns*, are one of the most common challenges faced by autistic children in the school environment. A study by Martínez et al. (2022) in children with ASD showed that impaired emotion regulation was uniquely associated with self-injury behavior, suggesting that when emotions are unmanaged, the risk of extreme behavior increases. These findings suggest that *meltdowns* not only impact a child's emotional stability but also disrupt the continuity of the teaching and learning process and require teachers to have sound pedagogical reasoning in determining their response. Therefore, research on how teachers handle *meltdowns* is crucial for strengthening educational practices for autistic children, particularly in early childhood settings.

Bulukumba 1 State Special School is one of the educational institutions that cares for children with autism in Bulukumba Regency, South Sulawesi. Based on initial observations and information from the school, *meltdowns* are quite common among autistic children aged 5–8 years. However, teachers' methods of managing and calming children in

these situations vary, depending on their experience and approach. This phenomenon is interesting to study in depth to understand the strategies teachers use in dealing with these situations. This phenomenon is important because each teacher has a different approach and experience in dealing with these situations, resulting in varying strategies.

In this context, this study focuses on identifying strategies used by teachers to handle *meltdown episodes* in autistic children aged 5–8 years at SLB Negeri 1 Bulukumba and examining the factors that influence their implementation. Specifically, this study aims to answer the core question of how teachers handle *meltdown episodes* in autistic children aged 5–8 years at SLB Negeri 1 Bulukumba.

Several previous studies have addressed the behavioral management of autistic children in schools. For example, research by Nurul Shalehah, Tri Suminar, and Diana Diana (2023) demonstrated that teachers use various strategies to improve the social skills of children with autism spectrum disorders in inclusive schools, including the implementation of specialized learning approaches, therapy, and social support (Shalehah et al., 2023). Another study by Zakyyatun Nufus and Hunainah (2025) highlighted that teacher strategies for increasing the independence of children with autism in special schools include individualized learning, the use of teaching aids such as games, and parental involvement as a key supporting factor (Nufus and Hunainah, 2025). However, research specifically highlighting teacher strategies at SLB Negeri 1 Bulukumba, particularly for children aged 5–8 years who experience *meltdown*, is still rare. Therefore, this study is expected to provide new insights into actual teacher practices in the local context.

However, these studies have not specifically addressed how teachers handle *meltdowns*, situations where autistic children experience a loss of emotional control due to high sensory or emotional stress. Therefore, this study is important because it specifically focuses on teacher strategies in handling *meltdowns* in autistic children aged 5–8 years, a topic that has not been widely researched, especially in the context of inclusive schools, specifically SLB Negeri 1 Bulukumba. Through a qualitative approach, this article seeks to describe teachers' actual practices in responding to children's emotional outbursts, from prevention strategies to direct handling in the classroom. This study is expected to provide new contributions to the understanding of effective, contextual, and needs-centered strategies for autistic children when experiencing *meltdowns*.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to both theoretical and practical applications. From a theoretical perspective, this study can add to the literature on pedagogical strategies used by teachers in assisting autistic children, particularly in special schools where in-depth research on meltdown management is limited. Practically, the findings of this study can serve as a reference for teachers, educational staff, and schools in developing more effective, adaptive, and empathetic approaches when dealing with autistic children experiencing emotional outbursts. With an understanding based on teachers' real-world experiences, this research is expected to make a tangible contribution to improving the quality of educational services for children with autism.

## Method

This research employed a qualitative method based on case studies. Qualitative methods allow researchers to understand an event more comprehensively by examining the experiences of informants and the real-world environment in which the phenomenon occurs. Qualitative research emphasizes that the researcher is the primary instrument, meaning the researcher plays a direct role in collecting data, interpreting meaning, and understanding the social dynamics that emerge in the field (Sugiyono, 2022). By using this approach, researchers were able to uncover in more depth the experiences of teachers, how they interpret situations, and the forms of management they apply when dealing with meltdowns in autistic children aged 5–8 years.

Case study research is a qualitative approach used to deeply understand a clearly defined case. Case studies require researchers to conduct in-depth exploration of a real-life case through various data collection techniques such as observation, interviews, and documentation to produce a comprehensive and contextual picture of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study uses a case study approach because the focus of the research is on a single school unit and teacher, as well as a specific and contextual phenomenon such as the unique "meltdown of autistic children." The case study approach is particularly appropriate when researchers want to answer "how" and "why" questions about intervention or management strategies in real-life situations (Yin, 2018). Because the research unit is limited (bounded system), the results of the case study are not intended to be generalized to the entire large population, but rather to fully understand the characteristics and processes within that specific case (Wohlin, 2021). Thus, the case study design supports the research objective of in-depth describing the actual practices of teachers in handling *meltdowns*, as well as the environmental conditions and individual dynamics of autistic children in the special needs school.

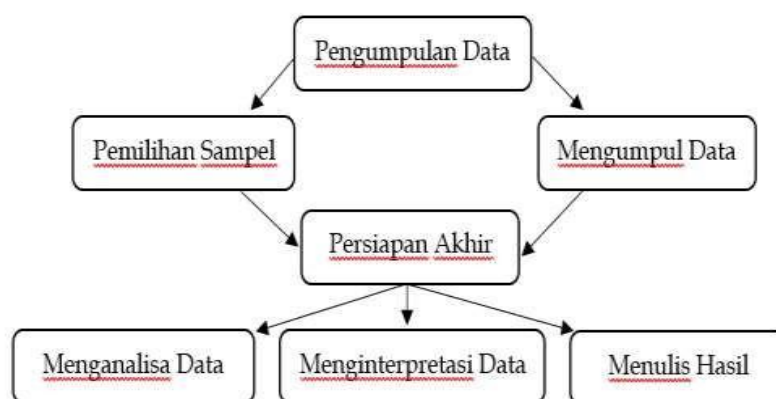


Figure 1. Research Design

This study employed *purposive sampling*, a deliberate selection of informants based on criteria deemed relevant to the research objectives and focus (Sugiyono, 2022). Purposive sampling allows for the selection of informants who are "most likely to yield appropriate and useful information" and ensures that important case types are included in the final sample, significantly increasing the rigor and trustworthiness of the data (Campbell et al., 2021). This approach allows researchers to access informants with

experience, knowledge, and direct involvement with the case (e.g., teachers, parents, or caregivers of autistic children), ensuring in-depth and contextual data collection.

Informants were selected because they had direct experience and competence in handling autistic children experiencing *meltdowns*. In this context, researchers visited SLB Negeri 1 Bulukumba directly and conducted interviews with teachers responsible for handling autistic children aged 5–8 years. The selection of these teachers was based on their intense involvement in the learning process and emotional support of children, so they were considered capable of providing rich, in-depth data that was appropriate to the research needs. In this study, participants consisted of one class teacher with one year of teaching experience who handled autistic children aged 5–8 years and was willing to be an informant. This teacher was selected because of her direct involvement in the learning process and support of children, so she was considered to meet the research inclusion criteria.

Research data was obtained through interviews, observations, and document reviews, all of which were used in a complementary manner. In-depth interviews were conducted directly with teachers who work with autistic children aged 5–8 years to explore their experiences, strategies, and considerations when dealing with *meltdowns*. Observation techniques were used to directly observe teacher interactions with children, teacher response patterns in certain situations, and classroom dynamics that can influence the emergence and decline of emotional outbursts. Additionally, documentation such as teacher diaries, individual learning programs (IPLs), and school data records were reviewed to strengthen the information obtained from the interviews and observations. The research activities were carried out in stages, starting with an initial observation on November 9, then continued on November 10 with in-depth interviews, follow-up classroom observations, and review of IPL documents to verify and enrich the data obtained from the field.

Data analysis was conducted following the interactive qualitative analysis approach of Miles et al., (2019), which includes data simplification, organizing findings into an easily readable format, and extracting meaning through repeated checking. In the data simplification stage, researchers coded to sort, summarize, and group information from interviews, observations, and documents into relevant categories. Data presentation was carried out by arranging the findings in the form of patterns, themes, or matrices to make it easier for researchers to see the relationships between categories. The final stage was drawing conclusions, which was carried out continuously through data re-verification to ensure that the conclusions produced were consistent and accountable.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, source triangulation (teachers, school documents) and technical triangulation (interviews, observations, documentation) were conducted. The researchers also conducted member checking by asking teachers to confirm the results of data interpretations, and maintained an audit trail through detailed recording of the data collection process, interview transcriptions, and field notes. Furthermore, this study adhered to ethical principles by obtaining official permission from the school, requesting informant approval, maintaining the confidentiality of informant identities, and storing research data securely.

This research is limited to a study of teacher strategies in handling *meltdown conditions* in autistic children aged 5–8 years at SLB Negeri 1 Bulukumba. The focus of the research is related to the *meltdown phenomenon*, the forms of responses they provide, as well as teachers' evaluations and expectations regarding the effectiveness of these strategies. In addition, the data used are sourced from interviews, observations, and documentation in the school environment, so that the research findings fully describe the specific context of SLB Negeri 1 Bulukumba and are not intended to be generalized to all other special schools. With this limitation, the research is expected to be able to provide a more focused, in-depth, and appropriate picture in accordance with the objectives of understanding the actual practices of teachers in handling *meltdowns* in autistic children in the school environment where the research took place.

## Results and Discussion

### a. *Meltdown phenomenon in autistic children aged 5–8 years*

The research results show that *meltdown* is understood as a condition when autistic children lose the ability to control their emotional responses due to stress they cannot manage, whether due to excessive sensory stimulation, changes in routine, or discomfort that is difficult for them to express verbally. The informant stated that " *Meltdown* is when a child becomes increasingly emotional, you could say their self-control is unstable. So many expressions are shown, such as anger, sadness, and screaming as if in pain." G1. In the classroom context, teachers view *meltdown* as an unintentional neurobiological reaction, so handling it requires a gentle approach and consideration of the child's individual needs. This understanding is in line with the study by Khoirunnisa & Nursalim (2021), which emphasized that emotional outbursts in autistic children are closely related to the inability to integrate sensations and environmental demands, resulting in behavior that appears overwhelming and difficult to control.

This understanding then shows that *meltdown triggers* vary and depend heavily on a child's emotional readiness. Based on initial field observations, some of the most common situations that trigger tension include fatigue during learning, sudden changes in the flow of activities, and transitions to mealtimes or going home, which can make children appear more sensitive. Although under stable conditions, children may participate well in activities, small stresses such as noise or demands to complete tasks when they are already bored can quickly escalate the situation into a spiral of uncontrollable tension.

Observations on November 9th showed that the child was actually able to participate in learning activities normally, but appeared anxious around mealtimes and often lost focus when reminded of the habit of waiting for the Free Nutritious Meal (MBG). The teacher explained that "when it's 9 o'clock, he seems to know the time; he says he's tired, wants to eat... waiting for the MBG like that" (G1). This situation emphasizes that transitions to routine activities (eating, going home) can be both sensory and emotional triggers. Case studies of children with autism show that emotions and behavioral responses are strongly influenced by situational factors and activity transitions (Khoirunnisa & Nursalim, 2021). Dani & Leylasari (2020) recommend the use of visual schedules and daily structures to help children with autism understand and prepare for changes in activity.

In relation to the learning process, *meltdowns* directly impact the continuity of academic activities in the classroom. When an episode occurs, a child's focus decreases drastically, learning activities are halted, and teachers must divert their full attention to help the child calm down before learning can resume. This situation emphasizes that emotional regulation skills are a crucial component in determining the quality of a child's learning process, as emotional disturbances such as *meltdowns* can affect a child's attention, working memory, and capacity to receive instructions. Therefore, teachers' perceptions of *meltdowns* are based not only on practical experience but also on the understanding that emotional aspects are a fundamental component in the learning of autistic children.

## **b. Strategies used by teachers at SLB Negeri 1 Bulukumba in handling *meltdown* conditions in autistic children aged 5–8 years**

### **1. Preventive Strategy**

Preventive measures include adapting learning to each child's individual characteristics, particularly their interests, sensory responses, and ability to follow daily routines. The teacher explained that "autistic children can't jump straight into learning strategies... we need to think about the approach first, because they have to be willing before we can start learning" (G1). Observations showed that when children appeared restless or distracted, teachers would encourage them to sing, play, or provide engaging visuals to refocus them. This approach could build rapport before beginning academic activities. This initial approach helps create a stable emotional state, reducing the likelihood of sensory stress or anxiety that can trigger *meltdowns*. These findings align with research by Mayyadah and Hayati (2024), which revealed that teachers use engaging learning media, build warm personal relationships, and create a comfortable classroom atmosphere as ways to reduce anxiety and increase children's emotional readiness before learning (Mayyadah & Hayati, 2024).

Adjusting Individual Learning Programs (IEPs) is also part of a preventive strategy, where teachers organize activities based on the day's abilities, considering that autistic children show significant fluctuations in learning readiness. Strategies such as the use of visual media, interest-based learning, and flexible activity structures have long been considered effective in reducing anxiety in children with ASD, as discussed in a study by Elisse & Aswati (2024), which emphasized the importance of emotional support and learning structure in facilitating self-regulation in autistic children.

### **2. Intervention Strategies During a *Meltdown***

When a *meltdown* occurs, teachers implement an approach that focuses on stabilizing the child's emotions through a calm atmosphere and minimal responses. The teacher stated that "first we have to know the cause of the tantrum, they are sensitive to schedules... if it's mealtime, they want to eat, if it's not fulfilled, they can have a tantrum" (G1). Physical approaches such as hugging are used selectively, "because they are still in second grade, usually I hug, I coax... to calm them down" (G1). The teacher does not provide additional instructions, but instead strives to maintain a conducive environment

to prevent increased stimulation. Safe physical contact such as hugging is used selectively, especially with children aged 5–8 years who still need a physical approach to reduce the intensity of their emotions. This is in line with the findings of Alawiyah, (2021) Physical touch, such as hugging, can reduce the intensity of tantrums in autistic children when given appropriately and with attention to the child's comfort. Observations show that this strategy helps children divert attention from the source of stress and prevents the development of more extreme reactions. Teachers provide space for children to express their emotions while being supervised until the child feels calm and can communicate again (Ariantari et al., 2025) . Teachers also try to rearrange the child's position or move them to a quieter corner of the classroom if environmental stimulation increases. This approach is in line with the regulatory strategy by Fadila et al., (2025) , who stated that handling tantrums in early childhood focuses more on regulating the child's emotions and emotional needs than on directly controlling behavior. This intervention shows that managing *meltdowns* does not focus on directly controlling behavior, but on meeting the child's disrupted emotional regulation needs.

### 3. *Meltdown Recovery Strategy*

After the *meltdown* subsides, teachers allow children time to recover emotionally before returning to learning activities. This practice of providing recovery breaks allows children to gradually *self-regulate and reduces the likelihood of emotional re-triggering when forced back into academic tasks* (Aprianti & Vitaloka, 2025) . Teachers record *meltdown events* in a diary and then adjust learning activities to suit the child's condition. The informant explained that "once the child is stable, I will slowly guide them again... I can't immediately return to the material" (G1). The recovery process is conducted without pressure, and teachers ensure that the child is truly stable before returning to learning activities. This statement is consistent with a study by Bangsawan et al. (2023), which emphasized the importance of self-regulation for autistic children to control their thoughts and emotions during learning activities. When regulation is successful, children are able to concentrate and learn better.

*Meltdown Recovery phase* , teachers record incidents in a diary and evaluate potential triggers, then adjust activities for the remaining learning time according to the child's abilities. Observed video documentation shows that emotional recovery generally occurs gradually, and children are more easily refocused when teachers provide light and familiar activities. Post- *meltdown recovery* is not only technical, but also part of the teacher's reflective efforts in refining IEP and building communication with parents, so that teachers and families have a shared understanding of the child's condition. This finding aligns with Hendriani's (2023) idea regarding the importance of structured communication between schools and parents in tailoring learning support for children with special needs. However, the study's focus on learning assistance still leaves room for this study to demonstrate how teacher reflection after a *meltdown episode* directly influences IEP adjustments based on emotional events in the classroom. Thus, the post-*meltdown phase* is not simply a recovery period, but a critical moment that determines the

continuity of learning and ensures that pedagogical interventions are truly aligned with the child's emotional state.

#### **4. Teachers' evaluation of the effectiveness of the strategies implemented, as well as their expectations for improving *meltdown management* in autistic children in the school environment.**

Evaluation of the applied treatment strategies showed that the flexibility in developing PPI became an effective combination in reducing the intensity of *meltdowns* in autistic children aged 5–8 years. Teachers assessed that strategies based on an individual approach, the use of visual media, and the flexibility of PPI were effective in reducing the intensity of *meltdowns* in autistic children. "The most effective is when I already know he likes visual learning... if he likes singing, then we sing first" (G1). This was also evident in the child's ability to re-engage in learning activities after being given calming and appropriate treatment. This finding is in line with Said et al., (2024) that *visual schedules* can improve independence and reduce behavioral problems in children with ASD during daily activities, strengthening the argument that flexible and individual strategies are an effective combination for managing emotions and regulation in autistic children.

However, the effectiveness of this strategy is heavily influenced by classroom conditions, particularly the number of students present. A teacher explained that when two students are present, "if one is calm, the other is having a tantrum... it's not effective, we have to stagger their schedules" (G1) because one child's emotional reactions often affect the other. Based on observational data, teachers anticipate this by staggering learning schedules and establishing intensive communication with parents to ensure children's readiness before entering class. These adjustments demonstrate that the success of *meltdown management strategies* is highly dependent on the management of the learning environment and consistent communication between the school and families. This finding is consistent with research by Siron et al., (2021) that class size and student population significantly influence the effectiveness of strategies for students with ASD—when classes are crowded or have too many students with special needs, individual interventions tend to be less than optimal.

On the other hand, teachers identified several obstacles that hindered the optimization of *meltdown management*. Field documentation showed that teachers have good response capacity, but the lack of professional training support related to autistic behavior management limits the possibility of developing more comprehensive strategies. Based on interviews, teachers hoped, "The government will provide more training to teachers, even though this is a special needs school, it does not rule out the possibility that some teachers still lack knowledge on how to handle autistic children during tantrums" (G1). Furthermore, improving learning facilities and sensory rooms is seen as important to create a more friendly environment for autistic children. This finding is in line with (Darwis, 2024), who emphasized that strengthening professional competence through

compensatory training is essential for teachers to be able to provide adaptive and effective interventions for students with special needs.

Teachers also hope for more intensive communication with parents. "The communication has to be good... I write in the book if the child doesn't understand the material, so parents can monitor it too" (G1). Consistent collaboration between schools and parents is key to reducing the frequency of *meltdowns*, as many triggers arise from home routines that schools cannot always control. This expectation demonstrates the need for a holistic approach, where structural support and relationships between various parties contribute to the long-term success of *meltdown management strategies*. Research by Sari & Rahmasari (2022) found that ongoing communication strategies from parents—including active involvement at home—facilitate children's social interactions and emotional regulation. Therefore, teachers' expectations for intensive communication and close partnerships with parents, as expressed by (G1), are not merely practical desires, but fundamental needs supported by the literature.

## Conclusion

The strategy of teachers at Bulukumba State Special Needs School 1 in handling *meltdowns* in autistic children aged 5–8 years old stems from the understanding that *meltdowns* are a loss of emotional control due to sensory stress, changes in routine, or demands that the child is unable to cope with. This understanding shapes a treatment approach that includes preventive strategies, intervention during the event, and post-*meltdown recovery*.

Teachers at SLB Negeri 1 Bulukumba use three main strategies to address these situations. In the preventive phase, teachers build positive emotional relationships, adapt teaching methods to the child's interests and characteristics, and create a comfortable learning environment to reduce anxiety and potential meltdown triggers. In the intervention phase, teachers employ a gentle, calming approach and tailor responses based on the child's needs, including redirecting attention, providing quiet time, or reducing environmental stimulation. These strategies are implemented with empathy and flexibility, tailored to each child's unique circumstances. In the recovery phase, teachers help children regain their sense of well-being before resuming learning activities, ensuring a conducive learning environment.

The use of a qualitative case study approach allowed researchers to in-depth describe teachers' actual practices in dealing with meltdown situations in schools. The results of this study confirm that successful meltdown management is significantly influenced by teachers' understanding of children's emotional patterns, the learning environment, and their ability to maintain consistency and patience in interacting with autistic children.

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