

# After School Restraint Collapse- What is it and How Do Parents Cope With it?

By Lucy Stroud (Registered Provisional Psychologist)

Have you noticed the storm cloud that can enter your car at after-school pick-up? All may be sunshine and rainbows at drop off, but suddenly, your child returns irritable, whiny, and frustrated by your “how was your day?” questioning. For some children, this can build into arguments, meltdowns, tantrums, and full-blown fights at home. You may be asking yourself “*What did I do?*” Well, do not despair. While frustrating, these types of behaviours are common in many households across the world. So common, in fact, that it has been coined “after-school restraint collapse,” or ASRC, for short.

ASRC was first defined by Andrea Loewen Nairas (an Ontario-based counsellor and parenting expert). She used this term to explain the sudden change in a child’s mood, behaviour, or emotional state upon returning home from school. For some children, it can look like tears and weepiness, and remaining quiet. For others, it can look like having a low frustration tolerance, being easily irritable, or having full-blown meltdowns. While common, it can be more apparent in children with Learning Disabilities (LD) and ADHD. Although it can be a relief to hear that your child has been “an angel” at school, parents also may find themselves exasperated by the difference they see in the evenings.

## **Why does ASRC happen?**

ASRC is common among the LD/ADHD population for a variety of reasons. Firstly, these children are often working hard to keep up all day, circumvent their learning challenges, cope with social demands, and follow the rules and expectations of a classroom setting. Working this hard all day can lead to an empty “fuel tank.” Essentially, these children have little (or no) resources left to help them manage their evening tasks, including regulating themselves. One way to think of this is like a bottle of pop that has been shaken all day. Once home, the “lid can come off” leading to an explosion of behaviours.

## **What do we do about it?**

Thankfully, we can support children who experience ASRC with a few tips, tricks, and strategies! The steps below are listed in what may be a typical order of events but can be modified to fit your family's individual schedule.

### **Tip #1: Avoid question overload**

It can be easy to want to find out exactly how your child’s day was by asking questions as soon as they get into the car. But keep in mind that this may not be the time. Instead, greet them with a smile, hug, and follow their lead. If they are quiet, turning on the music may be best. This can also be a great time to build up their emotional vocabulary. For example, if your child comes

home talking about something that has happened, you can support them by providing the emotional vocabulary (e.g., "It sounds like you felt really frustrated at that moment."). Not only are you building up their vocabulary and helping them process what happened, but you are also reflecting back their feelings to show you are listening. If a child does react with anger or hostility, remember that it may not be the best time for a lecture, tough conversation, or implementing new rules.

### **Tip #2: Check on their basic needs**

As noted, students with LD/ADHD have likely used up their cognitive resources throughout the day and are feeling depleted. One way to replenish these cognitive resources is by giving them a healthy snack and drink once they walk through the door. Consider enriching foods like fruits, vegetables, crackers, and a protein source (to stabilize the blood sugar). For some children, the snack may need to be given as soon as they get into the car. For children with AD/HD, there is also the added complexity of medication wearing off. This can lead to even less ability to inhibit their emotions and behaviours, increased tiredness, and a further depletion of cognitive resources. If medication is wearing off in the evenings, it is especially important to allow for more time to complete tasks, regularly scheduled breaks at shorter intervals, and lots of praise and rewards to help account for the dopamine depletion. Small glucose boosts (e.g., drinking some juice) while completing homework may also help to keep the dopamine levels up.

### **Tip #3: Provide enough "cool down" time**

It can be easy to want to get the homework and chore list started right away, but these students need a break to decompress. Each child will be different, but sunshine, fresh air, and movement can do wonders to "refuel the tank." Keep in mind that these children thrive from structure. Therefore, you may need to use a visual timer, make a visual schedule of the daily routine, and provide several warnings leading up to an upcoming transition. Examples of "cool down" activities include:

- Going for a short walk, riding a bike, kicking a ball outside, taking the chalk to the driveway or sidewalk, or bouncing on the trampoline. Blow bubbles outside to get the deep breathing going!
- Taking a free play break, listening to music, dancing, drawing, looking at some books together, wrapping up in a blanket, or taking out some water paints
- Having a shower or bath to decompress
- Avoiding the screen time. Keep in mind that screen time can further drain cognitive resources, rather than replenish them. It can also be more difficult to turn off the device when cognitive resources are low and children are tired.

### **Tip #4: Adjust the demands and expectations**

Now comes the tricky part, we have to lower the expectations for after-school tasks. Realistically, we understand that homework and chores are part of most families' weeks. That said, it is important to consider when the ultimate "productivity time" is for your child. For example, are they better off doing their homework in the mornings? Do they need homework split up into small chunks, with the larger chunks completed on the weekends? Are chores on a weeknight asking for problems? If homework is to be completed on a weeknight, consider the Pomodoro method for consistent breaks ([link below](#)). Lastly, be mindful of overscheduling too many extracurricular activities in the evening.

### **Tip #5: Take care of YOU!**

This next tip is to make sure parents are taking care of themselves, too! Many parents are also returning from their own busy workday, where they may too be managing their own after-work restraint collapse! Remember, it is okay to model taking your own break and refueling your own resources.

Also, keep in mind that parents around the world are struggling with ASRC. You are not alone with the feelings of frustration that can arise. That said, it can be easy for parents to take the "big feelings" personally. If there is one thing you take away from this, we want you to remember the wise words of Dr. Ross Greene: *"Kids do well if they can, not if they want to."* How we view behaviours and big feelings matters and influences our own well-being. Most of the time, children are "blowing their tops" at home because that is where they feel safe and supported. If anything, this speaks to the wonderful and supportive environment you have created for them. Although it can be easy to take challenging behaviours personally, viewing children through this lens helps parents to stay grounded and optimistic, and to persevere through tough times.

### **Key takeaways**

ASRC is common but can be stressful for families, caretakers, and children alike. While the above strategies are useful, keep in mind that you know your child best. Each child may need a slightly different cool-down strategy, expectation, or routine. Remember that consistency is key. Make sure the basic needs are met, give enough breaks, and lower the expectations after school. We hope that the information provided leads to a happier after-school and evening routine!

Additional resources and further reading:

[Understanding After-School Restraint Collapse in Kids with ADHD - CADDAC](#)

[The Real Reason Kids Have Emotional Breakdowns After School—and How Parents Can Help - Parents Magazine](#)

[The Pomodoro Technique](#)