

WHEN 'I *won't*
DO IT' REALLY
MEANS 'I'M
Too anxious
TO DO IT'

A booklet for teachers and support assistants working with young people with Pathological Demand Avoidance.

WHAT IS *Pathological Demand Avoidance* (PDA)?

Pathological Demand Avoidance or PDA as it's often known comes under the autism umbrella. But students often have a distinct profile. Like other students with an autism diagnosis they will experience difficulties with social communication and interaction, and display behaviours, activities and interests which are repetitive and restricted. However, students with PDA will also exhibit a pronounced need to be in control.

Their need for this control, is anxiety driven and leads to a need to avoid the demands and expectations of others. Although PDA students often present with behaviours that look as though they are being caused by anger and/ or wilful disobedience, behaviours are much more likely to be caused by fear, anxiety and confusion. This last point should be remembered and at the forefront of any strategies used.

SO HOW CAN YOU INCREASE A CHILD'S FEELING OF *control* WITHIN THE CLASSROOM SETTING?

Finding ways to allow students to feel in control is key. Whether that's in small ways e.g. through providing choices about a topic to write about (remember if your objective is well developed sentences you can afford to be flexible about topic), or in bigger ones such as developing a personalised timetable which involves students spending some part of each day studying something that interests them (AQA even runs a qualification that allows students to be accredited for doing so).

Wherever possible try to give students chances to see that you want to work with them rather than dictate to them. Ask them what would make their day better. And don't be offended when top of their list is not to have to come to school. If students find it difficult to talk about what causes them the most anxiety to you directly, ask parents to help by discussing it with their child and reporting back.

SO HOW CAN YOU INCREASE A CHILD'S FEELING OF *control* WITHIN THE CLASSROOM SETTING?

REDUCE PRESSURE

Some students may need a reduced timetable. For some that might involve having less hours physically in the building. For others it may involve having more freedom in the school day. Time out cards, access to quiet areas and time to focus on their special interest can all help to reduce a student's need to exhibit challenging behaviour in order to escape the demands put on them.

Schools need rules, otherwise they would cease to function. However, where possible and where it would not be detrimental to students, flexibility should be exercised. The less pressure put on a student the more likely they are to succeed.

Special care should be taken not to sanction or be negative to students who come into the building late. Whilst this can undeniably cause difficulties for consistency of teaching, it is more likely to cause complete school refusal than it is to result in better attendance.

SO HOW CAN YOU INCREASE A CHILD'S FEELING OF *control* WITHIN THE CLASSROOM SETTING?

BE CONSISTENT

As with all students with Autism, consistency is key. Whilst flexibility is important, that flexibility must be consistent.

Allowing something one day and then arbitrarily (in the eyes of the student at least) not allowing it the following day will cause problems. Be clear about what your boundaries and non-negotiables are, and explain why they are important to you and to the school. A rule with a good reason is much more likely to be seen as reasonable than one that seems unimportant or pointless.

Displaying important rules, reasons for those rules and consequences visually can help to avoid confrontation. As can giving students a way out. So for example, whilst we are allowed to be flexible with the uniform our students wear they are not allowed into our main building without being in full uniform.

My visual rule would therefore say:

You can choose what you wear for school. I want you to be comfortable. But if you would like to go to the main building for lunch I need you to wear full uniform. We have this rule because other students get upset if other people don't follow rules that they have to follow. If you aren't in full uniform we can still order your lunch and bring it across to our building, so you don't need to miss out.

My students therefore know that I am trying to be flexible. Parents don't have a confrontation on days where they can't face wearing uniform. But the needs of the school as a whole are also taken into account.

It's a balancing act. Your rules will be different to mine. I just wanted to give you an example of how consistency and flexibility can (and need to) work together.

SO HOW CAN YOU INCREASE A CHILD'S FEELING OF *control* WITHIN THE CLASSROOM SETTING?

THINK CAREFULLY ABOUT HOMEWORK

If you can avoid setting homework for a child with PDA then you should. The school day has enough demands already, adding more is far more likely to result in resentment and school refusal because of the anxiety of not having completed the task.

The homework is extremely unlikely to be completed and by setting it you are putting yourself in an impossible position, of having to create a consequence (demand) when it doesn't get done, which will almost certainly result in further disengagement.

Add to that they stress (and sometimes physical violence) that parents will face at home when asking students to complete the work.

If you must set work, giving it with the proviso of 'here's something to look at at home, if you get the chance' is more likely to result in completion and in return to school the following day.

SO HOW CAN YOU INCREASE A CHILD'S FEELING OF *control* WITHIN THE CLASSROOM SETTING?

WORK WITH PARENTS

I have put this strategy last because if you only take one thing from this booklet, this needs to be it. Students with PDA will stretch you to the limits of your teaching capacity. They will also stretch parents to the limits of their parenting capacity. You will be much more successful in ensuring the best outcome for the student if you work together.

Remember to ensure that parents know that you recognise when their child is successful as well as when they have difficult days. Positive phone calls or notes home can go a huge way in building good relationships. Do not be afraid to ask parents what strategies work for them at home. They will respect you more, not less for asking their advice. You may be the expert in your subject, but they are the expert in their child.

Parental knowledge is something that all too few professionals remember is important. As the mother of a child with additional needs it never ceases to amaze me how differently I am looked at as a mum versus as a teacher and this is something that as a profession we really do need to change.

SO HOW CAN YOU *help* ?

Remember

A child saying they 'won't' do something may actually be 'unable' to do so if they are pathologically demand avoidant.

Children who have PDA need you to reduce demands and, therefore, their anxiety.

They are relying on you to make a difficult world a little bit easier.

SO WHAT *next* ?

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Talking Autism: Teaching The Unique Child