

Support Strategies at School

for autistic students with a Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) profile



KEY FEATURES OF PDA

- Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is described as an atypical presentation or profile of autism
- Students with a PDA profile show extreme resistance to, and avoidance of, everyday demands of life, based on an anxiety-driven need for autonomy (*Christie et al, 2011*)
- Emotional regulation difficulties, with sudden or extreme mood swings, which can lead to meltdowns or shutdowns and seemingly “uncooperative” behaviour (or may manage tasks temporarily by “masking”)
- **“Explosive” behaviour** is best viewed as a **panic attack** (anxiety too high, tolerance too low)
- Ambivalence towards success; rewards or praise and punishment (or withdrawal of desired items), usually ineffective and increase anxiety (therefore *even less likely* to attend, co-operate, participate or engage)
- Surface sociability; Low self-esteem or self-worth despite appearance of confidence or bossiness

KEY POINTS FOR EDUCATORS

Thank you for
ALL you do to
support our
children...

They REALLY need it
& we REALLY
appreciate it!

- 70% of students with PDA struggle to attend school or don't attend (*UK PDA Society*)
- **Quality of relationship** between teacher and child absolutely fundamental – take the time to build rapport, trust, respect and connection – it will make an enormous difference
- The child or young person needs to **feel they have choice & control** as much as possible
- Issue is an **incapacity**, NOT wilful disobedience or naughtiness (it is NOT that they won't do the thing, it's that they **can't at this time**)
- **Flexibility** and adaptability by adults around them is critical (seating, tasks, expectations)
- Frequently don't respond to conventional teaching approaches (schedules, timers, rewards). These may **add to anxiety, agitation** and consequent **distressed behaviours**
- Believing, supporting and **working closely with families & therapists is key to success**

WHAT WORKS - IDEAS TO TRY

- Critical to choose **priorities & reduce demands** wherever possible (let go of all the less important things)
- Constantly **adjust your demands** to suit child's tolerance level, changes often – think of two dials that need to be in parallel (increase or decrease your demands/requests/expectations to suit child's fluctuating tolerance)
- Use of **humour & distraction** can be helpful; as can **novelty** & variety
- **Depersonalise** demands & **avoid directive or imperative language** – eg “I wonder what they're doing over there?” or “that looks like fun” or “pens are on the table” (rather than “go and see what the others are doing” or “you need to get a pen from the box” or “can you do your maths now?” Try **declarative or indirect language** (Declarative Language Handbook by Linda K. Murphy) instead of: “walk over there”, try “there's some Lego over there” or “here's the chalk” or “gosh I'm tired, I wish I had help to carry this” or “I can't quite work this out”. Comment on observations *without expectation* (like a sports commentator), *not* to manipulate into action
- Offer opportunity to make choices as much as poss – BUT NOT when child agitated / highly anxious / angry
- Best when **invited to participate**, but not pressured to participate (*this includes choice to participate or not*)
- **Extra time** and support for processing, and for transitions between lessons or classrooms
- **Heavy work** helpful for sensory and emotional regulation – push, pull, carry, dig, lift (ask OT for other ideas)
- Notify ahead of time of big changes to usual program, **plan ahead** – anticipate potential triggers
- **Reduced schedule** can be helpful (eg exemption from 2nd language / music / drama / activities which appear to exacerbate anxiety – should be done in conjunction with parents and treating health professionals)
- **Collaborate** with parents as regular comm'n can make huge difference – they'll know some strategies that work
- Use of drama & **role play** (characters, animals) can be effective to involve child, especially if a special interest
- Without isolating, allow them to be on the fringes, gives opportunity to **learn by osmosis**

- Provide lots of opportunities for relaxation, physical exercise, fidget toys, soothing music, yoga, gym balls, **nature++**, ask for ideas from OT/psych/parents. **Sensory breaks** and **movement breaks** are useful
- Your **expectations** of your other students can be very **different** from those with PDA – that's ok!
- Verbal/auditory **comprehension** can be noticeably less than verbal **expression/ability** (which is often very strong)
- Use **interest-driven** tasks best whenever possible
- Always **avoid power struggles**; use neutral posture, voice & facial expression (relaxed face, relaxed body language, monotone voice. Consider tone, soft/moderate volume). Can tell if you say you're calm, but you're not!
- Safe, **calm space** (physical and psychological "refuge") & **safe, calm mentor** or time away as needed
- **Negotiating** amount and type of work with student – some days little or no work will get done – that's ok!
- Easier for parents than teachers, as parents have more opportunities to trial and see what works and what doesn't (this changes frequently!), however, remember parents deal with these issues 24/7/365, every year – exhausting
- When PDA kids are harder to like, that's when they need **your support** the most!
- Overriding feeling towards school for PDA child is **MASSIVE ANXIETY** – once the anxiety is reduced adequately, *then* you can increase their engagement & participation in learning – BUT NOT until then!
- Remember these ideas work some days and not others, so are worth **revisiting** and having a range on hand to trial

WHAT DOESN'T WORK

- **AVOID** using the words "No", "Can't" and "Don't"
- **Loud voice**, agitated or **angry tone**, dominating body language, physical **restraint**, attempts to be "in charge" of child or **exerting control** (generally do not confer automatic respect to "authority" figures, as see themselves **equal to adults**, due to impact of PDA on understanding of social hierarchy)
- Viewing or describing the child or young adult as **defiant**, manipulative or purposely **oppositional** is very **unhelpful** and likely to increase behaviours of distress



COPING STRATEGIES FOR ADULTS SUPPORTING PDA-ERS

- Parents of PDA-ers deal with daily challenges by getting educated on PDA (some great books above), exercising regularly, counselling, reading, Netflix, chocolate, music, journals, yoga, meditation, work or volunteer work, face-to-face and online Facebook support and interest groups, gratitude journal or 3GT, respite or breaks when possible
- Need to look after yourself well first, then you can support the child well
- Don't take things personally – especially anger or aggressive behaviour – your student is communicating to you that they aren't coping – need to develop thick skin!
- All research points to an **early understanding of strengths & needs, together with appropriate support**, being the key to **positive long term outcomes** (PDA Society UK 2023)

PROFESSIONAL RESOURCES – FOR HELP & INFO

- **PDA Society** (pdasociety.org.uk) for strategies & excellent resources for educators, health professionals & families
- Local Perth/WA support & info – join us on Facebook **PDA Perth WA Interest Group for Educators & Health Prof's**
- Free, confidential counselling from Employee Assistance Program may be avail via your employer (WA DoE staff/family)
- For in-person and online PDA-specific support & resources – Amanda Diekman (online, USA) Amherst Psychology (online & in-person, Perth, WA), At Peace Parents (online, USA), Kidd Clinic (online & in-person, Perth, WA), Kristy Forbes (Online, Vic), The PDA Space's PDA Summit (online) & PDA Training Australia (online & in-person training, Perth, WA)
- <https://www.teachwire.net/news/understanding-pda/>
- <https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/PDA-for-teaching-professionals.pdf>
- <https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/What-is-PDA-booklet-website-v2.1.pdf>
- <https://www.twinkl.com.au/resource/t-s-4063-managing-pathological-demand-avoidance-in-the-classroom-top-tips>

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