

## Support Strategies at School for 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 PDA profile show **extreme resistance to, and avoidance of, everyday demands of life**, based on an **anxiety-driven need for autonomy** (Understanding PDA Syndrome in Children, 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 = vulnerability)
- \* Ambivalence towards success; **rewards or praise** and **punishment or withdrawal** of preferred items usually **ineffective** and increases anxiety (therefore even less likely to attend/cooperate/participate/engage)
- \* **Low self-esteem/worth**, despite appearance of confidence or bossiness

### KEY POINTS FOR EDUCATORS

- \* 70% of students with PDA profile **struggle to attend** school or **don't attend** (UK PDA Society research)
- \* **Quality of relationship** between teacher & child absolutely fundamental - take time to build **rapport**
- \* The child or young adult needs to **feel in control** as much as possible - the issue is an **incapacity, NOT** wilful disobedience or naughtiness (can't at this time, not won't). Give opportunity to make choices.
- \* **Flexibility** and **adaptability** by adults around them are critical
- \* Frequently **doesn't respond to conventional** teaching approaches like schedules, timers, rewards
- \* Believing, supporting and **working closely with families** is key to successful inclusion of autistic students with a PDA profile (pdasociety.org.uk)

### WHAT WORKS?

- \* Critical to **choose priorities** (let go of less important things) and **reduce demands wherever possible**
- \* Constantly **adjust your demands to suit their tolerance** level, which **changes often** - think of two dials that need to be in parallel (ie increase/decrease your “demands”/requests to suit the variable tolerance of child)
- \* Use of **humour** and **distraction** often helps and **novelty** and **variety** are often effective
- \* **Depersonalise** and **disguise** demands - eg “I wonder what they're doing over there?” or “that looks like fun” or “pens/crayons are on the table” rather than “go and see what the others are doing” or “you need to get a pen/crayon from the box” or “can you do x?” and
- \* Avoid directive language - use **declarative** or **indirect language** (see Dec Language Handbook by Linda K. Murphy)  
Eg instead of “walk over there”, you can try “there's a lego over there; or “here's the chalk if anyone needs” or “gosh I'm tired, I wish I had help to carry this” or “I can't quite work this out”. Comment on observations.
- \* **Offer opportunity to make choices** as much as poss - BUT NOT when child agitated / very anxious / angry
- \* Best when **invited** to participate, but not pressured to
- \* May need **extra time** and **support** for **processing** and **transitions** between lessons/rooms
- \* **Heavy work** 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 - ideally should be done in conjunction with parents / treating health prof's)
- \* **Collaborate** with parents as regular comm'n can make huge difference - they'll know which strategies 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**
- \* Lots of opportunities for **relaxation**, physical **exercise**, fidget toys, soothing music, yoga, gym balls, nature nature, ask for more ideas from OT/parents. **Sensory breaks** or **movement breaks** can be useful
- \* Your **expectations** of your other students can be very different from those with PDA and that's ok
- \* Verbal/auditory **comprehension** can be very different from verbal **expression** ability (which is often v strong)
- \* Use **interest-driven tasks** best whenever possible
- \* Always avoid power struggles; use **neutral posture, voice and facial expression** (relaxed face, relaxed body language, monotone voice or consider your tone, soft or moderate volume)

- \* 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 no / little 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 - exhausting
- \* When they’re hard 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**

### WHAT DOESN'T WORK?

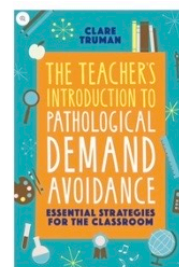
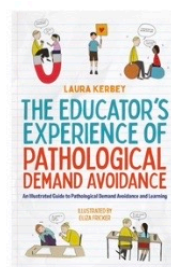
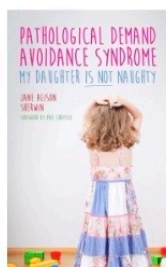
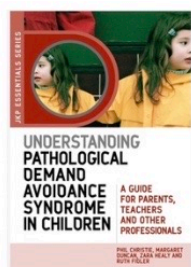
- \* **Always AVOID** using the words “No” , “Can’t” and “Don’t”
- \* **Loud** voice, agitated/angry **tone**, dominating **body language**, **restraint**, attempts to be “**in charge**” of child or **exerting control** (they generally do not confer automatic respect to “authority” figures, as they see themselves as equal to adults, due to impact of PDA on social understanding/hierarchy and self-identity)
- \* Viewing child/young adult as **defiant, manipulative or purposely oppositional** is unhelpful

### PERSONAL COPING STRATEGIES FOR ADULTS SUPPORTING PDA-ERS

- \* **Parents** of PDA-ers tell us they **deal with daily challenges** by getting educated on PDA, exercising regularly, counselling with a psychologist, reading, Netflix, chocolate, music, journals, yoga, meditation, part-time work, medication when prescribed, face-to-face/online FB support groups & respite when possible
- \* Need to **look after yourself well first**, then you can support the child well/better
- \* **Don’t take things personally** - especially anger or aggressive behaviour - *child is communicating to you that they aren’t coping* - you need to develop thick skin!
- \* All research points to **early understanding** of strengths/needs, together with **appropriate support**, being the key to **positive long term outcomes** (PDA Society, 2023)

### PROFESSIONAL STRATEGIES & WHERE TO GET HELP & INFO

- \* Many more strategies available from **PDA Society website** ([pdasociety.org.uk](https://pdasociety.org.uk)) They have a free newsletter for professionals and links to excellent resources
- \* For local Perth/WA support, please join us at **PDA Perth WA Interest Group for Educators & Health Professionals** (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/3429189420657840>) Currently 590 members.
- \* Free, confidential Employee Assistance Program is available to DoE staff as needed
- \* [www.teachwire.net/news/understanding-pda/](https://www.teachwire.net/news/understanding-pda/) (great brief introductory article)
- \* <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>.
- \* <https://podcasts.apple.com/au/podcast/pathological-demand-avoidance-pda-georgina-durrant/id1598292028?i=1000579397090>



**THANK YOU for all you do to support our children;  
they really need it and we really appreciate it!**

**Collated by Heidi Brandis | January 2024**

PDA parent | Former OT | Author WA Autism Parent Handbook | Member WA Department of Education Disability & Inclusion Consultative Committee  
Founder Northern & Western Suburbs Autism Mums Support Group & Eastern Suburbs Autism Network | Founder/Admin FB Perth Support Groups for Autism & PDA parents | Founder/Admin FB PDA Perth WA Interest Group for Educators & Health Profs