

A school for Arijana

The recent survey conducted by the PDA Society highlights that the school environment does not work for many children with PDA.

Positive experiences are sadly few and far between, but where they exist they provide a glimmer of hope. Successful placements necessitate a close working partnership between school and home, a whole school approach with strong support from the leadership team, a genuine commitment to inclusion and a positive, flexible approach.

Thank you to Arijana, her Mum Danielle and the team at Jupiter Community Free School in Hemel Hempstead for sharing their story in the hope that it helps others.

Arijana

Arijana is 6. She loves riding her bike, swimming and gymnastics. **She learns best by teaching herself new skills**, such as drawing the subject of her current top interest the Titanic by following a YouTube tutorial. Arijana would like to be an artist when she's older.



Arijana attends Jupiter Community Free School.

“As a Free School, we have some freedom to build our curriculum and culture and in this context we have developed an open approach to SEND and **a nurturing, rather than a behaviourist, approach to children's well-being**,” explains Neil Jones, the school's Principal.

Crisis point

Neil's introduction to Arijana was at a Child in Need meeting after the school was named in her EHCP. This multi-team meeting marked the family's crisis point after two failed school placements and a continuum of school refusal, violent meltdowns and exclusions when Mum Danielle self-referred to social services out of desperation following Arijana's self-harm, plummeting mental health and attempted suicide aged just 5.

The family's story is reported powerfully and honestly on Danielle's blog [PDA Parenting](#), but in brief: Arijana was a happy, calm baby and all was well for the first few years. Over time, Danielle began to notice some controlling behaviour and difficulties with transitions, though the good moments still generally prevailed. [All this changed instantly the moment Arijana started school](#). Despite Danielle raising concerns about Arijana's difficulties with emotional and social understanding, early signs of anxiety and autism were overlooked, Arijana was labelled as naughty and Danielle's parenting blamed. At 4, Arijana said that she hated her brain and shouldn't have been born. After endless searching, Danielle came across PDA and finally felt she had an explanation for Arijana's difficulties. After a further lengthy battle, Arijana was diagnosed with ASD with Significant Demand Avoidance, ADHD and SPD. Aka PDA.

A team approach

"The school staff team was initially and understandably rather apprehensive, because of Arijana's history and the number of children with SEND already in her year group," continues Neil. "But there was a sense of impending helplessness and that [if we didn't do something differently, the cycle would most likely repeat](#)."

Danielle was extremely nervous about trying school again after all they had been through, but some hope was restored after a positive first meeting with Neil and learning about his enthusiastic commitment to an inclusive ethos across the school.

Arijana's reintegration into school was thought through and planned extremely carefully, [combining input from various sources](#). The school considered Danielle to be the go-to expert on her daughter and combined her guidance with feedback from the agencies involved in Arijana's case and the recommended best practice guidelines for educating a child with PDA, together with their own highly nurturing approach.

"We adopted an open, growth mindset approach to managing Arijana's needs. [Put very simply, the approach is about compassion and love](#). We don't blame or judge or impose our bias," Neil explains. "Whilst put like that it sounds so simple, it is actually a rather challenging concept to embrace! But the staff have been magnificent in projecting patience and very low threat towards Arijana."

Careful, gradual reintegration

To start with Arijana had a couple of visits to school in the lead-up to Christmas accompanied by Danielle so that she was able to participate in activities whilst having the reassurance of her Mum's presence. As a result, Arijana began to feel [excited about the prospect of returning to school](#) and enthusiastically participated in ordering her uniform.

To help Arijana feel more connected with her peers, [a decision was made to work backwards through the school day](#). So initially she attended school for the last 45 minutes of the day and then left at normal home time along with her classmates.

Little by little, the amount of time Arijana spent at school increased until she was nearly achieving entire afternoons in school.

Finding a suitable 1:1 teaching assistant for Arijana was always going to be a key component in her successful transition back into school life. The school originally planned to make a new appointment but needed to cover from within the staff team for a few weeks. As it transpired, the teaching assistant who stepped in fully embraced the opportunity, [displaying an innate skill and subtlety interacting with Arijana](#). By following Arijana's lead and taking a gentle mentoring approach, a [trusting relationship](#) began to blossom and her TA was allowed to take the lead in developing an [individualised plan](#).

The school team decided to adopt an Early Years Foundation Stage approach to recording and assessing Arijana's academic progress by using a Learning Journal. Working from Arijana's interests and encouraging time spent with her class as much as possible, everything Arijana achieves is photographed or placed in her journal.

"It's lovely for me as a parent to see that she's engaging in activities and producing work," says Danielle. "Importantly, it's also a record for Arijana so that she feels a sense of achievement from her time in school."

Arijana's classmates have adapted with ease and were very accepting that Arijana was 'learning how to be in school'. This is in no small part down to the strong values and culture that permeates the whole school and the recognition that [good practice in SEN education is good practice for all children](#).

Flexibility, optimism and compassion

"[The approach is totally flexible and doesn't always go to plan](#)," adds Neil. "Looking ahead, the aim is for Arijana to attend full time. When? We're not sure yet. We've learned that we're not going to get there quickly, but we shall get there. We have to keep an open mind that the definition of 'there' may also change over time! But we are very optimistic."

"We are taking slow, small steps but Arijana now loves school and even wears her uniform at the weekend or during school holidays! [This nurturing placement is Arijana's best chance of success and rectifying the damage of the past](#)," enthuses Danielle. "I feel fully included as part of a collaborative team around Arijana, so some of my faith in the system that had utterly failed us previously is being restored too."

"Above all it is the patient, kind and tolerant approach of our staff, with Arijana's learning mentor and class teacher leading the way, that has been the key. This whole-school approach sets the tone, not only to achieve the successes so far with Arijana, but also to seek similar outcomes for other children with behaviour and communication challenges. A rising tide gathers all ships!" concludes Neil.