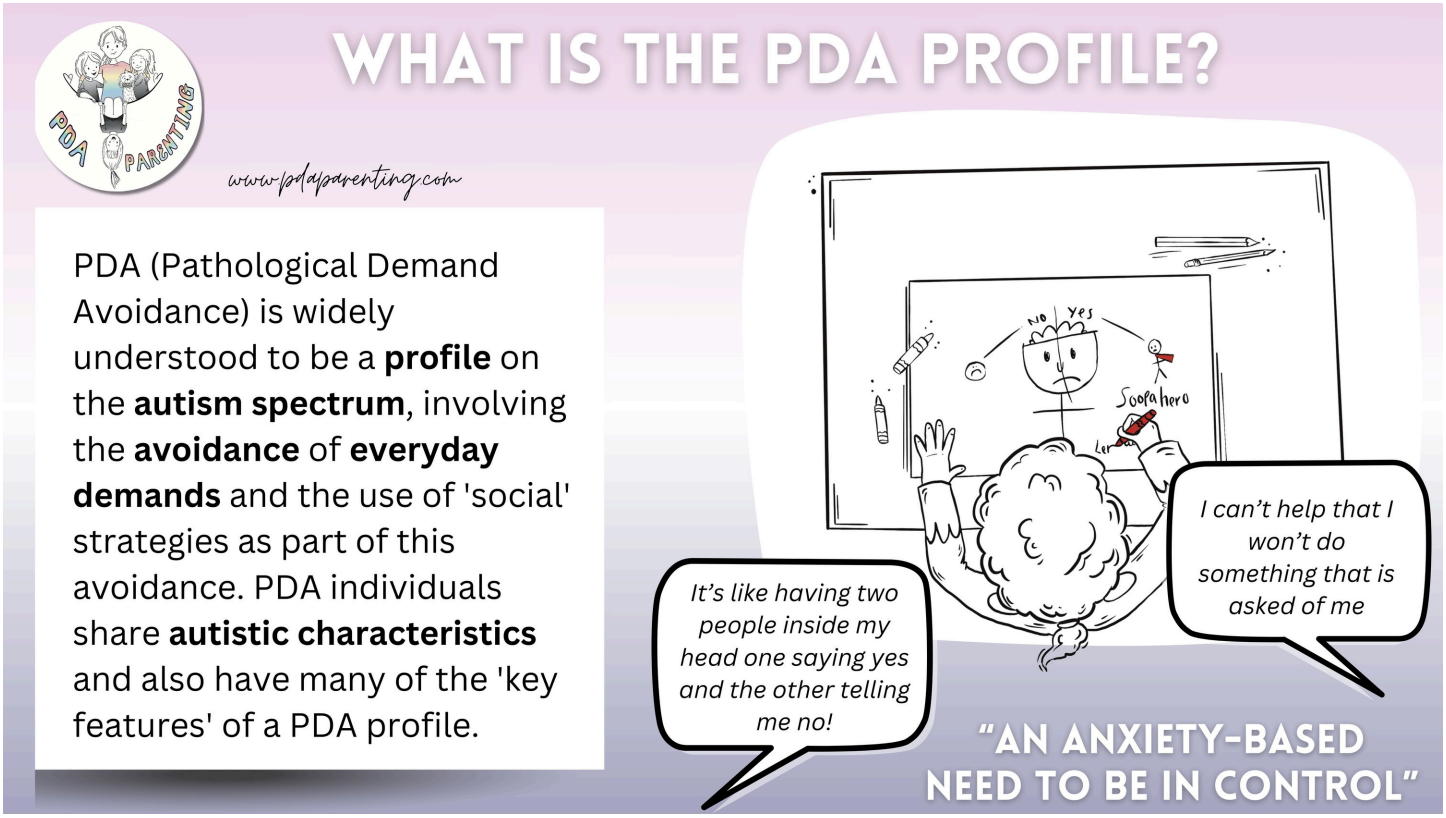
PDA PARENTING

Documents to support PDA families

Which Educational Setting Works Well for a PDA Learner?

Understanding the PDA Profile

Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is a profile of autism where anxiety drives a need for autonomy and control. PDA learners experience extreme anxiety around perceived demands, which can lead to avoidance, dysregulation or shutdown. Their responses often seem 'oppositional' or 'defiant,' but they are driven by an overwhelming need to feel safe and in control.



Key Challenges for PDA Learners:

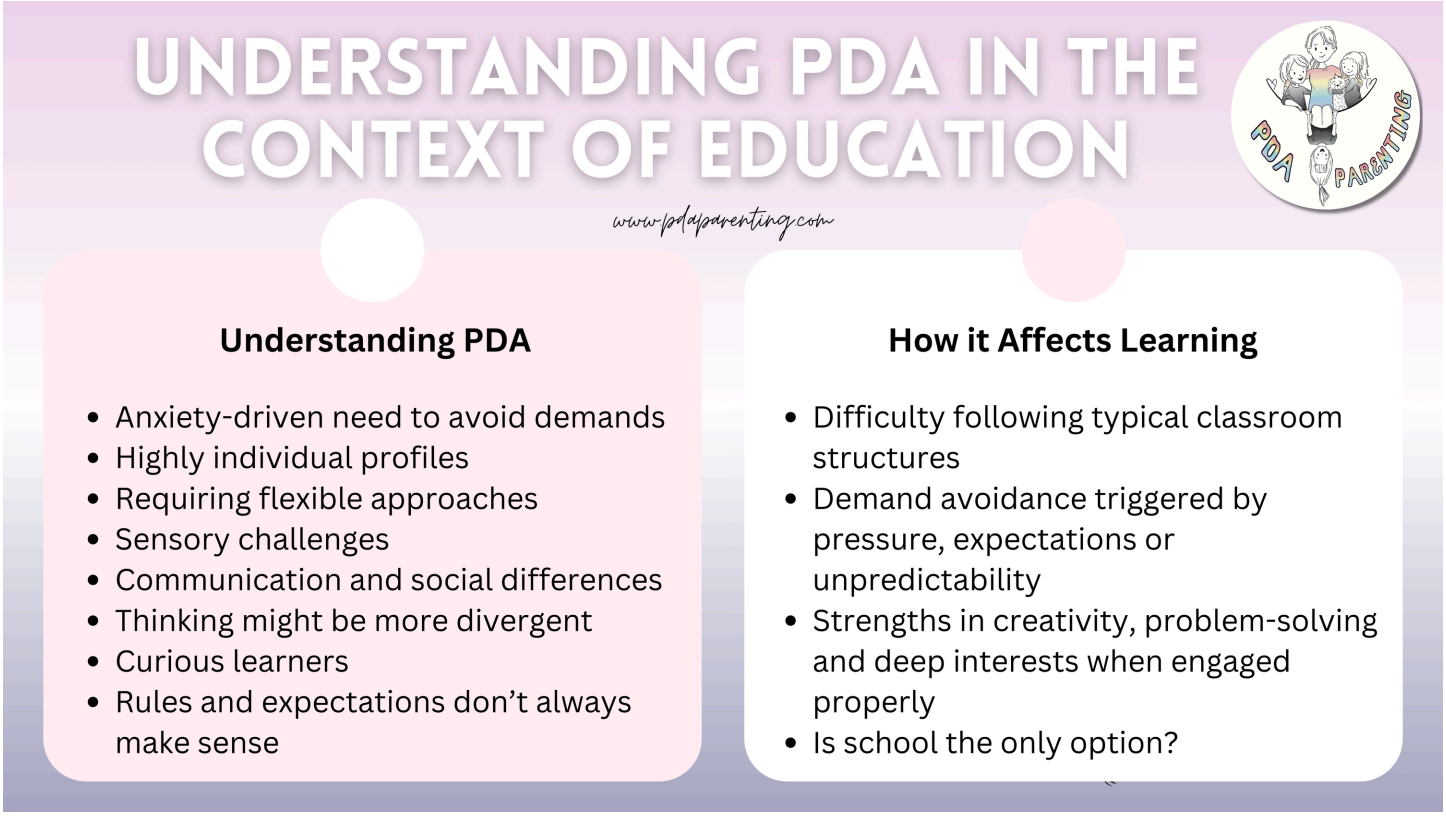
- **Intense Need for Autonomy and Control** – Feeling in control reduces anxiety and promotes engagement

- **High Levels of Anxiety and Sensory Sensitivity** – Overwhelming environments can lead to meltdowns or shutdowns
- **Difficulty with Transitions and Routine Demands** – Even seemingly small requests can trigger avoidance responses
- **Preference for Indirect Approaches** – Direct instructions often escalate anxiety, whereas playful or suggestive approaches may be more successful

The Impact of PDA on Learning

Traditional classroom structures often clash with the unique learning needs of PDA learners, making it essential to explore flexible and personalised approaches to unlock their true potential.

We have to closely consider and understand the PDA profile in the context of education to unpick why typical systems fail to meet the learner's needs:



Why Positive Behaviour Systems Don't Work for PDA Learners

Positive behaviour systems (PBS) are commonly used in schools to manage and encourage desired behaviours through rewards, consequences and public recognition. These systems often include sticker charts, certificates, "star pupil" awards and other extrinsic motivators designed to promote compliance. However, for PDA learners, these systems can be not only ineffective but also harmful. Here's why:

1. **Forces Compliance, Not Understanding**

PBS operates on the assumption that behaviour is a choice and can be modified through positive reinforcement or consequences. However, for PDA learners, behaviour is a response

to anxiety, overwhelm and an intrinsic need to maintain autonomy. When their responses are misinterpreted as “bad behaviour” and punished or rewarded, it forces them to comply under distress rather than addressing the underlying reasons for their struggles. Compliance without understanding does not build trust or emotional safety - essential foundations for learning in PDA children - or the support required for sensory differences.

2. **Creates Shame and Exclusion**

When PDA learners cannot meet the expectations of a rewards-based system, they are left feeling excluded, ashamed and like they have failed. Public systems like behaviour charts and “star pupil” awards can be humiliating for those who want to succeed but are unable to meet these external demands due to anxiety, sensory overload or demand avoidance. Repeated failure to conform can lead to a negative self-image and long-term emotional harm.

3. **Lacks Skill Development and Emotional Growth**

Children who experience emotional dysregulation, sensory sensitivities or anxiety do not need external motivators - they need compassionate support and skill development. PBS focuses on external control rather than teaching essential emotional regulation, self-awareness and coping strategies. PDA learners require co-regulation, flexibility and trust-based relationships to develop the emotional resilience and autonomy they need to thrive.

4. **Increases Anxiety and Demand Avoidance**

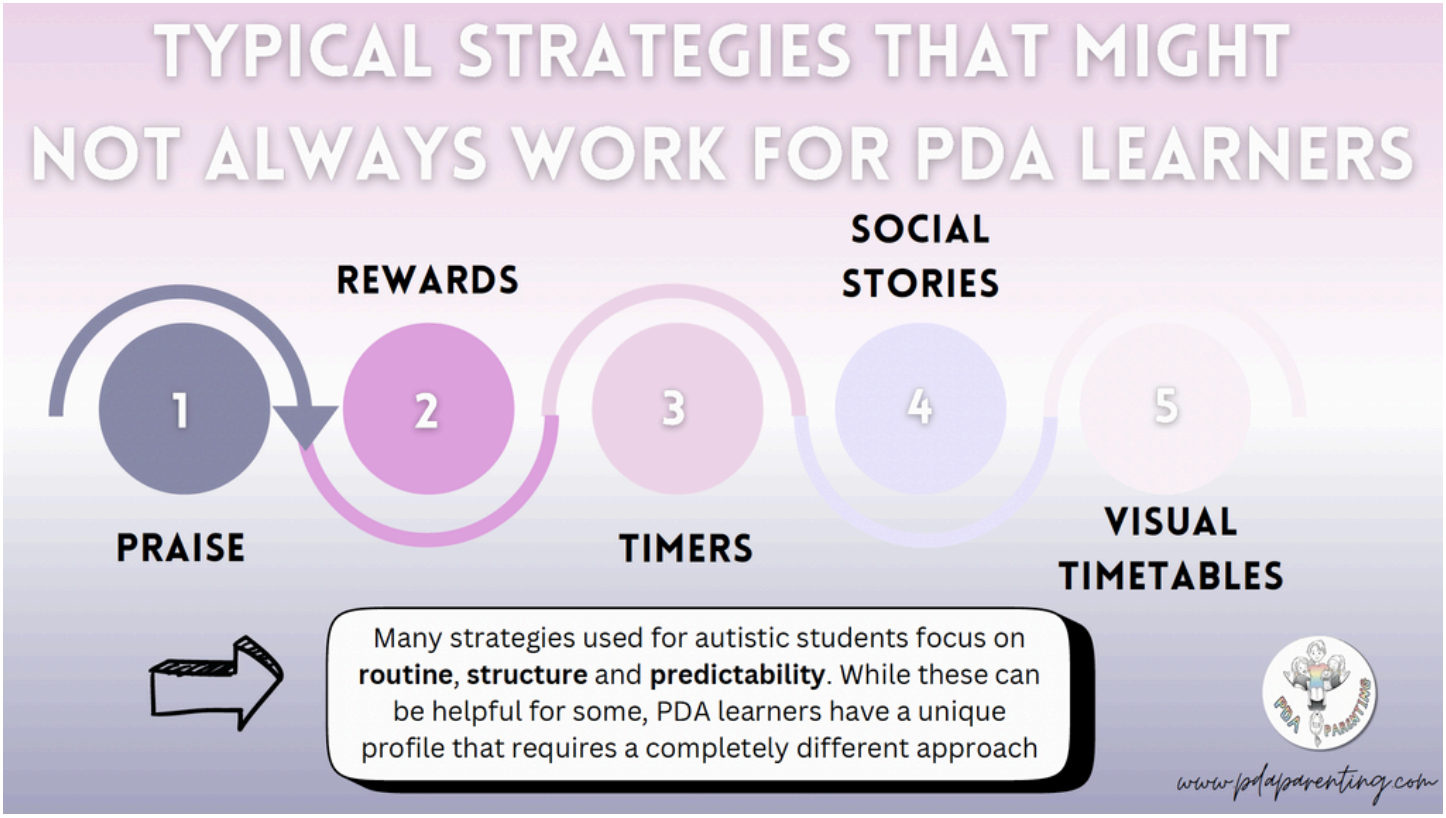
Positive behaviour systems often increase anxiety in PDA learners because they introduce unpredictable consequences and create pressure to meet external expectations. This heightened anxiety exacerbates demand avoidance, making it even more difficult for the child to engage and learn effectively. Instead of feeling safe and supported, the child may shut down, mask their struggles or exhibit extreme avoidance.

5. **Ignores Individual Profiles and Unique Needs**

PDA learners have highly individual profiles and a one-size-fits-all behaviour system does not consider their unique sensory, emotional and cognitive needs. Flexibility, curiosity-driven learning and reducing demands are far more effective approaches to encourage engagement and build trust.

Why Typical Strategies May Fail PDA Learners

Many strategies commonly used to support autistic learners - such as praise, rewards, visual timetables and social stories - are designed to create structure, predictability and routine. While these approaches can be helpful for some autistic profiles, they often fall short or even backfire when applied to PDA learners who are often more highly sensitive to feeling controlled or managed.



The PDA Support Pyramid: A Framework for Success

To create a supportive learning environment, it's essential to understand the **PDA Support Pyramid**, which we have designed to highlight the key principles that allow PDA learners to thrive.

1) Connection: Trust-Based Relationships

The foundation of successful learning for PDA learners is **trust and emotional safety.** When a child feels safe and connected, they are more likely to engage and explore.

What This Looks Like:

- Safe, empathetic adults who listen and validate feelings
- Building trust through low-pressure interactions
- Prioritising the relationship before any academic expectations

2) Low Demand: Safe and Low-Demand Environment

Reducing the perceived pressure around tasks and expectations prevents avoidance and dysregulation.

What This Looks Like:

- Avoiding unnecessary demands and offering meaningful choices
- Creating environments where the child feels they have control
- Allowing plenty of downtime and regulation opportunities

3) Flexibility: Flexible and Adaptive Approaches

Rigid systems create stress and anxiety for PDA learners. Flexibility in approach, pace and content promotes autonomy and reduces resistance.

What This Looks Like:

- Adapting plans based on the learner's mood and capacity
- Offering multiple ways to engage with content
- Using creative and playful strategies to reframe demands

4) Safety: Emotional Regulation and Co-Regulation

Emotional safety is key to allowing PDA learners to engage with learning. Co-regulation helps develop emotional resilience and builds confidence over time.

What This Looks Like:

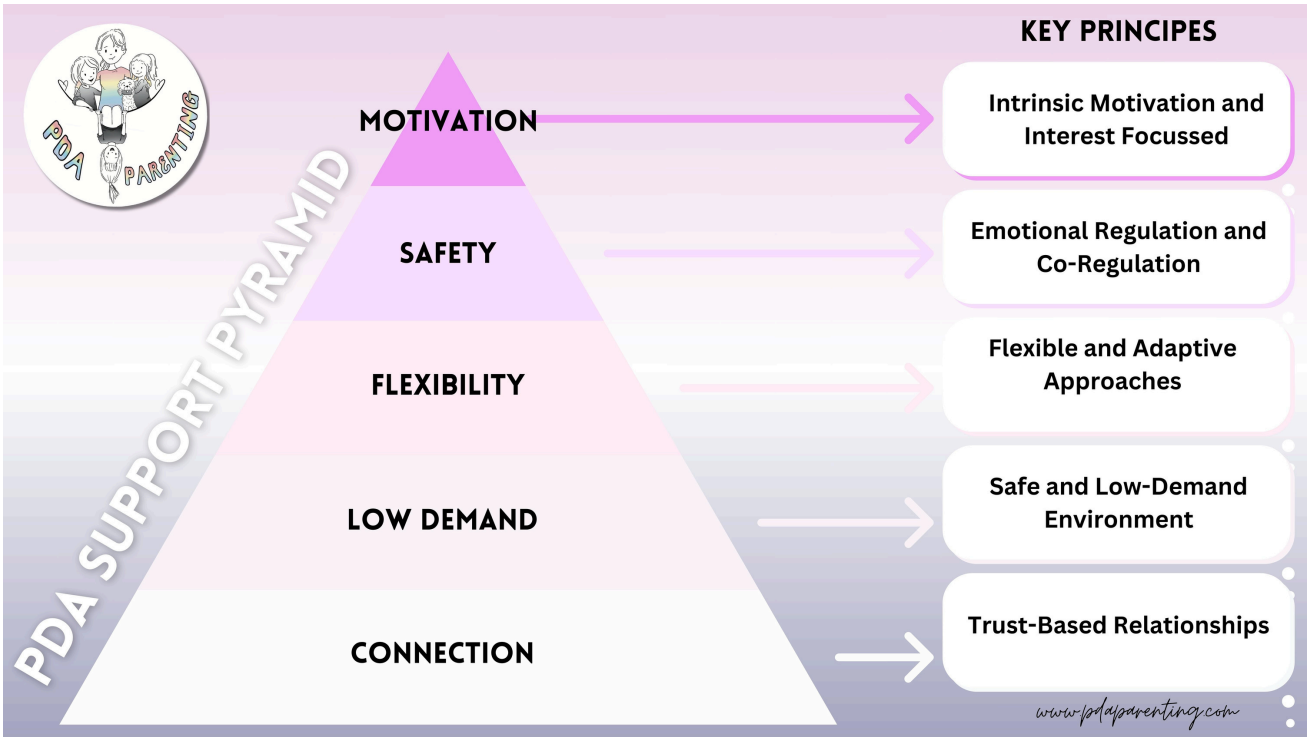
- Offering emotional support without judgment
- Creating safe spaces where the learner can self-regulate
- Modelling calmness and providing sensory supports when needed

5) Curiosity: Intrinsic Motivation and Interest-Focused Learning

When PDA learners feel safe and connected, their **natural curiosity** emerges. Intrinsic motivation leads to deeper learning and engagement.

What This Looks Like:

- Following the learner's interests and passions
- Encouraging exploration and inquiry-based learning
- Avoiding external rewards that create pressure



Exploring Educational Options

There is no one-size-fits-all solution for PDA learners. The most suitable setting is one that aligns with their needs and allows them to feel safe, valued and understood. This can also adjust over time and sometimes settings that were working can naturally come to a stage where they can no longer meet the learner's needs. Reframing our expectations and mindset, whilst being flexible to go with the flow is essential to ongoing holistic and therapeutic support.

Below are some of the most common options:

1) Mainstream School with EHCP and Support

Pros: Can work if the school adopts a flexible and trauma-informed approach, with PDA-trained staff and an inclusive school culture.
Challenges: Many mainstream settings rely on positive behaviour systems that often increase anxiety and avoidance in PDA learners.

What to Look For:

- A school willing to create a bespoke support plan
- Staff trained in PDA and trauma-informed approaches
- Flexibility with attendance, homework and participation

2) Specialist SEND Schools

Pros: Some specialist settings understand neurodivergence and offer lower-demand, individualised learning.
Challenges: Not all specialist schools are PDA-friendly and behaviour management systems can still be a barrier.

What to Look For:

- Low arousal environments with trauma-informed practice
- A focus on emotional regulation rather than compliance
- Flexibility in adapting to the child's individual profile

3) Elective Home Education (EHE) / Unschooling

Pros: Offers complete autonomy, reduces demand and allows for interest-led learning.
Challenges: Requires time, resources and a supportive network. Not always an option available to families for a multitude of reasons.

What to Consider:

- Self-directed learning tailored to the child's interests
- Flexibility to adapt to emotional needs daily

- Opportunities for social interaction and skill-building

4) Online Learning or Virtual Schooling

Pros: Allows learning in a familiar, low-pressure environment.
Challenges: May lack social interaction and often requires parental facilitation.

What to Consider:

- Self-paced, low-demand options
- Programs that allow for breaks and flexibility
- Access to online communities for peer interaction

5) Hybrid Learning / Flexi-Schooling

Pros: Combines the structure of formal schooling with the autonomy of home learning.
Challenges: Can be difficult to negotiate with schools and requires consistent communication.

What to Consider:

- A balance between formal learning and interest-led activities
- Opportunities for flexibility when needed
- A collaborative relationship with the school to ensure consistency

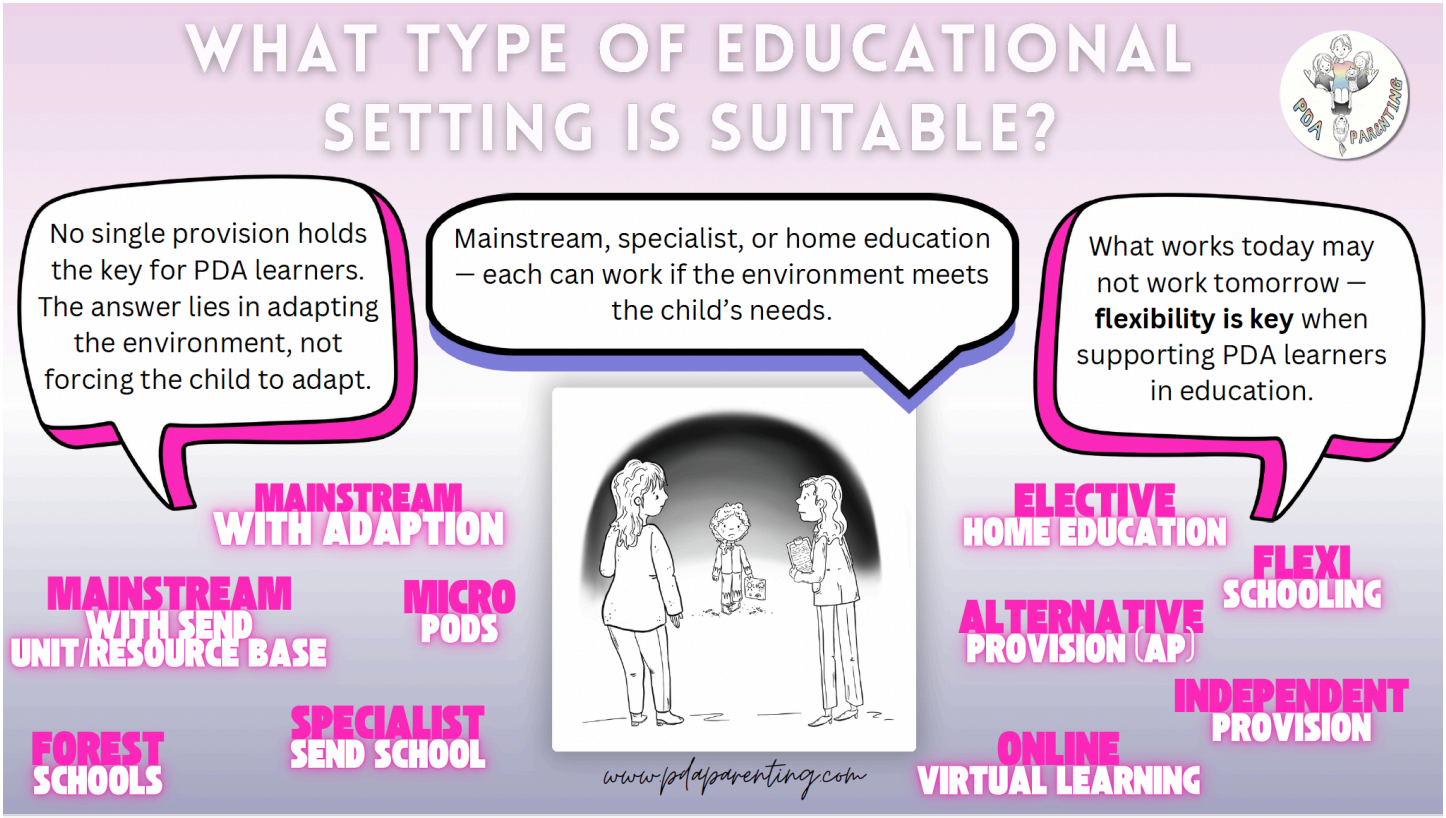
Key Considerations for Parents

No educational setting is perfect and PDA learners often require **ongoing adaptation and flexibility.** Here's how to ensure the best possible fit:

Do Your Research: Visit potential settings, ask about their approach to behaviour, flexibility and emotional regulation.
Be an Advocate: Ensure that any setting values your input and sees you as a partner in supporting your child.
Monitor and Adapt: Stay attuned to your child's emotional well-being and be ready to make changes if their needs aren't being met.

When Traditional School Can't Meet Needs: Exploring Alternative Provision

When a traditional school setting is unable to meet the unique needs of a PDA learner, it can lead to heightened anxiety, distress and even school avoidance (otherwise referred to as emotional based school avoidance or EBSA). In these cases, exploring **alternative provision (AP)** can provide a more supportive environment. AP options are often more flexible, creative and tailored to individual learning profiles, allowing children to engage in learning without the constant pressures of traditional structures. These settings focus on reducing anxiety, building trust and nurturing a child's strengths, providing a pathway for meaningful learning and emotional well-being.



Final Thoughts: Empowering PDA Learners to Thrive

The best educational environment for a PDA learner is one that recognises **the importance of autonomy, emotional safety, and flexibility.** Whether through traditional school adaptations, specialist settings or home education, the goal is to create a supportive system where the child feels safe, understood and empowered to explore the world on their terms.

It's essential to remember that **one size does not fit all** – what works well for one PDA learner may not work for another. Building a bespoke learning environment often involves trial and error, close collaboration with the child and ongoing adjustments. Success lies in prioritising emotional well-being and fostering trust, ensuring that learning happens naturally when the child feels secure, valued and in control of their environment. By championing an approach centred on empathy and flexibility, we empower PDA learners to thrive and reach their full potential.

Here at PDA Parenting, we speak regularly at conferences, events and webinars, as well as by sharing information and resources online for families and professionals. We have two books available on our website and invite you to sign up for our regular newsletter which is free and provides further information and news.