PDA PARENTING

Documents to support PDA families

Supporting PDA Siblings: Compassionate and Long-Term Strategies

Siblings of children with a profile of Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) often experience a unique set of challenges that may go unnoticed, even though as parents and carers, we try our best to navigate complex situations and to get things right. This guide explores ways to understand, validate and compassionately support siblings in a PDA household without shame or blame. It is based on insights shared during the **PDA – Promoting Demand Awareness: Compassionate Support for Siblings** webinar, where we discussed real-life experiences and practical approaches (recording available for playback in our **PDA Parenting Store**).

To understand the impact on a child whose brother or sister may have PDA, it's important to explore some of the feelings the sibling might experience:

THE SIBLING EXPERIENCE: EXPLORING PERSPECTIVES

Common feelings siblings may have

- Confusion about PDA behaviours
- Frustration due to unmet expectations/being controlled
- Shame of their sibling's behaviour
- Guilt for feeling upset
- Fear of becoming the same
- Feelings of unfair treatment
- The need to be 'perfect'
- Desire for their own attention

Common feelings siblings may have

- Role of being a sibling is their identity
- Their own struggles go unnoticed
- Feelings of loss or trauma
- Fear living in unpredictable situations
- Excessive worry of parents getting hurt
- Protective instinct for their siblings
- Love and appreciation for their sibling's uniqueness
- Future responsibility/guardianship

Acknowledging the Emotional Impact

Many of the feelings that siblings feel are completely normal, but it is important that they are able to voice them without fear or judgement. This can be very difficult to manage as an adult, especially if those feelings are quite emotive for us. Just listening with empathy can often be enough to allow the sibling to feel seen. It is very common to hear that they:

- **Feel Invisible:** They may feel that their needs and emotions are secondary to their sibling's more urgent challenges
- **Carry Emotional Burdens:** Siblings often take on the role of a 'peacekeeper' or caregiver, which can lead to anxiety, overwhelm or stress
- **Experience Guilt or Resentment:** They may feel conflicted, experiencing guilt for wanting attention or resentment for the imbalance of focus, yet the feelings of protection and love for their siblings
- **Struggle with Misunderstanding:** Their peers or extended family may not understand their unique family situation, leading to isolation

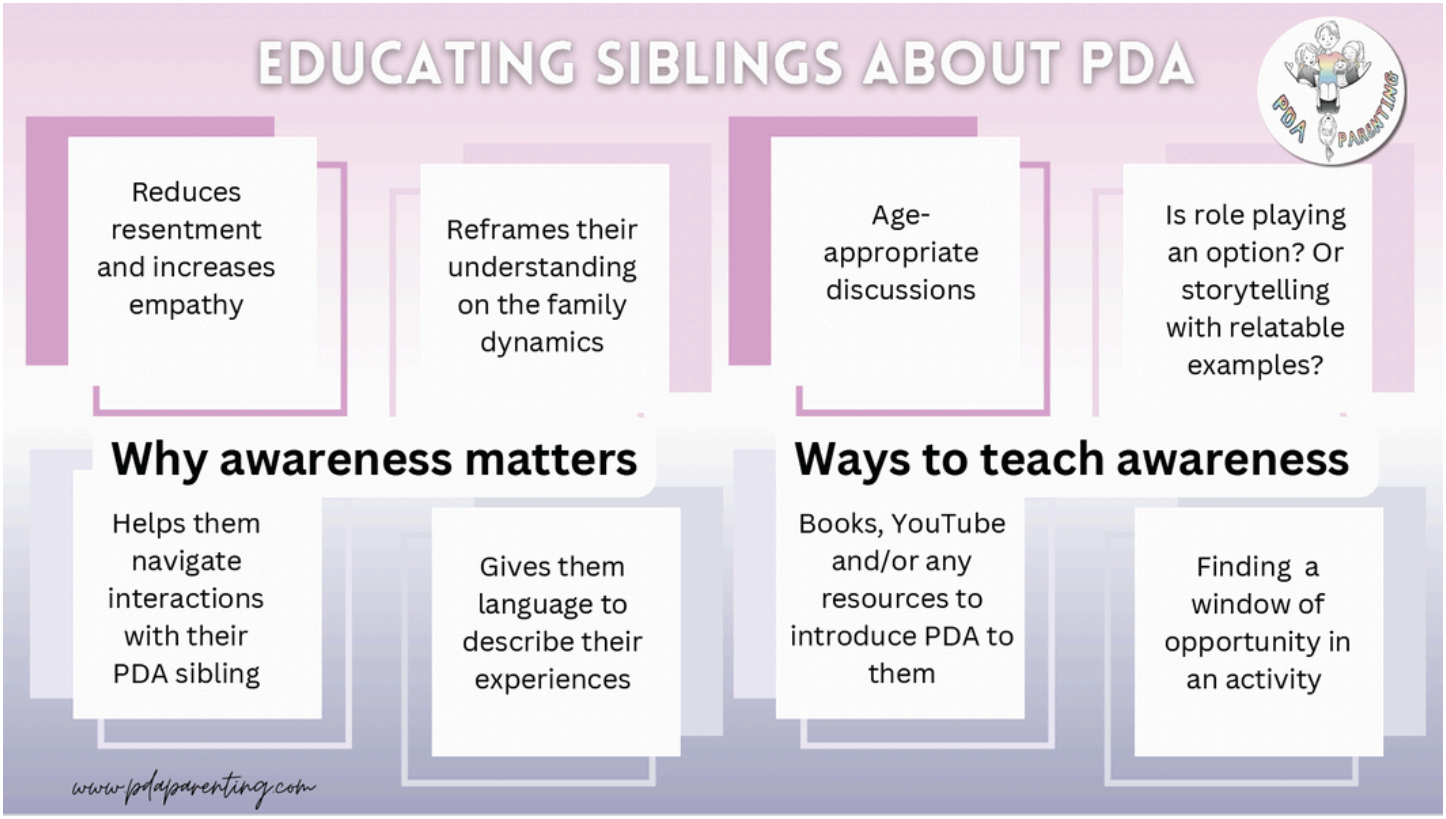
It’s essential to give siblings permission to feel whatever emotions arise and validate those feelings. Providing a safe space to express their concerns helps to build trust and to provide them with long-term coping strategies.

Compassionate Support for Siblings

In order to support siblings it is useful to consider some of the areas of focus that we might need to explore further. Siblings may need help navigating these emotions that we have highlighted, support to understand their sibling’s behaviour and also some useful approaches to feel secure and valued within the family dynamic. The following strategies focus on creating a supportive environment that nurtures connection, safety and emotional well-being for all children.

Education and Understanding

- **Provide Age-Appropriate Information**: Educate siblings about PDA in a way they can understand. This might include explaining how it affects their brother or sister's behaviour and why they might act differently
- **Lead By Example**: It’s so important that we model a PDA friendly approach and that we come from a place of understanding - the language we use and the strategies we adopt are demonstrating how to show compassion even when we least expect it
- **Encourage Questions**: Create an open environment where siblings feel safe to ask questions and express their thoughts and feelings about the situation (reminding them to find an appropriate time and a safe space to be able to do this)

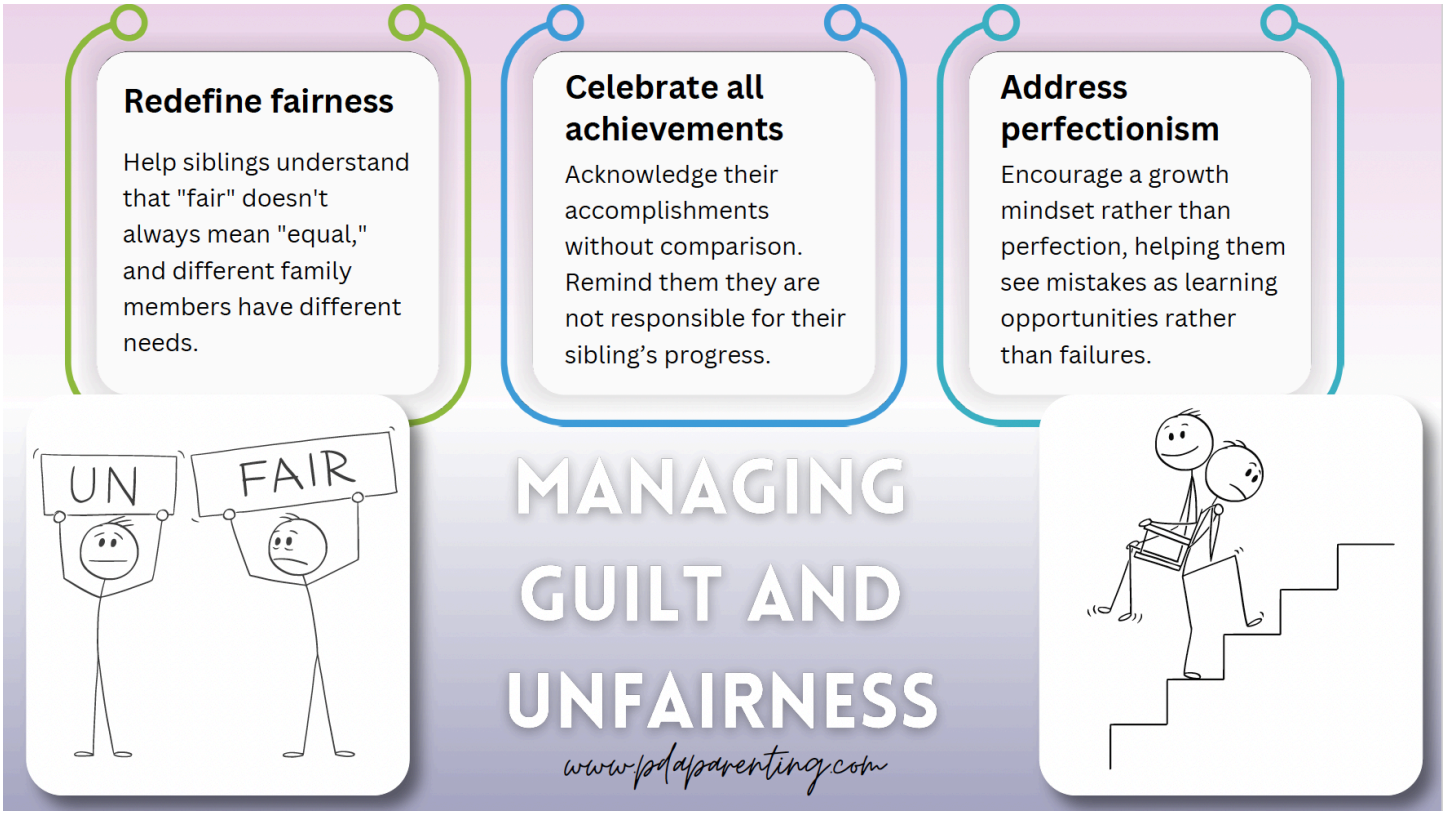


Encourage Open Communication

- **Active Listening**: Encourage siblings to share their experiences and listen actively to their concerns, ensuring they feel supported, validating rather than trying to correct it!
- **Collaborate Together**: How can we act on the information that our children give us? Can we find ways to collaborate and work together to ensure family life feels better for everyone?
- **Using Resources:** It can be effective to start slowly introducing resources on PDA as soon as you can so that understanding is shaped as much as possible

Foster Positive Relationships

- **Avoid Blaming:** Negative emotions can easily be passed on so it's important that we avoid blaming children for meltdowns or for making mistakes
- **Bonding Activities**: Plan activities that siblings can enjoy together *if possible*. The goal is to foster some positive interactions and shared experiences - even if they are just for a few minutes and are tiny steps that can be built upon. Ultimately we want to change the narrative and improve the relationship dynamic when things can often feel very challenging and negative. Some siblings need to be completely apart and for some families that might need to be a solution. Working with the needs of individual families is key and it's best not to make comparisons with others
- **Celebrate Achievements**: Recognise and celebrate the achievements of all children in the family, ensuring everyone feels valued and appreciated
- **Parenting Continuity**: Using a low-demand approach to parenting can be applied to siblings too as using collaborative, trust-building strategies work with all children. Also, having discussions around 'fairness' might help to ease feelings of frustration

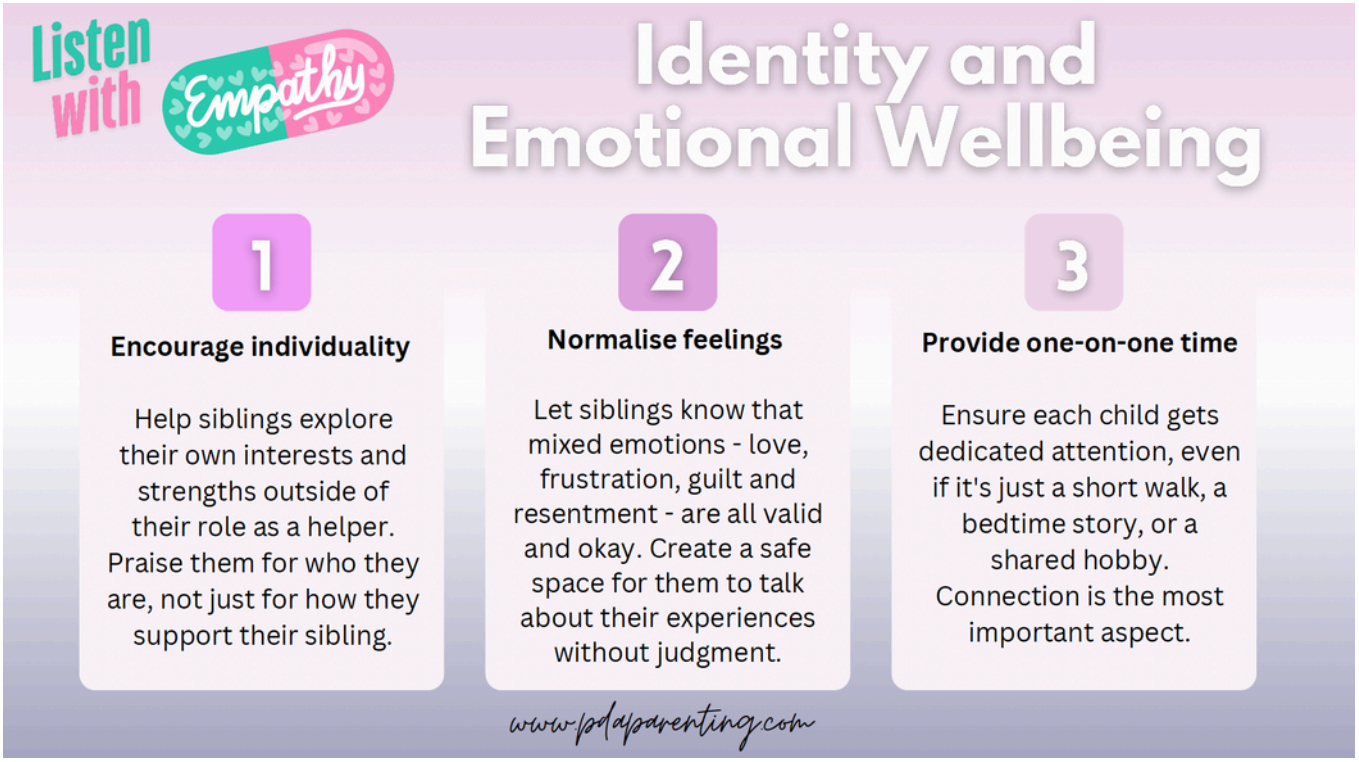


Provide Emotional Support

- **One-on-One Time**: Spend quality time with each child individually, allowing them to feel special and important, even if this is only for very short pockets of time
- **Counselling and Support Groups**: Consider looking at siblings in support groups or counselling sessions where they can meet others in similar situations and learn coping strategies
- **Creative Outlets**: Encourage siblings to work through their feelings using expressive outlets such as drawing, writing, sport, gaming or music. This can be a therapeutic way for them to process their emotions
- **Safe Spaces**: Create safe spaces where siblings can talk openly about their feelings without fear of judgment or reprimand
- **Individual Experiences**: Recognise that each sibling will have a unique experience and perspective on living with a sibling with PDA. Tailor support to meet their individual needs
- **Peer Comparisons**: Be mindful of how siblings might compare their family situation to those of their peers and try to find ways to have open discussions about that. Helping the sibling to reframe and see the positives in our own families might help to create a more positive mindset

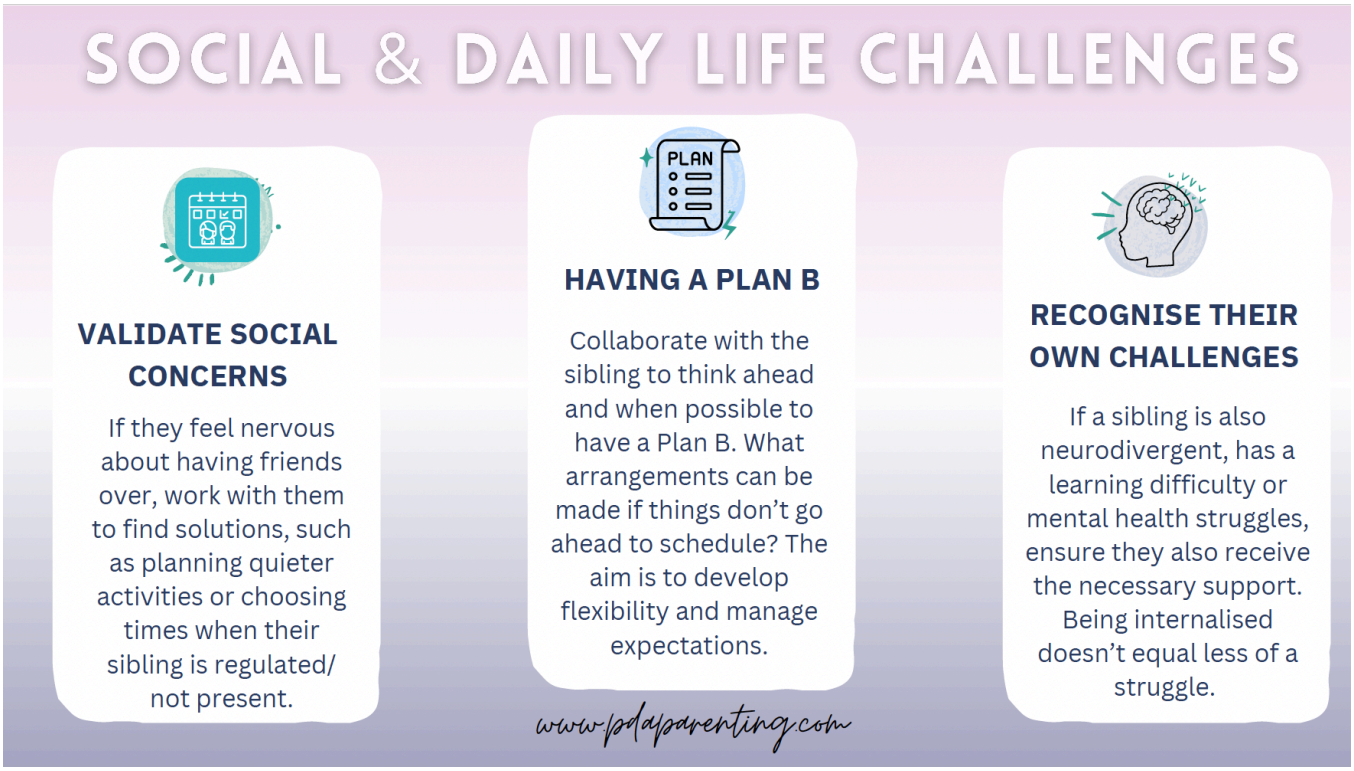
Identity and Emotional Wellbeing

A sibling's sense of identity can be deeply influenced by growing up alongside a brother or sister with PDA. They may struggle with self-worth, feel overshadowed or take on a caregiving role at a young age. Emotional wellbeing is a crucial aspect of their development and without proper support, siblings may internalise stress, guilt or resentment. Encouraging self-expression, fostering independence and providing validation for their own experiences can help siblings develop a strong and positive sense of self.



Create a Supportive Environment

- **Routine and Structure**: Maintain a consistent family routine, where possible, to help siblings feel secure and understand what to expect. Safety can be found in having less unpredictability for all members of the family
- **Inclusive Planning**: Involve siblings in planning family activities, ensuring that everyone's needs and preferences are considered, maybe even separating when needed rather than trying to achieve family activities together
- **Social and Daily Challenges**: Understanding that there are far more social and daily challenges that PDA siblings face. Working with them to recognise and make plans for these issues might help the child to feel more secure



Promote Empathy and Understanding

- **Role-Playing and Discussions**: Use role-playing activities and discussions to help younger siblings to understand and empathise with their sibling's experiences
- **Books and Resources**: Provide books and resources that depict characters with similar experiences, helping siblings relate and learn

Supporting Siblings During Crisis Points

When meltdowns become extreme, it can feel incredibly frightening and overwhelming for siblings to witness and experience. Without preparation, they may feel helpless, scared or even unsafe. To protect their emotional well-being and ensure their safety, it's essential to have a well-thought-out **Safety Plan** in place.

Why a Safety Plan Matters:

- **Provides a Sense of Control:** Knowing where they can go or what they can do during a meltdown gives siblings a sense of security
- **Reduces Anxiety:** Having predictable steps in place can reduce the fear of the unknown during difficult situations
- **Prevents Harm:** Moving a sibling to a designated "safe zone" minimises risk and helps them avoid being caught in physical distress

Neurodivergent Families

In neurodivergent families, it's important to recognise that siblings may express their emotions in different ways - some outwardly through frustration or questions, while others may suppress their feelings. Research shows a high likelihood of autism and other

neurodivergent traits recurring within families, meaning siblings may also have unique needs that require understanding and support. By considering each child's perspective and potential neurodivergence, we can ensure all siblings feel seen, heard and valued.

Some siblings may internalise their experiences, leading to increased anxiety, perfectionism or withdrawal. It's essential to:

- **Check-in Regularly:** Ask open-ended questions about how they are feeling
- **Make Space for Siblings**: All too often we lack any capacity to support or make space for moments of distress or dys-regulation in siblings. It's so important that they have the same and equal parenting parameters to work within and that we haven't run out of spoons too support them too. Their episodes of distress may also look different to their siblings and it can be far too easy to gloss over without applying the same adjustments
- **Model Emotional Regulation:** Show them how to express and manage difficult emotions and acknowledging when we make mistakes by leading from example. We can't always get it right and nor can our children - we are only human after all
- **Seek Professional Support if Needed:** Consider counselling or sibling support groups when emotional struggles persist

Useful Resources for Sibling and Family Support

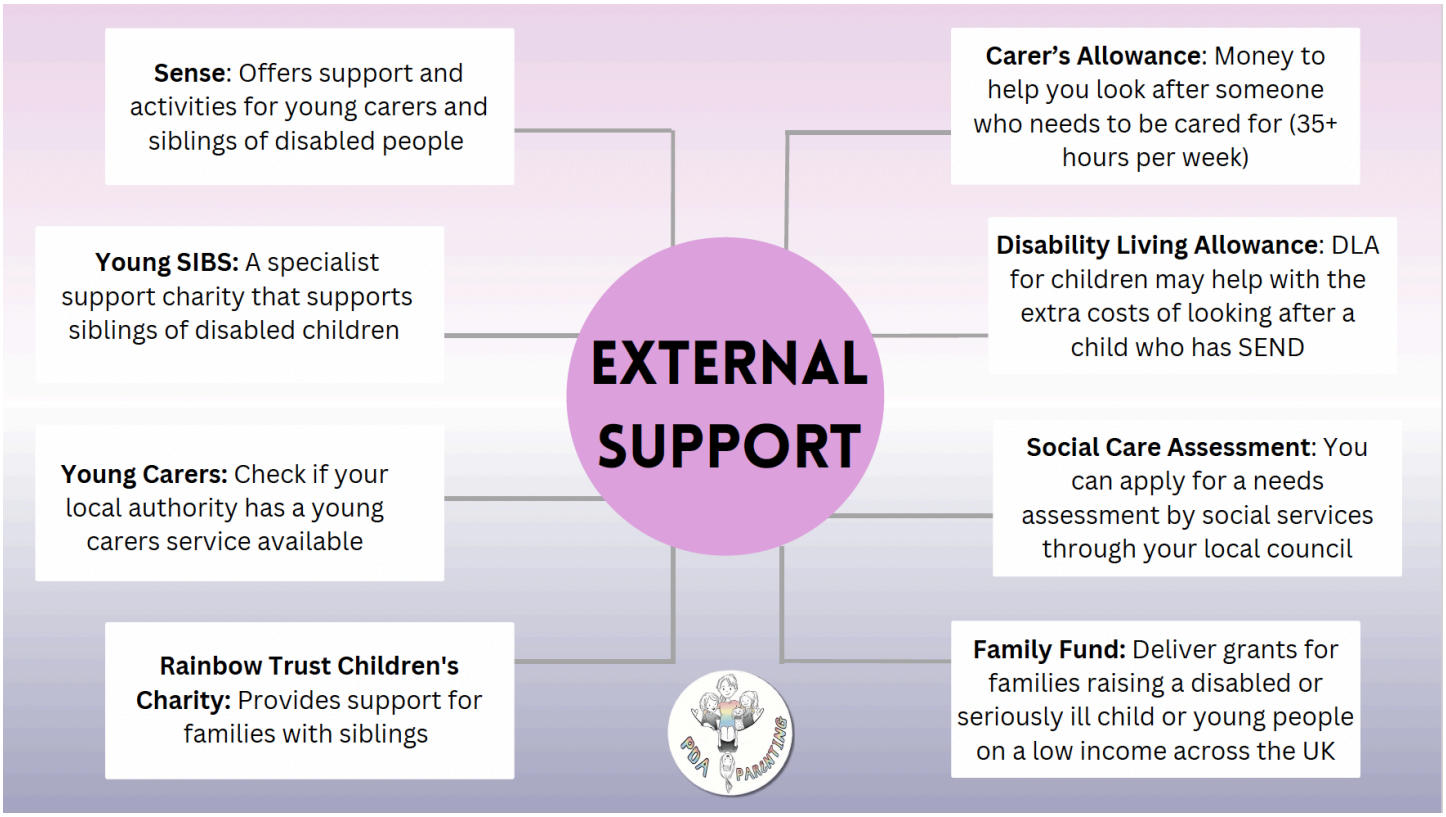
Finding the right support can make a huge difference for siblings navigating life alongside a brother or sister with PDA. Whether they need emotional reassurance, a sense of community or practical coping strategies, there are many resources available to help. From sibling support groups to insightful books and expert-led guidance, these tools can provide comfort, connection and a deeper understanding of their experiences.

Our Recommended Books to support Siblings

- **Young Child:** *The Panda on PDA* by Dr Glòria Dura-Vila
- **Young Reader:** *I'm Not Upside Down, I'm Downside Up: Not a Boring Book About PDA* co-authored by Danielle Jata-Hall
- **Adult Non-Fiction:** *PDA In The Family: Life After the Lightbulb Moment* by Steph Curtis
- **Adult Fiction:** *Black Rainbow* by Danielle Jata-Hall

External Support

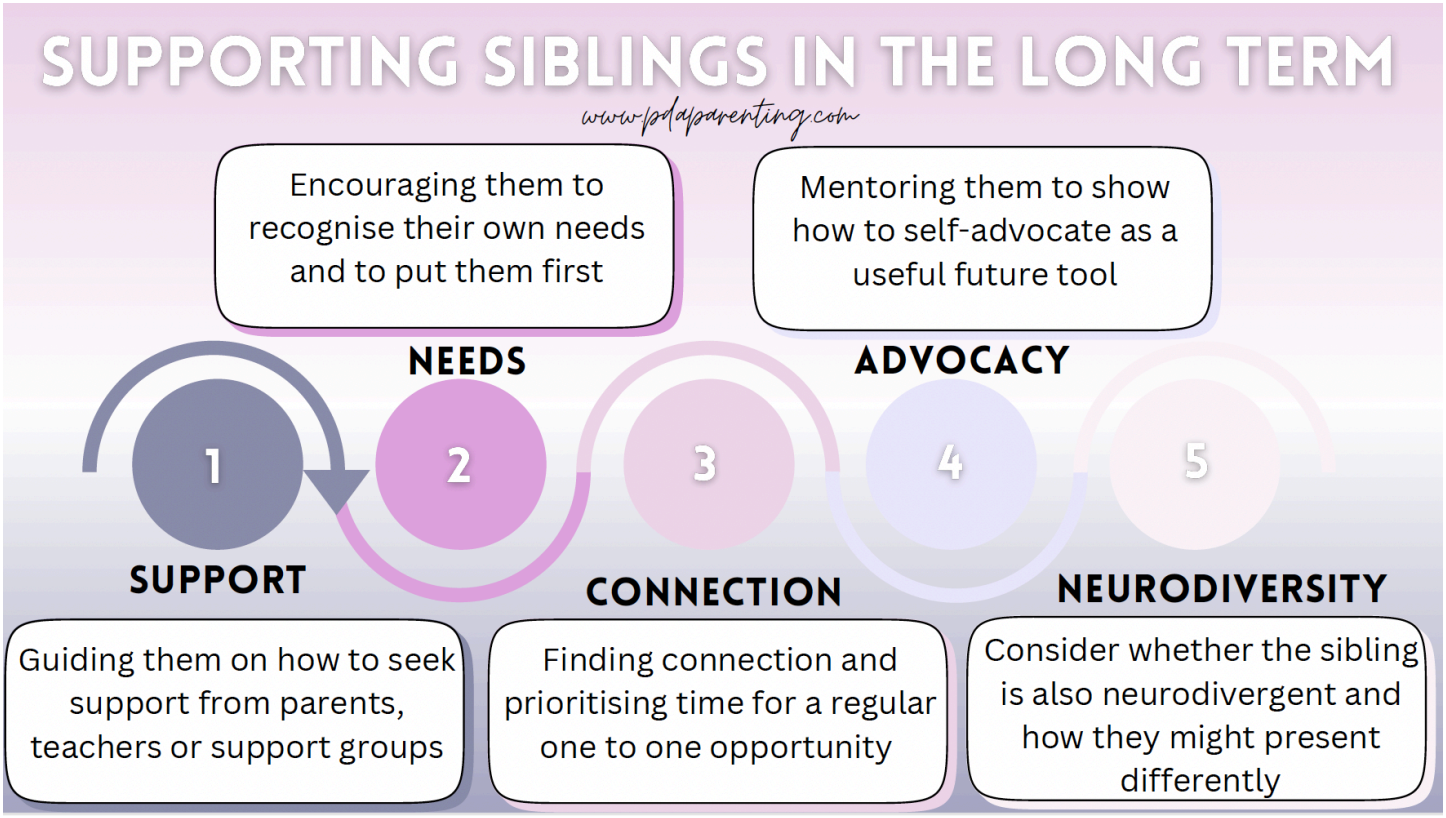
- **Sibling Support Groups** – Connecting with other children who have similar experiences can help siblings feel less alone
- **Counselling and Therapy** – Professional support (which needs to be neuroaffirming) can provide a safe space for siblings to express their emotions and develop healthier coping strategies
- **Workshops and Webinars** – Educational sessions designed for parents and siblings can offer practical advice and reassurance (see our webinar recording on sibling support in the *PDA Parenting* store)
- **Helplines and Online Forums** – Anonymous and accessible support options for siblings who may struggle to share their feelings with family
- **Young Carer Support Services** – Recognising and addressing the additional responsibilities some siblings take on within the family



Building Long-Term Support

Supporting siblings is a long-term journey, which might have many challenging bumps to navigate, but it's important to try and practice doing the following things:

- **Checking In Continuously:** Ensure their voices are heard and their needs are met over time
- **Involving Everyone in Family Discussions:** Give all family members a say in decisions that affect family dynamics
- **Being Open to Adaptation:** As their needs evolve, adjust your support strategies
- **Explore Sibling Needs**: Encourage siblings to advocate for their own needs and support them ongoing to enable them to be met



Final Thoughts

Supporting siblings isn't about finding a quick fix. It's a long-term journey that involves ongoing communication, emotional validation, and ensuring all children feel valued and supported. By putting compassionate strategies in place, families can create an environment where every child thrives.

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.