

PDA PARENTING

Documents to support PDA families

A Resource for Staff Room Walls: Insights from Parents, Carers and Providers on Supporting SEND/PDA Learners

Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is a profile on the autism spectrum characterised by an extreme avoidance of everyday demands and expectations. This is not driven by defiance but by a deep-seated anxiety response. Learners with PDA often experience demand as a threat, triggering a fight, flight, freeze or shutdown response. This can make it difficult for them to engage in conventional learning environments.

Their ability to complete tasks can vary from day to day, depending on their emotional regulation and stress levels. Masking - the act of hiding distress - is common in PDA learners and may create the illusion that they are coping well when in fact they are in a state of constant internal struggle. High cognitive ability can coexist with a significant nervous system disability, making it important not to equate apparent ability with emotional readiness or well-being.

Listening to Families

When it comes to supporting learners with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) and PDA, it is crucial for educational staff to understand the unique challenges these students face. Below are key insights and suggestions compiled from comments made by parents, carers and providers. These insights are intended to help staff create a more supportive and understanding environment for SEND/PDA learners.

We would love you to display this on your staffroom walls or share electronically as a document to all of your staff. It's so important that the approach is applied universally across a setting so that we can create the best outcomes for our young people.

From those living it every day, here's what we need you to remember. Let's start with a few comments given by parents when we asked them:

“What’s something you wish schools knew about PDA?”

Just because she could do it yesterday, doesn't mean she can do it today.

It's not hostility. It is anxiety.

Compliance is not, and should not be the goal! Compliance isn't learning.

Masking throughout the day does not mean my child is doing well at school.

That expectations overwhelm my child; she freezes and does not study at all.

"Behaviour charts" have a negative impact on their anxiety.

That it is real. Like a phobia to any demands. That's what they feel like.

They can be cognitively brilliant AND have a nervous system disability at the SAME TIME.

www.pdaresources.co.uk

This resource was created to bring the authentic voices of parents, carers and professionals directly into the staffroom for everyday learning and improvement. These are not abstract theories or hypothetical scenarios - they are lived truths from those supporting children and young people with a PDA profile and other complex SEND needs every single day. The statements above are powerful insights into the emotional and practical realities of these learners. They challenge assumptions, highlight what’s often misunderstood and point towards the kind of compassionate, flexible and individualised support that truly makes a difference.

We hope that you will let these following learning areas be your guide.

Debunking the Myth: Behaviour as Communication

One of the most pervasive myths surrounding learners with SEND/PDA is the notion that their behaviour is inherently bad or defiant. This misunderstanding can lead to negative assumptions and responses that do more harm than good. It is crucial to shift our perspective and recognise behaviour as a form of communication.

Understanding Behaviour as a Message

Behaviour is not a random act of defiance or disruption; it is a signal that something deeper is going on. For SEND/PDA learners, what may appear as challenging behaviour is often an expression of unmet needs, anxiety, sensory overload or difficulty processing emotions.

Instead of viewing these behaviours as problems to be corrected, we should see them as messages to be understood.

Becoming Behavioural Detectives

To truly support SEND/PDA learners, educators and caregivers must become detectives who seek to understand what these behaviours are trying to communicate. This involves:

- **Observing Patterns:** Pay attention to when and where behaviours occur to identify potential triggers or stressors.
- **Listening Actively:** Engage with the learner to hear their perspective and validate their feelings. This can provide insights into their needs and challenges.
- **Asking Questions:** Encourage open dialogue by asking questions that help uncover the root causes of behaviours. This can lead to more effective solutions and support strategies.
- **Being Patient and Non-judgmental:** Approach each situation with patience and without judgment. Recognise that learners are doing their best to communicate in the ways they know how.

Reframing Our Approach

By reframing our approach to behaviour, we can create a more empathetic and supportive environment for SEND/PDA learners. This means responding to behaviours with curiosity and compassion rather than control and punishment. When we view behaviour as communication, we open the door to deeper understanding and more meaningful connections with our learners.

Here's what our audience wanted you to know:



Three Key Behaviour Mottos!

- 1**
All behaviour is communication.
Be curious.
- 2**
Punishing a child in shutdown will only escalate the behaviour.
- 3**
They need connection and co-regulation, not correction.

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Trust-Based Strategies

Traditional behaviour management strategies often backfire with PDA learners. Systems based on compliance, rewards, consequences or correction may increase anxiety, trigger shutdowns or escalate behaviour. Behaviour charts, sticker systems and punishment-based approaches can reinforce feelings of failure and contribute to distress.

What works better are low-demand, flexible relationship-based strategies that prioritise emotional safety and connection. Co-regulation - where a trusted adult helps a child return to a state of calm - is essential. Using indirect, non-demanding language, offering choices and reducing pressure are far more effective than commands or incentives. Collaborative approaches that involve the child in planning and decision-making help to build trust and autonomy.

Here's what our audience answered:

Using a Different Approach

That it looks VERY different to atypical autistic behaviour and challenge.

It's a nervous system disorder.

When you tell a child what to do this is a demand and it will never work!

Perceived consequences determine whether it's a request or a demand, not how nicely it's asked.

ONE PAGE PROFILE

PDA SUPPORT STRATEGIES

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The infographic features a central illustration of a person's hands holding a document titled 'ONE PAGE PROFILE' and 'PDA SUPPORT STRATEGIES'. The document includes a cartoon drawing of a child's face and several stars. The background is a light purple gradient with a white glow around the central image.

This is why it's vital to understand that PDA does not always present like "typical autism" and why standard approaches often fail. Traditional strategies frequently rely on structure, routine, visual timetables, clear instructions and reinforcement systems - all of which are perceived by PDA learners as external control or demands. These well-meaning tools can unintentionally trigger anxiety and resistance rather than provide reassurance. Our contributors emphasise repeatedly in their responses that they would like staff to remember it is a case of "can't not won't."

Challenging Assumptions

It is essential to move away from assumptions that these learners are making deliberate choices to be difficult or non-compliant. PDA is a nervous system difference rooted in anxiety and sensory processing differences. What may appear to be opposition or laziness is often a protective response to overwhelming internal states.

Many PDA learners present differently from typical autistic profiles and even from each other. No two PDA learners are the same and comparing them to previous students can lead to misunderstandings. Supportive parenting or professional accommodations are not causing dependency or helplessness - they are necessary responses to real needs.

It's also important to recognise that doing well academically or appearing calm in school does not mean the learner is thriving. Often, significant effort goes into masking difficulties, which can lead to after-school meltdowns, burnout or mental health challenges.

Here's what our audience answered:

The infographic is set against a light purple background. In the center, the words "Challenging" and "Assumptions" are written in a large, white, sans-serif font. Below "Challenging" is a circular illustration of a child in a green hoodie sitting on a blue bench, looking down with a sad expression. A rainbow is visible behind the child. Below the illustration is the website address "www.pda parenting.com". At the bottom center is a circular logo for "PDA PARENTING" featuring a stylized figure. Surrounding the central text and illustration are four white speech bubbles with blue outlines, each containing a quote from the audience:

- Top-left: "He's not naughty, he's misunderstood and struggling."
- Top-right: "Can't not won't!"
- Bottom-left: "These kiddos aren't choosing not to attend."
- Bottom-right: "Children do well if they can..."

Supporting PDA learners means that we ask that they are not punished for what they can't do, but are supported in the hope that we can break down those barriers over time.

A Call to Educators

The first step before anything can be achieved is to look at what we can learn from parents. The ability to collaborate and listen to one another is key in creating the foundation that PDA learners need to thrive. **Our audience eloquently summed up these points:**

Working with families: What can we learn from parents?

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Listen to the
parents and
the child.



Listen to kids and
learn from them.
This is especially
important for
kids who are
struggling.



Work on a
collaborative
level with the
child, not from
a place of
authority.



Yes, my child can
still 'have' PDA,
even though they
look totally
different to the
PDA child you
worked with one
time before.



Its not me being
anxious and
"enabling" that is
causing him to
have "learned
helplessness".

To support PDA learners effectively, educators must be open to unlearning traditional methods and embracing **neurodiversity-informed practices**. PDA requires a bespoke, compassionate approach that centres the needs and voices of the child. Flexibility, curiosity and creativity are key. The child and parent's voice should be at the centre of the discussions around the learner, **"with us, not without us,"** as the autistic community often says.

Understanding that behaviour is communication allows staff to respond with empathy rather than control. Building genuine trust with learners is foundational. When a child feels safe and understood, they are more likely to engage, even if in non-traditional ways. It's important to consider how we define success and whether we prioritise engagement and well-being over academic achievements.

Professional development should include up-to-date, lived experience-informed resources on PDA. Staff are encouraged to explore approaches such as those advocated by Dr. Ross Greene, which focus on the idea that **"children do well if they can, not if they want to."**

Feedback from our survey in the PDA Parenting community highlighted a common misconception that the problem is derived in 'poor' or 'lazy' parenting, rather than understanding the PDA profile instead. Multiple voices pushed for parents to be listened to so that both sides could make better progress.

Our audience also noted how hyper-vigilant their young people are and how quickly they can detect authenticity and true care.

They reported the following information:



Forget what you know and believe - PDA is complex, subtle, individual (and should be individual-led).

Not everyone learns in the same way. Flexibility and lateral thinking are crucial .

They need to be able to trust you, and they can tell when you are not genuine!

What parents want educators to know...

In schools and education, we need members of staff to advocate for the necessary resources and support within your own educational settings. This may include specialised training, additional staff or access to specific tools and materials.

By incorporating these insights into your everyday practice, you can create a more inclusive and supportive environment that empowers SEND/PDA learners to thrive. Remember, your role as educators is vital in shaping their educational journeys positively. **Here are some key mottos that might just make all of the difference:**

Keep an open mind and heart

If I'm not regulated, I cannot learn

Chose your battles

One size does not fit all

Key Mantras!

Tomorrow's another day



Creating a Whole School Ethos

We hope you feel inspired and committed to creating meaningful, positive change in your school environment. By printing, sharing and displaying this resource, you are actively championing our SEND and PDA learners - recognising their rights to be understood, supported and included.

For PDA learners to truly thrive, they need to feel emotionally and physically safe across the entire school setting. This cannot be achieved through isolated efforts; neuro-affirming practice must be embedded as a consistent, whole-school approach. Without this consistency, even the best intentions of individual staff members may not be enough to sustain a placement or meet the child's needs long term.

The language we use around neurodivergence matters. It shapes attitudes, beliefs and ultimately the quality of support a learner receives. Understanding the PDA profile isn't just helpful - it's essential. It empowers staff to recognise the underlying causes of behaviour, avoid harmful assumptions and respond with empathy and effectiveness. It also allows children to be seen for who they are, rather than who we expect them to be.

As parents and carers, our hope is not just for our children to survive the school experience - we want them to thrive. We want them to feel respected, valued and safe to be themselves. If this resource has sparked conversation or challenged assumptions, that's not only okay - it's necessary. Growth comes from open dialogue, especially when it leads to better outcomes for vulnerable learners.

Please continue listening - especially to the parents. Even if what they describe isn't visible in school, that doesn't mean it isn't real. Masking is powerful and home experiences often reveal the impact of the school day in ways educators may not immediately see.

Thank you for taking the time to engage with a different perspective. Your willingness to listen, learn and reflect is the first and most important step toward making a difference.

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.

