

Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA)

What is PDA?

Pathological Demand Avoidance is a condition which is part of the Autism spectrum, where young people have an overwhelming need to avoid demands or instructions, even if the demand is to do something they enjoy. The demand avoidance is driven by anxiety.

It must be recognised that currently in BANES PDA is not officially recognised and is not diagnosed.

Young people with PDA often display good social skills, this however is often only at a surface level. It is very difficult to know how much a young person with PDA is understanding. These guidelines should be read in conjunction with the speech and language advice. Young people become very efficient at using a variety of strategies to avoid a demand or instruction given to them. This can include:

- Delaying activities
- Distraction
- Negotiating different options for themselves
- Charming
- Role playing
- Making excuses
- Falling to the ground
- Pretending to sleep
- Shouting
- Explosive behaviour (sometimes this is an act of behaviour rather than the way they are actually feeling. This is used where it has brought them success in avoiding demands in the past).

Strategies to support young people with PDA

- Communication is central to supporting young people with PDA. All adults working with the young person need to be trained in avoiding the use of demand words. These include, but are not limited to, the following:
 - "I need you to..."
 - "You can't do..."
 - "You must do..."
 - "Now you..."
 - "You will..."
 - "You won't..."
- Instead try using the following phrases to support young people. Adults will need to be very aware of the tone, volume, pace and pitch of their voice.
 - "I wonder if we can..."
 - "Lets see if we can..."

- "I can't seem to do this myself can you help me..."
- "Let's see if we can make this work..."
- "Would you like to attempt..."

- Be aware of your own body language and the effect it may be having. Try sitting, standing side on, giving space to the young person.
- It is important to develop a strong relationship with young people with PDA. Adults may need to abandon the typical adult child dynamic. Young people with PDA may automatically view this as authoritarian or controlling. Learning academically is not the initial priority. The initial priority is relationship building and regulation and control strategies.
- Normal behaviour and reward strategies and policies may not work. Adults should discuss with the young person what would be an appropriate approach.
- Adults will need to be very aware of distraction or avoidance techniques being used.
- Adults will need to recognise when they need to remove themselves from situations to avoid the young person becoming increasingly dysregulated. Allowing a young person to "win" an "argument" is often a very helpful regulation strategy.
- Humour is a vitally important distraction and regulation strategy.
- It is not possible to cure PDA. The aim is to provide the young person with coping strategies. It is important that staff working with young people with PDA are supported by colleagues and have regular supervision sessions with line managers. The condition can often be very frustrating for staff as what may work on one day, may not work the next. Often progress can be slow, big steps forward are often followed by larger steps backwards.
- Adults will need to decide what is unacceptable behaviour that needs to be tackled directly and what is unacceptable but can be ignored. This can only be decided with an excellent understanding of the individual pupil.
- Give pupils as much warning about the tasks and activities they will be working on as possible.
- Giving young people a choice of activity is vitally important. A sense of control is what young people with PDA are looking for to reduce their own anxiety. Teachers and support staff will need to not only have a plan A and B but potentially a plan Z as well! All adults will need to be flexible with their plans.
- Leaders will need to reduce or remove pressure on staff for the young person to achieve academically.
- Visual timetables can be agreed with the young person.
- Give young people the option on when they choose to complete their work. i.e. "We have these tasks to attempt today. I'd like to help you complete five of them. Which ones would you like to do and which ones do you want to do first?"

- Agree with the young person on a safe space and a “regulation action plan” that they can choose to initiate if they are feeling anxious.
- Adults need to be very aware of the emotional state of the young person. This can sometimes feel like walking a tight rope. Sometimes the young person can be pushed to achieve more and other times the academic focus may need to be removed completely.
- Interventions like zones of regulation and consequence mapping support young people with moving to independence. This gives the young person control over their regulation strategies. Adults will need to work with young people to practice their regulation strategies when they are in a regulated state rather than waiting to dysregulation to occur.
- Co-regulation is very important for pupils with PDA. Adults will need to model regulated and emotionally intelligent behaviour in sometimes very challenging situations.
- Sometimes putting the ball in the young persons court is helpful. When you would like them to do something make an indirect statement and allow the young person time to consider. This may be quite a long time. The young person is sometimes delaying the activity so when they do choose to start it feels as if it is on their terms.
- Work with pupils around gaining an understanding of their anxiety triggers. Develop joint plans for dealing with them.
- Meet and greet and soft starts to the day can reduce anxiety.