

### **General note about PDA:**

Students with PDA experience high levels of anxiety and there is a strong need for them to feel in control in most situations. This anxiety is largely driven by:

- the perception of demands or potential demands,
- being faced with failure
- not being in control.

Any demands or expectations can impact on anxiety: from direct and explicit instructions to more subtle, everyday demands. These then heighten anxiety and lead to compulsive and obsessive avoidance. Avoidance can lead to a 'panic attack' meltdown. Due to more sophisticated social interaction skills, students with PDA are often able to use these skills creatively and seek to avoid demands through negotiation, manipulation and distraction.

### **Features of students with PDA:**

- A very poor sense of self-esteem, which often results in students expressing that they can't do something or won't like it as a default response.
- Lack of confidence in crossing the threshold necessary to engage in an activity (being described as 'can't help not won't help').
- An expressed desire to be on a par with or better than others, but not seeing it as necessary to put in the effort required.
- An ambivalence about succeeding and enjoying an experience or activity, typified by the student who destroys their work on completion when it is commented on by the teacher.
- A lack of permanence and transfer of learning and experience, which means that there can be very sudden and dramatic setbacks after relatively prolonged periods of settled behaviour and progress. This leads to a feeling among staff that changes have often been brought about by managing external features, such as the environment and the way people relate to the child, rather than internal change within the student.
- Very poor emotional regulation means the student is prone to mood swings and phases which can be both short-lived or last for longer periods of time. The level of tolerance is very much mood-related and there can be what are best seen as 'can't help it days' when it is unproductive to pursue demands. There is often a sense of the child being emotionally exhausted from 'always being on the watch' for the next demand.
- A desire to have friendships and relationships with peers, but inadvertently sabotaging this through the need to be in control, manipulating and mediating or refereeing others' interactions.

### **Below is a summary of suggested PDA practice:**

- Parents and staff can use ASD-friendly approaches, remembering that students with ASD are mainly visual thinkers and learners, that it is best to assume nothing, and make the implicit explicit in every case. Parents and staff could use visuals to cue students in to a specific job or task. Use visual timetables or task checklists so that they can ask what they have got to do before being told what to do.
- A strategic approach might be useful, remembering that the use of structure and routine, usually effective for students with autism are rarely so for children with PDA, due the demand effect, so it will be important to keep reflecting and building in flexibility into any structure. Predictability can become boring and may lessen the desire to participate. The aim will be to keep students on task for a 'substantial' period of each day, ensuring that what appears to be 'learning' is actually absorbed and retained. Introduce goals gradually, using a visual timeline and building on positive experiences - don't allow students to feel that they have failed, so ensure that some acceptable achievement is gained at each step. You may need to limit expectations in the short term.
- Short rules or expectations for school need to be agreed. These need to be as few as possible and maintained using techniques such as passing over responsibility (e.g. 'It's a health and safety rule', 'The Government says'),

depersonalising (use imaginary characters or visual clarification) or giving choices. Rules can be disguised or negotiated, but there have to be some non-negotiable boundaries. Students with PDA may understand school rules but do not always feel that they apply to themselves e.g. "I don't understand why rules matter (unless they are mine)". Suggest that they work out the possible reasons for the rules, so that they have agreed them but not been told them: this way, it is not a demand and they will not feel so anxious! Any rules need to be clear, simple, unambiguous and visual (written). Link success with expectations during the school day, noting that students with PDA are not generally motivated by rewards, as they can make them feel less in control because staff have the balance of control with the carrot or stick.

- Staff can empower students, and make them feel more in control, by giving more choice. Giving simple choices will help the day run smoothly. This gives a sense of having some control, while ensuring that you keep the key requirement firm. Direct demands cause students the most anxiety. If phrased as a choice, it is easier to cope with, even if one choice is so undesirable there isn't really a choice! They also then need to learn that there are consequences for not achieving an expectation, with regard to making work up, etc. Again any consequences need to be few, clear, simple and visual (written) so that they are non-negotiable.
- Staff need to be reflective and allow take up time: plant the seed of what you would like to happen at the start of the session, but don't expect it to happen straight away. No matter how many disagreements and refusals the student exhibits during the day, they will always need and seek out more. They will test each boundary set. Staff will need to be mindful of their level of anxiety and have an 'Escape Plan', with script and symbols, for them to access, with demands then scaled back.
- Build the student's ability to communicate through good, functional relationships. Students with PDA need a trusted and 'safe' key worker or adult who they respond to. It is easier to disguise the pressures of learning through the pleasures of a positive relationship with the adult; in this way students could have time built into the day to begin to talk about some of the difficulties they are having, and begin a dialogue and understanding of their own SEN. In the same way, students can follow a simple routine at home where they go to their room for some down time to recharge their battery, and then be expected to communicate about how their day went, using a 5-point scale, thinking of actions they can take to make things better.
- Use humour If you feel the tension rising. Humour is a fantastic distraction. You could try making jokes, using physical humour (exaggerated facial expressions, or silly walks), being silly or feigning ignorance.
- Be cautious about rewarding success: although praise can be motivating, it may make students decide not to give in so easily next time and tear up work which has been praised.
- Use distraction to temporarily press 'pause' and ease anxiety. Engage the left brain with a question to which the student needs an answer (e.g. "Is it too hot in here?")
- Use Social Stories/Comic Strip Conversations to enhance social understanding, particularly of the appropriate ways of being and behaving in school and how other people might see or 'read' their behaviour. These also encourage the student to see the big picture.
- 1:1 discussion to identify how the day is going and break it down - staff may remind student of these if they are spilling out to others during the day. Problems will be discussed and solutions agreed.
- Have a SAFE space and/or several areas where students can go to be alone and calm.
- When the student 'melts down' use quiet tones, give lots of REASSURANCE even if they are swearing obscenities at you and lashing out. Try to think of it as a panic attack.
- Keep calm and level in your own emotions in the face of challenging or disruptive behaviour, or situations that you may find frustrating. Students with PDA are adept at reading these reactions and can gain satisfaction from the excitement that their behaviour can bring about.
- Novelty and variety is often effective because they will exploit routine and predictability. Variety in the pace of presentation and personal style will intrigue. Creating a sense of mystery and suspense can be helpful and building on strengths and interests such as football or sport.
- Visual clarification methods (symbol strips, written messages on post-its or a white board, cartoon drawings etc) can be used to de-personalise demands. Draw and record all discussions visually – then add post-it notes for any further comments and actions.

- Using quite complex language can often be effective, giving the feeling that this is negotiative and 'adult'.
- It may help to give instructions in an INDIRECT, NON CONFRONTATIONAL style - practice 'asking without asking' e.g. "I wonder if someone might be able to help me do this....." or "Wonder" out loud:
  - ✓ "I wonder if we can..."
  - ✓ "Let's see if we can ..."
  - ✓ "I can't see how to make this work..."
  - ✓ "Shall we see if we can beat the clock..."
  - ✓ "Maybe we could investigate..."

Try to avoid saying:

- x "It's time for you to..."
- x "You've got to..."
- x "You need to..."
- x "You must..."

Above all, think ahead – keep the student in mind. Advance notice, and plan ahead: daily, weekly, monthly, termly etc. A lack of control can lead to the student creating a 'worse-case scenario' in their head, and it will be this that will convince them that they do not want to, or are unable to participate in. Not having control then brings a new anxiety: "If I don't have control then who does?" and "Who's going to keep me safe?" Once the relationship of trust has been built and tested with key workers, they can try letting the student know that when they do not feel as if they have total control, key staff do, to reassure them. At some point, when the student is calm and more receptive to instruction, it will be key for staff to work with them to build their personal understanding and self- esteem, teach relaxation, identify anxiety and potential triggers and strategies they can use to deflect this. Students can create a leaflet about their condition for others to read – include any coping strategies to manage stress and expectations of KS4.

Increasing the amount of physical exercise can also be valuable.

## **Secondary ASD Outreach Service**

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