



Supporting PDA Students in Schools

by Diane Gould, Founder & Executive Director of PDA North America
www.pdanorthamerica.org

There needs to be a move away from seeing the student as a child with bad behavior. We need to understand the child and use a brain science attuned, trauma informed and neurodiversity affirming lens.

The following are a menu of supports that can be used in schools. There is no one size fits all. None of these supports replace the need for the student to have trusting relationships with the adults at school. They are all helpful in context with the trusting relationship. **The student needs to feel that the adults can keep their nervous system safe in the environment.** Isolated or inconsistent accommodations won't help with that. The student needs more of an overall approach than specific strategies. It is a mindset and belief system more than a recipe. It is helpful to keep in mind that the student cannot learn, if their nervous system is not feeling safe.

Menu of Supports for PDA Learners:

- **Trust** is most important. The responsibility of forming the relationship is on the adults.
- Partner with the student and do tasks together.
- The student needs to be able to opt out of tasks.
- Have the student plan a schedule of tasks.
- Teacher may need to allow extra time before transitioning the student.
- If the student feels trapped, their nervous system will have a threat response. (fight, flight/flee) They may need to have a specific safe place or person to escape or may need to be able to go home.
- Have a code word for the need to exit.
- Use declarative language for verbal communication.
- Communicate expectations or demands indirectly such as "I wonder what comes next?"
- Use indirect communication if the student is not responding to verbal communication (such as post it notes).
- Do not require them to answer when talked to.
- Do not point out their behavior or refusal.
- Get consent ahead of time for requests.
- Facilitate peer interactions. They probably **need more support than they appear to need.**
- Have a check in with trusted staff member to start the day.
- Do not use rewards or incentives.
- Do not use consequences.



Menu of Supports for PDA Learners, Cont.:

- Do not process behavior or incidents after the fact.
- Praise can also be problematic. Be indirect.
- First/then or working towards reinforcement will backfire.
- Do not have the student earn freedoms or rewards.
- If the child is experiencing a “panic attack” or period of dysregulation, he or she will not be able to process your language.
- Help other students understand individual differences and why different students will have different expectations.
- A designated safe person may be required for support at all times.
- Work expectations most likely will need to be modified and shortened.
- Use student interests for academics.
- Use humor if that works for the student.
- Use challenges if that works for the student.
- Make learning fun or at least engaging.
- Realize that boredom can feel painful.
- Doing work at home should not be required and the absence of completed homework should **NOT** have consequences.
- Decrease pressure overall.
- Do not use timers.
- Have alternative ways of showing learning and mastery.
- Understand that the student’s capacity will vary with stress (that you may not be able to see) so expect inconsistency.
- Match demands with the student’s window of tolerance.
- Empower the student to be a leader.
- Have the student teach or help others.
- Give the student as much control as possible as control is what helps decrease anxiety.
- Give choices but do not overwhelm them. Forced choices between tasks the student can’t handle, will not work.
- The student may need a flexible starting time without being marked tardy.
- The student may have need based non-attendance days and should not be considered truant.
- Understand and support sensory differences.
- Use a calm voice tone and monitor nonverbal communication.
- Help the student understand themselves.



Crisis Management with PDAers in Schools

In terms of crisis management with PDA students, staff should use a **Low Arousal Approach**. This involves **focusing on staff behavior instead of the students**. The goal is to de-escalate the situation. It is easy to unintentionally escalate a situation.

Low Arousal Approach for Crisis Management with PDA people:

- Be aware of your tone of voice - speak slowly, calmly and softly.
- Keep language simple and clear.
- Avoid demands and requests.
- Avoid conflicts, power struggles and 'stand offs'.
- Don't talk too much – less is more.
- Listen to the person and acknowledge what you think they are communicating.
- Ensure you show the individual that they have your attention.
- Sometimes gestures alone can be powerful because a distressed individual is processing information more slowly.
- Move slowly and cautiously around someone who is clearly threatened and distressed to portray a sense of calmness.
- Give them space - do not get close if possible.
- De-emphasize yourself.
- Have other students leave if possible instead of trying to move the child to another location.
- Introducing a distracter when the person is highly aroused is an opportunity to redirect attention and reduce stress.
 - Many of the people we support have established high interest topics, items or activities.
 - Try to change the subject (avoid being obvious about this) and talk about things and subjects that the person likes.
 - Physical activity can also be helpful.
 - It could be a food item or a beverage.
 - View the distraction as a positive intervention to avoid a crisis, it is not a reward for negative behavior.
- Stressed and hyper aroused people become highly sensitive to sensory experiences in their environment:
 - Reduce sensory triggers in the immediate environment.
 - Be aware of sensory stimuli in the environment that the individual may find irritating or overwhelming, consider all the senses!
 - Avoid touch