Helpful approaches for parents and carers

Every PDA experience is different and what works one day might not work the next. That's why parents and carers often need a flexible 'toolkit' of approaches, tailored to each child and adapted over time. You can explore more detail here: https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/what-helps-guides/

Traditional parenting strategies like firm boundaries, routines, rewards or consequences are often unhelpful for PDA children. In fact, they can increase anxiety and lead to more avoidance.

What can help

A low-demand, low-arousal approach can make a big difference. Here's a few suggestions:

- Working towards calm, respectful, two-way communication can help **build trust and connection**.
- Giving **autonomy and reducing pressure** can help a PDA child feel more in control.
- Try using **indirect, non-demanding phrases** and **offering choices** like "would you like to do X or Y first?".
- **Working together** with a PDA child to plan and find best ways of working can lessen anxiety.
- What works today might not work tomorrow, so being flexible and creative with your approach is key.
- **Taking care of yourself** is really important as well, however that looks for you.

Understanding behaviour

Behaviours that seem challenging are usually signs of anxiety or distress. A child might not be able to explain what's wrong - they may withdraw, lash out, shut down, or show other signs of overwhelm.

- By staying calm and offering a safe space for recovery you can help a PDAer get back to a more regulated state.
- Once they've had time to regulate, try supporting them to reflect and problem solve.

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Supporting sensory and processing needs

Many PDA children experience sensory differences and may need more time to process information. Helpful approaches could include:

- Giving extra time for processing and avoiding rushing.
- Offering support by use of creative tools like stories, games or role-play.
- Learning about emotions and relationships.
- Consulting with an OT trained in sensory integration may help develop a personalised "sensory diet".

Rethinking rewards, praise and sanctions

For PDA children, traditional systems of reward and consequence can backfire.

- Rewards can feel like extra pressure.
- Praise might raise expectations and increase anxiety.
- Sanctions often feel unfair when behaviour is rooted in "can't", not "won't".

Alternatives to this could be:

- Giving indirect praise (e.g., mentioning to someone else when they can overhear).
- Celebrating effort or moments of connection.
- Learning from natural consequences.
- Using encouragement that includes offering choices and control.

Reducing the perception of demand

Changing how demands are presented can lower anxiety:

- Using gentle, non-directive language like "I wonder if..." or "Maybe we could...".
- Talking out loud to yourself to "plant seeds", such as pondering aloud "It's a lovely day outside, a good day for going to the park..."
- Offering visual prompts, choices or role play.
- Using humour, distraction, or turning things into a game.
- Framing requests as coming from an outside source (like "the weather" or "the law").

It takes time to build confidence using these approaches, but it gets easier. As you and your child learn together, you'll find what works best for you both. Over time, your child can begin to develop their own tools for coping and self-regulation.

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