



Why must any new education legislation consider PDAers?

Because PDAers are autistic people for whom “business as usual” in education simply doesn’t work. There are likely to be 18,000 PDAers of school age in England. These children are experiencing extreme, fear-based responses to everyday demands, and are currently underserved by an education system that neither understands nor meets their needs. This results in anxiety, declining mental health and children being unable to attend school.

Education is not working for these children or their families. It’s not ok that our school system leaves so many children so deeply unhappy and too frightened and overwhelmed to engage in learning. In our 2023 survey 40% of parents of PDA children told us their child had considered taking their own life – we must do something to change this.

Schools and teachers tell us it’s rare to have the training, experience or resources needed to support PDAers in school. As a result, school can be such a source of anxiety for PDAers that it affects every aspect of their lives. Without support being available in school many parents are stuck being forced to make impossible choices; do they force their child to attend school knowing the impact it is having on their wellbeing, or allow them time to recover at home and face judgement, blame, financial penalties and in some case legal action for doing so. These are impossible choices to make.

In some cases, parents end up home schooling their child to prevent them becoming increasingly mentally unwell. For many families, this means one parent has to step back from work—losing both income and the enjoyment it brings—because the alternative is sending their child into a system that doesn’t understand their needs and is pushing them into burnout.

Children are not getting the chance to learn. Their wellbeing is being destroyed, and their families sliding into poverty. All because their needs aren't being recognised or met.

This isn’t okay. But thankfully it also isn’t inevitable. Every day the PDA Society works with schools and teachers who are going above and beyond to get it right for PDA children. We are seeing some children thrive at school, or with fractional timetables and EOTAS packages for children for whom full time school is simply too much.

PDA children, their teachers and parents are doing their best, they need change urgently so that a generation of PDAers education isn't wasted.

The Statistics

Prevalence research suggests that 1 in 5 autistic people could struggle with PDA, that equates to at least 18,000 children of school age right now.

PDA Society's 2023 survey (with nearly 1000 responses) found parents of PDAers reporting:

- 91% of PDA children have severe anxiety.
- 40% of PDA children have considered taking their own lives.
- 98% have sensory differences.
- 91% have difficulty leaving their homes.
- 85% have experienced emotionally based school avoidance at some point in their school lives.
- 44% of PDA parents say it's a daily struggle to get their child into school, a further 16% say it is a regular occurrence.
- 49% of parents with child in school said their child was getting no emotional or practical support with their school anxiety.

Why are things so difficult?

Distracting debate about how to categorise PDA instead of what helps

Much of the public and professional conversation remains stuck on whether PDA is a distinct diagnostic category - children and families cannot wait for academic consensus. We can't be distracted from the fact these children exist and are struggling right now. Policymakers must prioritise understanding what works for these children – and then making that happen.

A one size fits all approach to supporting autistic people

Mainstream autism strategies assume consistency, predictability, and routine are helpful for all autistic children — but these can be intolerable for PDA children. Rigid timetables, behavioural sanctions, and inflexible attendance expectations often escalate distress and breakdown. Schools and teachers need access to better tools and training. They also need flexibility within regulatory frameworks to be able to make adjustments for these children.

The assumption that this is new or Covid related

There needs to be clarity that PDA's identification predates Covid by decades; these challenges are not pandemic-driven. What Covid did was reveal what happens when children are not forced into masking, compliance, or overload.

Parents are now more likely to know what their child is like without school stressors and so likely to intervene earlier when their child is heading for burn out. Parents aren't choosing non-attendance. In fact many parents report having to lose household income, and negative impact on their own wellbeing and that of the wider family as a result of having to withdraw their child from school (either by taking time off or by off rolling) or witness the further deterioration of their mental health. Families frequently report being disbelieved, blamed, or accused of enabling avoidance. This erodes trust and prevents collaborative solutions.

Punitive approaches to mental health related school absences

Approaching attendance as an outcome in itself, without nuance, is creating harm for families. Regular absences of SEND pupils should signify that needs aren't being met, and prompt supportive action to identify and meet needs. Sadly, this is not parents experience. Instead, they face fines, pressure, and rigid targets which ignore SEND realities and can be re-traumatising.

Commitments that would make a difference:

- 1. A funded research programme around PDA and school avoidance which focuses on:**
 - Developing a screening program to identify children who have PDA traits and for whom classic autism approaches are unhelpful. Ideally making this screening available before school age and linking to specialised parent mediated interventions. (similar in methodology to Jonathan Green's PACT work in Manchester)
 - Identifying approaches that work for children in school.
 - Suggesting what support is most effective for children educated outside schools (including fractional timetables and supporting self-led learning).
 - Understanding how to effectively transition children back into Education after burnout.
 - Building evidence around how we skill up parents and professionals early in children's lives – to minimise any disadvantage experienced because of PDA.
- 2. To reframe absence as an alert that extra support might be needed.** Building practice around understanding of how school attendance and behavioural concerns can be symptoms of unmet need or of inappropriate support in school, and ways to fix this.

3. **Freedom for schools and teachers** to take decisions around flexing curriculum, offering fractional learning, or supporting a home/school hybrid model as children need, that is resourced and able to be implemented when concerns first arise.
4. **Training** for all school staff, everyone involved in assessment and placements and for parents about PDA and approaches that work, so there is a shared language and shared expectations for children. And for this training model to be robustly evaluated in order that practice can be established quickly.
5. **Facilitated practice supervision** for school staff where they are struggling to meet a child's needs to help them consider changes and adaptations they can make.
6. **Investment in EOTAS packages** that are flexible and quality assured for children, as soon as need is identified.