

Working at the NAS Robert Ogden School (ROS) with children with a pathological demand avoidance (PDA) diagnosis or a profile more indicative of PDA

Supporting the transition phase and early stages of the placement

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This article hopefully offers some practical suggestions on how you might support pupils who have a PDA profile through a school transition phase, and how you can start to build up their educational confidence during the early stages of their placement. PDA children can challenge school environments and policies, as school organisational rules and procedures can be difficult for this group of pupils. Traditional behaviour management approaches such as clear structures, routines and rewards, which are often successful with children with an autistic spectrum condition, are generally ineffective and may cause even more anxiety and possibly inflame situations for children with PDA.

These suggestions should be viewed as a toolkit of ideas and are not exhaustive. As with everything, there will always be exceptions to the rule. It is also important to remember that PDA is dimensional, and not all children will require the level and intensity of adjustments that are discussed in this article. Working with children with PDA requires a holistic approach, and it is vital that a school ethos and philosophy allows an environment that is flexible enough to embed collaborative learning, as well as considering how you can:

- allow for an overall decrease in demands
- offer a curriculum and pace of activity that correlates with a pupil's emotional states and ability to engage at any given time
- allow a pupil to have the maximum possible control of both their learning and social interactions (with pupils and adults).

First steps towards re-integration

At ROS, many of the young people with PDA we work with have had quite a harrowing and negative experience of previous educational provision. This may include formal and informal exclusions, leading to the consequence of missing out on schooling. This in turn may lead to serious consequences regarding their mental and emotional well-being. It is important to take this into consideration when planning for a young person to access a learning environment.

The transition process is key to helping to re-engage these children who are 'hard to include' and initially it has to be about improving confidence and reducing anxiety. It is important that this is a gentle process, based on individual need and previous educational history. The plan should be one that does not put pressure on the child or family to move at a pace that they feel they are not in control of.

Each transition will vary according to need. For example:

- Meeting the pupils in a neutral area such as home, café or park so they can build up trust and start to develop a relationship. One of our pupils had been out of school for over 2 years and his family was not able to persuade him to visit the school. I made a number of home visits, taking with me books I knew he was interested in,

and showing interest in the range of topics he was fascinated about. On one occasion I deliberately left some school books at his home and then rang him up to say I was in a bit of trouble from the head for leaving the books, asking him if he could help me out by bringing them into school with his parents. He was happy to offer his services, and once he was in school I offered him a tour if he had time. He accepted and we moved forward from that point.

- Inviting close family and friends to see the school and their learning environment.
- Allowing the pupil to lead the pace of the transitions, including arrival and finish times.
- Showing enthusiasm over their special interests and using the skills that the child is bringing into their learning.
- Negotiating with each child a learning pathway, with a self-directed and personal curriculum, based on strengths and interests, but also with clear boundaries regarding school expectations.
- Having the flexibility to move from one plan to another, depending on the pupil's emotional tolerance.

Key ideas to help a pupil remain calm and able to access learning in school

- Key to making the provision work is a clear and empathetic understanding of PDA and the pupil's individual personality. Tolerances are crucial in helping these pupils to learn within an educational setting. Accept the pupil's individual needs and challenges and try to be proactive and attentive to the times when anxiety is high.
- Adapt your teaching style to accommodate each pupil's capacity to learn at a given time. Be flexible and adaptable. Facilitate, and be careful not to try to dominate: the classic relationship of authority versus submission may not work. Realise there are times when you need to cut back or reduce demands, but also there may be times when you can increase expectations.

A good starting point to ask yourself if you are working with children with PDA is:

- Does the pupil's curriculum include personal relevance with curriculum choice?
- Does the pupil's curriculum nurture their unique talents and strong interests?
- What strategies can you use to enable the pupil to take an active part in their educational experience?

Case Study: How we 'Include the hard to include' - early stages of the placement

Evidencing progress and learning intentions using a young person's interests and strengths.

A female pupil with a diagnosis ASD/PDA. Age 11 years. Her educational history started in a mainstream primary school until year 4. Due to high anxiety levels she was out of school during year 5. She then refused to go back to school due to high levels of anxiety, mental health issues and threats of self-harm. Home tutoring was offered but she was not able to engage with them.

Initially her parents visited the school and were impressed with our understanding of the PDA profile and the learning environment we were able offer their daughter. The school ethos is, wherever possible, to invite the young person to visit the school so they can voice their own feelings and opinions as this is key to a successful placement. It is vital that the young person chooses and wants to come to us and is prepared to 'give us a go' and buy

into our service. In this instance, she was able to tell us that she would like to come to our school.

Her transition phase included being in control of the days and times she wanted to come into school, showing her close family her learning environment, allowing for personal items to come into school, such as her own computer chair and sensory items. In discussion and negotiation with her, she was allowed a say in which staff and children she felt she was comfortable meeting. During this phase we started to develop an agreed personalised curriculum and timetable. From paperwork received, we were aware that her interests and strengths were in the area of entrepreneurial tendencies and that she was very creative.

During September to December of her first year, her timetable consisted of the following tasks and activities: Art and Craft (self-directed), participating in our whole school Enterprise project which is predominately craft-based, and being responsible for our recycling programme which includes sorting out the recycling and making decisions on which charity shop to take any clothing items to. She was also involved in delivering them to the chosen shops (tapping into her entrepreneurial skills). At that stage she was not able to tolerate any 'academic subjects' and any suggestion around academia led to her 'shutting down' and high levels of anxiety. Through the lesson plans, we were able to plan for a different learning objective and different focus for each craft-based activity to incorporate the core subjects of Maths, English, Science and Personal, Social, Health and Citizenship, including budgeting, life skills and independence skills. This clearly demonstrated that she was being provided with a broad, balanced and relevant curriculum and we were able to show progress by addressing the outcomes identified in her Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP)

Outcomes taken from her EHCP include:

- To work with an adult and work towards expressing how she feels about a topic or activity.
- To demonstrate an increased ability to focus and concentrate on activities for an increased period of time.
- To follow instructions to make items of her choosing on six different occasions.

In addition, because we were indirectly delivering the more academic subjects within her interests, we were able to assess her levels in the areas of mathematics, English, Science and PSHE.

During the following spring term she asked to have Science and History included in her curriculum, and she has gradually increased her confidence in education to tolerate further academic subjects.

School life for this young person continues to be a rollercoaster of emotional anxiety, and will always be work in progress for us all, but working in collaboration with the whole family and the young person, we take each day as a new day. We hope we can continue to support her through the tough times and allow her to enjoy the times she feels good about herself.