

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH PDA: GUIDELINES FOR EDUCATIONAL PROVISION AND SUPPORT

A number of recent reports, including that by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism (2017), have concluded that many children with autism are being let down by the education system, exclusions are rising significantly and fewer than half of the children surveyed said that they were happy at school. This is especially true for those with more complex presentations, such as those with a PDA profile. The PDA society report, 'Being Misunderstood in Education', points out that a significant proportion of children with a PDA profile are being excluded from school and their website cites the Children's Commissioners report (2019), 'Skipping School,' which highlights the rise of exclusions more generally from an 'unforgiving school system'.

Such reports underline how a detailed assessment, which leads to a greater understanding of an individual's profile and needs is the starting point to making the adaptations needed to improve the educational experience and outcomes for all learners on the autism spectrum.

While there is continuing discussion and research around aspects of how the PDA profile should be best described within diagnostic classification systems, there is wide agreement about the need to recognise the particular education and support needs of these children. This was forcibly advocated in an article about PDA published by the British Psychological Society in 2016. This concluded that...*'It is essential that this help is provided to these very vulnerable individuals and their families'*

Guidelines for supporting children with a PDA profile have evolved over time, promoting an approach based on a less directive and more flexible style than the more structured methods that are often advocated for many other children on the autism spectrum. These guidelines have since been developed and adopted as part of the National Autism Standards, published by the Autism Education Trust (2012). The limited research that has taken place on educational approaches has supported the efficacy of this approach (Gore Langton and Frederickson, 2015) and parents responding to an online survey carried out by the PDA society have also endorsed their effectiveness.

In a later publication (Fidler and Christie, 2018) this methodology has been detailed and given the title of 'Collaborative Approaches to Learning'. Underpinning the approach is the understanding that at the heart of PDA is an anxiety driven need to be in control and avoid other people's expectations. The child with PDA doesn't make a 'deliberate choice' not to comply and can't overcome the situation by 'an act of will'. He or she may, though, make a series of achievements towards this end as trust and confidence builds. Teaching and learning is a transactional process and it is the role of the supporting adults to enable tolerance and confidence to grow so that expectations can be progressively increased.

KEY PRINCIPLES

Children with PDA will be catered for in a range of different settings and with varying levels of support but **flexibility and adaptations** of one sort or another will be needed. These adaptations may be considerable and are likely to be needed at both an **organisational** level and in **personal** style. The timetable itself may need adjustment in terms of the amount of time spent on particular subjects, or where learning takes place. Another issue might be the extent of the 'adjustment' to whole school practice or policy that is needed to include a particular pupil, such as the uniform policy, arrangements for assembly or break time etc. Classroom staff need to feel supported in ensuring that they are able to provide **sufficient personalisation**, both in the curriculum offered and the way in which it is delivered. This is likely to mean finding a way of embedding their interests into the curriculum and allowing a significant degree of choice to give a child a feeling of control. The degree of adaptation and personalisation needed for many children with PDA doesn't sit easily alongside inflexible whole school policies.

PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE

Putting these principles into practice requires a range of strategies in order to maintain the pupil's engagement. It is beyond the scope of this short paper to describe all of these in detail and more can be found in the resources mentioned at the end. A few of the key strategies are given below.

Choosing priorities. What is important now and what can we come back to? Use of a simple priority rating scale completed by staff and parents together can be a useful starting point. Only a realistic number can be worked on at any one time.

Being indirect and avoiding unnecessary confrontations; Priorities will need to be put in place but with a child with PDA there is the potential for 'flashpoints' over a host of everyday expectations. Using indirect, invitational language and giving more choice can help to avoid unnecessary confrontation eg 'It would be great if we could get this done today...shall we do it in the hall or the library?', 'Oh this looks a bit tricky...perhaps you might be able to help?' This may mean adjusting aspects of a typical teacher:pupil dynamic so as to create a sense of alliance.

Adapting visual strategies. Using visual strategies is very helpful to most children with autism, clarifying information in a way that gives them more time to process what is being asked. Schedules and systems can, though, come across as being too prescribed and seem to represent a 'to do list'. They can be adapted, though, in a flexible way that enables a pupil to better see choices and possibilities.

Providing extra processing time. This is important for all children with autism who are likely to need more time to fully process some of the information they are given. This may be the case for the child with a PDA

profile too and they may also need additional time to process whether they can co-operate at this particular moment (this is likely to be linked to their level of anxiety).

Minimise anxiety. Anxiety is at the heart of the child's difficulties with co-operating and meeting other people's expectations. As a result it is critical to look at ways that anxiety can be reduced. In addition to the teaching approach being less pressurising and more accommodating it is also necessary to consider ways of moderating certain situations that might cause the child to be anxious in the first place. It might also be helpful to consider introducing or increasing the amount of time that the child has access to activities that he or she finds calming and regulating. These will be different for each individual but might include relaxation techniques, mindfulness, physical activity or quiet periods of engagement based on a favoured interest.

Foster emotional resilience and self-reliance. These strategies are aimed at reducing the child's level of anxiety, helping them feel less pressurised and in turn more amenable to the expectations that people have of them. Improving this can make an enormous difference to children who have become extremely stressed and reluctant to engage. It is also likely to have a cumulative effect and, as the child participates more, they become less anxious and more trusting with a wider range of people and in more situations. In the longer term thought must be given to ways in which we might enable the young person themselves to become more self aware, better able to communicate their anxieties in an effective way and manage and regulate their own emotions.

CONCLUSION

As our understanding of the PDA profile grows, so does recognition of the implications for those who live and work with children and young people. Due to their high levels of anxiety and need for control they respond better to flexibility, negotiation and a less direct style.

Putting this sort of learning environment in place requires significant adaptation from schools as organisations as well as the individual style of those working directly with the pupil. When these adaptations are made tolerance levels increase and lead to greater engagement in the learning opportunities.

Reflecting on some of these adaptations one headteacher commented

... using different strategies has made the world of difference to school staff. It's amazing how big an impact making small changes in emphasis and priorities can make... At school, we are so much better equipped to move forwards with a more flexible and positive education...'

Resources

All the references and resources mentioned above, together with many more, can be found on the PDA website in the resource collection.

<https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/resources/resource-tag/education/>

PDA development group / December 2019