



BIO

AILEEN HOSTY

Aileen works at Southgate School in Huddersfield, a school for young people with complex needs. She leads the 'pathway for pupils with high anxiety', including a number who fit the PDA profile of autism. Aileen is passionate about developing positive person-centred approaches and access to education for all.

Providing PDA support

Aileen Hosty, Pathway Lead from Southgate School, shares some of her school's values, principles, and tips regarding practice for supporting pupils with Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA).



A key element of supporting pupils with PDA at school is to try to reduce anxiety levels and, in turn, reduce the intensity and frequency of anxiety-based responses, thus developing a feeling of trust, which is essential for students' learning.

Fundamental principles underlying a successful and positive approach to PDA include:

- A belief that all children want to succeed and that when they are struggling it is because of problems out of their control (in the case of PDA, their anxiety). Holding this belief changes the way we approach teaching and shifts the focus to trying to understand what is getting in the way and how we can change things to make learning possible.
- Understanding that all children need to feel safe to learn and succeed and that we need to make the school environment feel safe.
- Commitment to a person-centred approach: we are working with the young person and not doing something to them. This will improve trust, build relationships and increase the chance of success.

GOOD PRACTICE BEFORE A YOUNG PERSON STARTS SCHOOL

Before a student starts school, it's essential to develop whole-school awareness and understanding of PDA, taking full account of the views of the young person and their family.

In my experience, in this context, the place to start in a person-centred process is the family. We should try to find out as much as we can about the young person, what strategies are adopted at home, what their special interests are, what their lives are like and how we can best support them.

As a school, we need to consider what adaptations are needed to include the young person. These may include physical adaptations e.g. providing a safe, demand-free place for the young person to access when their anxieties are increasing; being flexible around timetabling, expected curriculum content and attendance; providing one-to-one support.

Parents and carers will be able to support the school in establishing required adaptations, so time needs to be set aside for this process.

Once information from home has been established, we can begin to build our own relationships with the young person. Developing a relationship based on trust and mutual respect will bring many benefits as time progresses. Personally, I find play-based approaches work best.

Teaching teams must be sensitive to the young person's needs and work with them to understand how things can be adjusted and developed. Upskilling the team in advance will clearly give them more confidence, and equally, reduce the risk of approaches which may put the young person into crisis. This includes:

- Understanding how to use a **flexible and adaptable**, low demand approach tailored to each young person and appreciating how crucial this approach is to success
- Providing staff development sessions on how to adapt phraseology to be more '**declarative**' and '**invitational**', when questioning or making requests of the young person
- Providing examples of how learning can be 'slipped' into play
- Providing strategies around how self-directed topics and projects can be utilised as a tool to develop literacy and numeracy

- Knowing how to develop a personalised curriculum
- Clarifying with all parties what accommodations can/cannot be made in terms of the school's organisational policies and procedures – this includes priority and non-negotiable areas
- Encouraging adults to use reflective practice – thinking about what systems are in place for everyone, so they learn from incidents and reduce the frequency of re-occurrence
- Understanding the concept of restorative practice and person-centred thinking tools to reflect together about what worked well or not so well.

Young people may mask anxiety at school but then, at home, it may erupt. At the other extreme, they may find the school environment so difficult that they are unable to attend.

Parents often report that where masking is occurring, they are faced with school and other professionals not believing their accounts of the difficulties faced. We can't afford to ignore parents and families if we want to understand and develop positive relationships with these young people.

POSITIVE MANAGEMENT PLANS

To keep young people and those around them safe, it is crucial that, from the outset, you undertake a risk assessment and plan for managing a crisis. Record all known possible anxiety reactions, as well as potential hazards and preventative measures, and share this with teaching teams.

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→ TEACHING & LEARNING



Positive management plans should address the following:

- How to set the right conditions to reduce anxiety – staff teams should be able to identify how best to communicate, activities known to reduce demands and importantly, what not to do.
- Strategies to adopt as anxiety levels increase and how to observe increasing anxiety levels: Does the young person become more restless? Do they begin to use set phrases or become more negative? Do they escalate to crisis point very quickly?
- Details on how best to respond (based on what the young person and their family have shared with us). Typically, with PDA, this would be to reduce demands and enable access to the young person's safe place where they can engage in their preferred chosen activity or just have some downtime.

- Identifying the non-negotiables staff and families have worked out together, and how to support the young person if these boundaries are crossed (it's a common misconception that a low-demand approach means that a young person can do whatever they want, whenever they want). One example is that for one young person it is not a priority that they wear shoes around the school – everyone is aware of the risks this presents but, they agree that this is not a priority. The same young person may often want to take food that isn't theirs; this is seen as a priority that needs to be prevented from happening, even though the student may go into crisis.

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- Strategies to adopt in a crisis. The whole school team needs to know what a crisis looks like for each young person and how to respond. The priority is to keep the young person safe and to support them in a non-confrontational way. Utilise the young person's views on this including their preferred approaches and how they would like adults to respond. Views should be gathered when the young person is calm and happy, preferably with a trusted member of staff. Clear guidance about when physical intervention might be needed must be provided (but should be the very last resort and only be used when the risks of not physically intervening are higher than intervening).
- Strategies to support the young person during the recovery phase after an incident. It is important to reflect on incidents; consider what systems are in place for everyone to learn and to reduce re-occurrences. Again, if possible, the opportunity to reflect with the young person can be very beneficial both in terms of support and developing relationships and in improving their own self-awareness. Time needs to be set aside for this process.

Adopting helpful approaches for PDA helps teaching teams to reduce anxiety and therefore reduce crisis situations. This requires support from the leadership team, a whole-school commitment and often considerable effort to change our own practice. Flexibility is the key, along with provision that meets each individual's needs. Allowing staff the time to invest in relationships with young people first, before attempting to achieve any 'academic' success will, in the long term, provide rewards.