



REACH UP

Resource · Empower · Advocate · Connect · Human rights · Upskill · Peer support

Macarthur Southern Highlands



PDA

What we get right and still oh so wrong

This resource is based on the work on Kristy Forbes and Megan-Anna Neff, presented at the 2026 Yellow Ladybugs Conference.

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@_kristyforbes



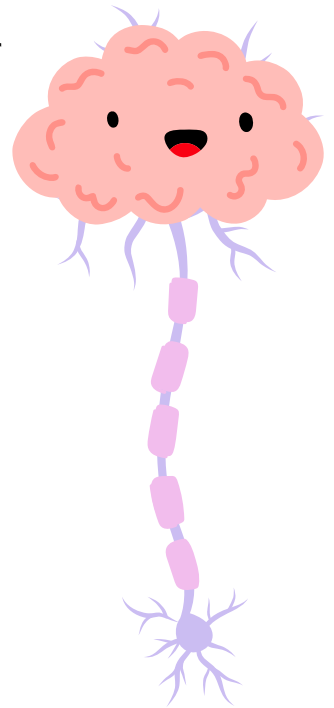
@neurodivergent_insights

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- How PDA needs to be understood as a nervous system disability, stemming from a deep and pervasive need for autonomy.
- How this understanding frames common PDA experiences including demand avoidance and equity-seeking behaviours.
- Unpack some of the misunderstandings about supporting PDAers through reflecting on where we might be going wrong.

UNDERSTANDING PDA

- **PDA is not a behavioural problem**
- “Too often framed as a behavioural problem when it is actually far better understood as a nervous system disability stemming from a pervasive and safety-driven need for autonomy.”
- Often misunderstood as oppositional or defiant behaviour
- **Equity seeking:** Not about being the same as others, but about being seen, heard, and valued.
- **Hierarchy and power:** PDAers are highly sensitive to how power is wielded in relationships.
- **Relationality and reciprocity are central:** PDAers seek genuine human connection, not control.
- “There’s always going to be this dance of needing to be here, and people think that it means the PDAer needs to be in control of the same, but it’s seeing one another, it’s relationship, it’s reciprocity.”
- “PDA isn’t about behaviour, demand avoidance or control. Instead, it is about that survival-driven need for autonomy and agency.”



NERVOUS SYSTEM & WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

- **Window of tolerance:** The range in which a person can cope with stress.
- “Autistic and ADHD folks, we tend to have some differences in how our autonomic nervous system is regulated. And it tends to be a little bit more sensitive to stressors.”
- **Hypervigilance:** PDAers are often in a state of constant threat scanning.
- “We tend to flip into a stress state more easily.”
- **Stress responses:** Can manifest as fight/flight (meltdowns, yelling, fleeing) or freeze/shutdown (immobilisation, dissociation). “When we’re outside of our window of tolerance group, we go to one of those two stress states.”
- **Co-regulation:** Regulation with another human is key to returning to a safe nervous system state.

Window of Tolerance

Flight/Fight During extreme stress you move out of your window of tolerance and into fight or flight mode. Anxiety Panic Fear Anger Aggression	Overloaded
Window of Tolerance Where you can handle and process your feelings in a healthy way while being able to function and thrive. You increase your tolerance with coping skills. Safe Capable Grounded Self-Aware Mindful Engaged Self-Soothing Connected	Comfortable
Freeze During extreme stress you just completely shut down and withdrawal physically/emotionally. Depression Fatigue Numb Disconnected Disassociated Checked Out Unfocused	Shut Down

@BlessingManifesting

TRAUMA AND BURNOUT

- **Trauma:** is often layered onto PDA due to misunderstanding, punitive measures, and lack of acceptance.
- “My trauma responses seek to protect me from what happened to me. My PDA seeks to protect who I am.”
- **Burnout:** Not just about being overwhelmed, but a result of being forced into environments that are not suitable.
- “Being forced into anything that isn’t right for me causes me to be unwell, causes me to be mentally, physically, spiritually unwell.”
- **Processing after threat:** Even when demands are removed, the nervous system may take a long time to recover.
- “When you’ve been in survival mode for a really long time, when you come out of that environment, that doesn’t mean that your nervous system just relaxes.”



BEHAVIOURAL LABELS AND REFRAMING

- **Labels like oppositional, defiant, manipulative, and conduct disorder are unhelpful** and close curiosity. Labels can open or close doors for individuals.
- “When we put a label on it like oppositional or manipulative, one of the things it does is it closes curiosity and it closes space.”
- Oppositional Defiance Disorder or Conduct Disorder really only describe the behaviour, not uncover the why.
- **Curiosity and generosity:** Essential for understanding the “why” behind behaviour.
- “If we can become generous interpreters of each other as humans, of our kids, and assume behaviour makes sense, then we can... start contacting each other’s humanity again.”
- “Behind those behaviours, there is something else going on. It’s not just a child that shows up and wants to hurt people or harm people. There are always really important reasons behind that.”
- **Intersectionality:** Black and brown children are more likely to be viewed through a behavioural lens rather than a developmental one.
- PDAers may not show vulnerability (remorse, anxiety) unless they feel truly safe.



PARENTING AND STRATEGIES

- Compliance-based approaches (even gentle ones like choices or declarative language) can still be coercive if the underlying agenda is compliance.
- **Motivation matters:** Are we seeking genuine autonomy and safety, or just disguising demands?
- **Parental conditioning:** Deeply ingrained ideas about compliance and success need to be challenged.
- "Our conditioning runs so deep around what that looks like and what's acceptable."
- "I had to really work on myself and unpack what can I heal, what can I change, what can I look at, what is reasonable and what might not be."
- **Active, not passive, parenting:** "Lowering demands is not about doing nothing, but about being actively attuned to the child's needs and alignment".
- **Alignment over compliance:** Focus on helping children align with their core selves, not just comply with expectations.
- "It's about alignment. I wish we were using like alignment language more than low demand. How do I help my child get into greater alignment?"



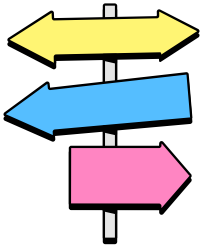
SAFETY, TRUST, AND RELATIONSHIP

- **Relational safety:** PDAers need adults who know themselves and can contain their own emotions.
- "Relational safety isn't something that just happens and it doesn't look the same for everyone."
- **Authenticity:** Showing humanity and vulnerability as a parent strengthens connection.
- "Focus on the relationship. That doesn't mean just going out and spending time together. It means working on allowing our children to see us, seeing ourselves, being able to see our children."
- **Intuition and trial and error:** Trust your relationship and intuition over external advice.
- **Self-compassion for parents:** Give yourself the same patience and compassion you offer your child.



SOCIETAL AND SYSTEMIC ISSUES

- **Systems are not built for PDAers:** “Systems are not built for PDAers and instead put them in a permanent state of nervous system threat activation.”
- **Rejecting busyness:** Modern culture values productivity over nourishment; resisting this is an act of self-care and resistance.
- **Multiple pathways:** “There are so many different pathways to different outcomes. If a child is experiencing school avoidance or if they’re not able to comply with things, can we not think bigger and see past the immediate now and understand that people don’t stop learning just because they’re the age that school is recommended.”



STRENGTHS AND REFRAMING PDA

- **PDAers as change-makers:** “Compliance has never saved us but dissent might.”
- **Pervasive drive for alignment:** PDAers show us the importance of being congruent and true to oneself.
- **Amplifying what needs to be addressed:** PDAers highlight both micro and macro issues in society.
- “PDAers are the ones who refuse what others accept, the ones who disrupt harmful systems.”
- **Strengths:** Fiercely protective, loyal, caring, deep-thinking, and resistant to harmful systems.
- “If we could shift out of a behavioural lens and if we could look at the environment, we might stop being so focused on the people, the children or the PDAers as much as we are.”
- **PDAers don’t do false:** “Pervasive drive for alignment: that drive to be aligned, to be congruent, to be in a world that’s congruent.”



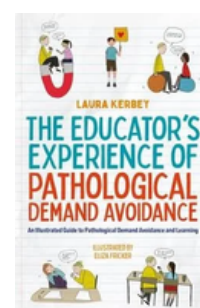
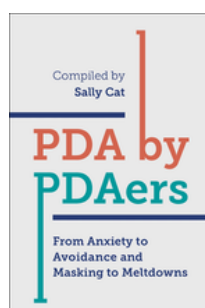
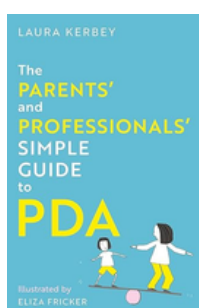
“Our PDAers are giving us all the opportunity to rethink what matters.”

MORE FROM THE PRESENTERS

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BOOKS



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