

Research into the educational experiences of children with PDA: Summary of findings



This research asked parents who believed their children to have PDA to report on their children's educational experiences using a questionnaire. Parents were recruited via the National Autistic Society's PDA conference, and online via PDA support and information forums, and social media and networking sites (e.g. Facebook and Twitter).

Who took part?

Forty eight parents took part. Children were aged between four and 17 with an average age of 10. Thirty seven percent of children were female.

- 49% had a diagnosis of PDA
- 63% had a diagnosis of some form of autism spectrum condition (autism, Aspergers, autism spectrum disorder/condition, atypical autism)
- 75% of children with a diagnosis of PDA *also* had a diagnosis of some form of ASC

On the *Extreme Demand Avoidance Questionnaire*, an index of risk measure developed by Liz O'Nions and Professor Francesca Happé at the Institute of Psychiatry, children had an average score of 65, of a possible maximum score of 90.

On the *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire*, a widely used measure, ninety seven percent of children scored in the 'Abnormal' range on their total level of difficulties.

School behaviours

In their worst term at school...

- 69% of children had refused to attend at least sometimes
- 79% had refused to comply at least sometimes
- 71% had attempted to leave the classroom at least sometimes
- 42% had attempted to leave the school site at least sometimes
- 42% had hurt themselves at least sometimes
- 48% had hurt staff at least sometimes

Levels & type of support

- 60% of children had Statements of Special Educational Needs
- A further 10% were currently undergoing Statutory Assessment
- 56% of children were receiving some level of 1:1 support each week
- 31% were receiving between 25 and 32 hours of 1:1 support each week
- Of the 44% of children not receiving 1:1 support, 33% were in specialist provision, and a further 14% were either being educated at home or had no educational provision.

Use of support organizations

- 69% of parents had accessed Contact a Family
- 69% had accessed the PDA Contact Group, an online information and support site
- 65% had accessed Parent Partnership
- 14% reported accessing the National Autistic Society or its local branches

Involvement of professionals

- 88% of children had seen an Educational Psychologist, suggesting difficulties were experienced in school
- 69% had seen a Clinical Psychologist, suggesting difficulties were not only experienced in the school context
- 60% had seen a Speech and Language Therapist
- 48% had a CAF (Common Assessment Framework), indicating the involvement of multiple agencies

Placement types

- 96% of children had begun their education in a mainstream school
- By their second placement, only 64% of children were still in a mainstream school
- By their third placement, only 26% were still in mainstream school
- By their fourth placement, only 14% were still in mainstream school
- At the time their parents took part in the research, only 52% of children were attending a mainstream school.
- Children were attending a wide range of specialist provision, including ASD (19%), EBD (8%), Pupil Referral Units (4%) and SLCN provision (2%).

Placement breakdowns and exclusions

- 51% had experienced at least one move due to their educational needs. This included parents choosing to move their child because the school was not meeting the child's needs
- 25% had experienced at least one permanent exclusion
- 8% had experienced at least one 'managed move'
- 38% had experienced *at least one* fixed term exclusion
- 20% had experienced *four or more* fixed term exclusions

Placement success

Despite the considerable educational difficulties indicated by parents' responses, parents tended to rate their child's current placement fairly positively, with an average 'success' rating of 6/10.

The following factors were identified by parents as defining a 'successful' placement:

1. *Child outcomes*

- Children were willing to go to school and had regular attendance
- Children were engaged with learning and made progress, achieving their potential
- Children were happy and not anxious
- Children learnt to interact and had friends
- The child and others were safe from dangerous behaviours

2. *School factors*

- The school was flexible, thinking of the child's needs on an individual basis and trying different approaches
- The school was able to 'cope' with the child's behaviour
- The school was understanding towards the child's needs and difficulties
- The school worked in partnership with parents
- The physical environment of the school was suitable for the child's needs

3. *PDA specific factors*

- The school acknowledged and accepted that the child had PDA and needed a PDA approach
- The school knew about PDA and interpreted the child's behaviour within the framework of PDA

Key Messages

This was the first research to look systematically at the educational experiences of a large group of children with PDA. The findings suggest that many children with PDA experience high rates of challenges in education, including:

- Displaying a range of hard to manage behaviours at school
- Requiring high levels of additional support in school
- Having multiple professionals involved with supporting them
- Experiencing high rates of fixed term exclusions
- Experiencing placement breakdowns due to permanent exclusion or its alternatives ('managed moves' or parents moving their child)
- Being educated in specialist provision

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