

VFN Annual Conference 2026

Panel Discussion: *Looking Beyond the Absence: Family-Centered Approaches to Support School Attendance*

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Rethinking Attendance: PDA and the Need for Safety

“We derive safety from the predictability of systems.” – Dr. Mel Houser, All Brains Belong

PDA (known as Pathological Demand Avoidance or community preferred term, Pervasive Drive for Autonomy)

Definition: A presentation of autism characterized by a heightened sense of neuroception.

Neuroception: (coined by Dr. Stephen Porges in 2003 as an expansion of Polyvagal Theory) The instinctual burglar alarm in the nervous system that scans for threat and initiates fight/flight/freeze/fawn responses.

Demand Avoidance vs. Autonomy: Demands trigger dysregulation which can look like avoidance. Demands often accumulate within the nervous system leading to a collapsing window of tolerance. Like with any adrenalized response, judgement and memory encoding go offline, shedding light on why the child often cannot explain their behavior or remember it later. By contrast, autonomy signals safety to the nervous system. Choice and connection reinforce a regulated nervous system.¹

School is Demand Central: Schools operate on behaviorism... rewards and punishments, learning through repetition and reinforcement, PBIS. Behaviorism tends to treat difficulties with demands as behavior to be modified rather than the signal of an underlying need. PDAers experience dysregulation from demands like: praise, behavior charts, inconsistent follow through, being told what to do, forced transitions, coping with the sensory environment, social expectations, waiting, executive functioning and motor planning, anticipatory excitement, being called on, figuring out unwritten rules, assignment deadlines and many more. The underlying need of the resulting behavior is nervous system relief.

The Canary in the Coalmine: PDAers are highly sensitive to control, fairness, and emotional tone. When a classroom lacks enough psychological safety or feels unequal, a PDAer will react quickly and visibly signaling when something in the classroom environment isn't working. Likewise, when a PDAer is thriving in the classroom, it is a good indication that the classroom dynamic is connected and authentic.

PDAers Cope by Masking: Masking is the conscious or unconscious suppression of natural responses in order to fit in and avoid negative responses from others. Masking takes a tremendous energetic toll and delays authentic identity formation. In school, it can look like a teacher reporting the child is fine in the classroom while parents experience the child completely falling apart at home. In other words, the mask

¹ [How does the need for autonomy influence the behaviour of someone with PDA? Kristy Forbes, 2025](#)

can only come down within the safety of the home environment. Parents often get the brunt of big behaviors because they are the safest nervous systems.

Autistic Burnout results from prolonged exposure to an environment that doesn't fit an autistic person's needs. Autistic burnout is different from the colloquial sense of burnout in that it is characterized by (1) pervasive exhaustion (2) loss of skills (3) reduced tolerance to sensory stimuli. It can look and feel like depression if you don't have the right lens. Unaddressed burnout often becomes a vicious cycle where the PDAer is entering burnout, in burnout, coming out of burnout or slipping back into it. Burnout can be managed by allowing for profound rest, engaging in high interest activities, learning to understand one's capacity limits and changing behavior and/or the environment to live within those limits.

School Avoidance: According to a 2018 survey conducted by The PDA Society, 70% of PDA students are not in school or struggle with regular attendance. School avoidance often becomes the behavior of last resort for a child who feels trapped in an environment that can't respond in a good enough way. PDA students aren't choosing to resist; they're struggling to cope. Think of it as "**can't, not won't.**"

Why Reintegration Plans Don't Work: PDA is often characterized incorrectly as extreme anxiety and treated with exposure protocols meant to build tolerance. However, repeated exposure to the same unchanged environment can unintentionally increase distress by forcing endurance. Dr. Ross Greene's Collaborative & Proactive Solutions (CPS)² can address school avoidance by building capacity through partnership.

PDA as a Disability: PDA is a *dynamic disability of the nervous system*. In other words, a PDAer's capacity fluctuates. Support needs fluctuate. Traditional high- and low-functioning labels don't apply. Following the social model of disability (the problem lies with societal barriers) rather than the medical model of disability (the problem lies with the individual) is a helpful lens shift.

The Role of the Caregiver: Caring for a PDAer often means becoming a surrogate nervous system for the child, lowering demands, communicating and influencing indirectly, monitoring accumulating stressors, re-examining long-held beliefs, being flexible when no one else can be, anticipating and creatively supporting outcomes, educating and advocating in exclusionary spaces, meeting the child where they are at any given moment, bearing witness to struggle, learning to detach from judgement, and prioritizing the trust relationship above all.

Educator Approaches: Ask yourself, "What about the environment, my demeanor, the child's prior context, and the child's internal beliefs might set off their threat detector? Am I setting up a scenario where the child may feel startled, trapped or shamed?"³ Cultivate connection, create an equal and reciprocal relationship, use humor, cue safety with body language, allow for rewards that are individually meaningful, depersonalize rules, get clear on what learning objectives are most important⁴, use declarative language.⁵

² [Dr. Ross Greene's CPS Model FAQ](#)

³³ [Startled, Trapped, & Shamed: How to Stop Accidentally Dysregulating Autistic Kids, Two Sides of the Spectrum, 10/15/25](#)

⁴ [The Educator's Experience of Pathological Demand Avoidance, Laura Kerbey, 2023](#)

⁵ [The Declarative Language Handbook, Linda K. Murphy, 2020](#)