



The Shame Loop in PDA

Breaking the cycle for families and schools

Shame sits at the heart of many PDA meltdowns and behaviour patterns — and it is often overlooked. Understanding how shame operates in PDA children can help families and schools respond in ways that reduce rather than deepen it.

What Is the Shame Loop?

The shame loop is a self-reinforcing cycle that begins when a PDA child experiences failure, criticism, or perceived inadequacy. Because PDA is anxiety-driven and the child often cannot meet expectations despite wanting to, shame accumulates rapidly.

- Child attempts a task or interaction → feels they have failed or disappointed
- Shame response activated → intense internal distress
- Shame is expressed as aggression, refusal, or withdrawal
- Adult responds with consequence, frustration, or withdrawal
- Child's sense of being "bad" or "broken" deepens
- Next demand arrives with even more anxiety attached

How Shame Looks in PDA Children

- Explosive reaction to being corrected — even gently
- Intense response to perceived criticism or failure
- Self-defeating talk: "I'm stupid," "I can't do anything right," "I hate myself"
- Refusal to attempt anything they might fail at
- Blaming others for their own mistakes (shame deflection)
- Intense emotional reactions to normal mistakes or accidents

Breaking the Loop — For Families

Language that reduces shame

- "That was really hard — you tried something difficult today."
- "Mistakes are information, not failures."
- "I'm not cross with you. I know your brain works hard."
- Normalise difficulty: "That's tricky for lots of people."
- Separate behaviour from identity: "That was a hard moment — it doesn't define you."



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Classroom practices that reduce shame

- Never correct PDA students publicly or in front of peers
- Separate effort from outcome — acknowledge the attempt
- Allow private communication rather than public performance
- Give permission to not know: "It's completely fine to say you're not sure yet."
- Avoid comparison with other students — verbally or via visible reward systems

The bottom line When a PDA child feels ashamed, their capacity to engage, comply, or regulate drops immediately. Reducing shame is not soft — it is the most direct pathway to improved cooperation and emotional safety. Safety before compliance, always.