



# PDA Meltdown Language Guide

What to say (and what to avoid) — at every stage

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Having the right words ready before a crisis reduces your cognitive load in the moment and helps you respond from calm rather than panic. Print this card and keep it somewhere accessible.

## Stage 1 — Early Warning Signs

The child is showing signs of rising anxiety. This is your intervention window.

### ✓ SAY

- "No rush — take your time."
- "We can do that differently if you want."
- "How are you going? You seem like you might need a minute."
- "Forget what I said — we'll figure it out."

### ✗ AVOID

"You need to do this now." / "I already told you." / "Stop making this difficult." / "Why can't you just...?"

## Stage 2 — Escalation

The child is becoming increasingly distressed. Reduce input dramatically.

### ✓ SAY

- "I'm right here."
- "You're safe."
- "Nothing has to happen right now."
- "I'm not going anywhere."

### ✗ AVOID

Repeating instructions. Explaining consequences. Asking "why". Bringing in other adults. Touching without consent.

## Stage 3 — Peak

Full meltdown. Say as little as possible. Your presence matters more than your words.



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## If you speak at all, use only

- "I'm here."
- "You're safe."
- "Take all the time you need."

## Now is not the time for

Reasoning. Explaining. Consequences. Comfort that involves demands ("come here", "look at me"). Any instruction at all.

## Stage 4 — Recovery

The child is coming back. Follow their lead — don't rush reconnection.

### ✓ SAY

- "I'm glad you're feeling a bit better."
- "Would you like some water?"
- "We don't need to talk about it yet."
- "I love you. That was hard."

### ✗ AVOID

Debrief or discussion immediately. Reminders of what happened. "Now that you're calm, we need to talk." Any new demands.

## Repair Conversation (hours or days later)

When the child is fully regulated and the moment feels right:

- "I've been thinking about what happened. How were you feeling before it got really hard?"
- "Is there anything that would make it easier next time?"
- "I'm not cross. I want to understand."
- "Thank you for talking to me about this."



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**Remember**

Your calm voice is more important than your words. Slow down, lower your pitch, and trust that your presence — without demands — is the most powerful de-escalation tool you have.