



Window of Tolerance

A PDA family guide — explained simply

The Window of Tolerance is one of the most useful frameworks for understanding PDA behaviour. Once you understand it, the patterns you see every day start to make much more sense.

What Is the Window of Tolerance?

Developed by neuropsychologist Dr Dan Siegel, the Window of Tolerance describes the zone of nervous system arousal in which a person can function optimally — learning, connecting, problem-solving, and regulating emotions.

- Inside the window: the child is regulated, accessible, and able to learn
- Above the window (hyperarousal): fight or flight — meltdowns, aggression, bolting
- Below the window (hypoarousal): freeze/shutdown — withdrawal, dissociation, unresponsiveness

PDA and the Window of Tolerance

PDA children typically have a narrower Window of Tolerance than neurotypical children. Their nervous systems are more sensitive to perceived threat, which means they move above or below the window more quickly — and with less apparent provocation.

What this means practically

Behaviour that looks like wilful defiance or extreme sensitivity is often a nervous system that has left the window. The child is not choosing to be difficult — they are genuinely dysregulated. They need support back into the window before any other intervention can work.

Signs Your Child Is Above the Window (Hyperarousal)

- Increased demand avoidance and refusals
- Voice changes — louder, faster, higher-pitched
- Physical agitation — pacing, bouncing, unable to settle
- Aggression or explosive behaviour
- Racing thoughts, talking excessively
- Rigid thinking ("it has to be NOW")

Signs Your Child Is Below the Window (Hypoarousal)

- Withdrawal, going very quiet
- Blank staring or appearing "switched off"
- Unable to respond or communicate



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- Moving very slowly or refusing to move
- Appearing numb or emotionally flat
- Sleep — retreating to bed during the day

Bringing the Child Back Into the Window

For hyperarousal — slow and downregulate

- Lower demands to zero immediately
- Reduce stimulation — quieter, dimmer, calmer
- Slow your own movements and voice
- Offer something grounding: water, a blanket, a familiar object
- Give space — stay nearby but don't hover

For hypoarousal — gentle activation

- Don't demand engagement — wait it out
- Offer gentle movement: a short walk, physical comfort
- Reduce isolation gradually — come near without demands
- Light, warmth, and familiar sensory input can help
- Follow their lead for re-engagement — don't rush it

Share this guide with teachers, grandparents, and other adults in your child's life. Understanding the window changes how adults respond — from frustration to genuine support.