



Understanding RSD in PDA

A guide for families and schools

Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD) is an intense emotional response to real or perceived rejection, failure, or criticism. It is common in autism and particularly intense in PDA profiles. Understanding RSD helps families and schools respond in ways that prevent escalation and build trust.

What Is RSD?

RSD is not simply being upset about rejection. It is a rapid, overwhelming wave of emotion — often described as physical pain — triggered by any perceived indication that the child has disappointed, failed, or been excluded. The response can seem wildly disproportionate to the trigger.

- A mild correction triggers explosive rage
- A perceived slight from a peer triggers complete shutdown
- "No" from a parent triggers intense distress disproportionate to the request
- Not being chosen first in a game feels catastrophic
- A gentle "that's not quite right" provokes intense shame and aggression

Why RSD Is More Intense in PDA

PDA children are often acutely socially aware — they pick up on subtle signals of disapproval, frustration, or rejection that adults don't realise they're sending. Combined with the underlying anxiety and demand avoidance, this creates a hair-trigger for shame and rejection responses.

What RSD Looks Like at Home

- Extreme reaction to being told "no" or being redirected
- Intense distress after any perceived failure — including small accidents
- Refusal to attempt anything they might fail at
- Blaming others immediately when things go wrong
- Extreme sensitivity to sibling dynamics and perceived favouritism

What RSD Looks Like at School

- Explosive response to any correction, even gentle
- Refuses tasks they fear doing imperfectly
- Very sensitive to perceived unfairness or inconsistency
- Social exclusion or rejection by peers triggers significant crisis
- May appear fine, then suddenly escalate after a subtle perceived slight



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Language Strategies

Use this language instead of corrections

- "I wonder if we could try it a slightly different way — what do you think?"
- "That's really close — I think there's one small thing we could tweak."
- "You've done so much of that already — the last bit is the tricky part."
- Never correct publicly — always privately
- Give an out: "There's no pressure — we can leave that for now."

The key principle When a child with RSD perceives correction as rejection, their ability to hear the actual feedback drops to near zero. The emotional response floods everything else. Address the emotion first — the learning can only happen once the child feels safe again.