



Building Regulation Skills in PDA

Low-demand approaches for home and school

Teaching regulation skills to PDA children requires a different approach from standard strategies. Because the skills themselves become demands, the introduction needs to be voluntary, indirect, and genuinely low-pressure.

Why Conventional Regulation Teaching Doesn't Work in PDA

Programmes that direct children to "use your breathing," "go to the calm corner," or "name your feeling" immediately become demands. For PDA children, this triggers the very anxiety they're meant to be managing.

Low-Demand Approaches to Regulation Skill Building

Parallel Modelling

Model the skill yourself without asking the child to participate. "I'm feeling a bit worked up right now — I'm going to take a few slow breaths." Over time, the child observes and absorbs without the pressure of performance.

Interest-Led Learning

Embed regulation concepts in the child's interests. If they love gaming, explore regulation through the lens of character stamina and energy management. If they love animals, discuss how animals self-regulate.

Offering — Not Instructing

Offering language vs instructing language

- "Would you like to try this breathing thing I found? It's kind of interesting." (not: "Go do your breathing.")
- "I've been using this thing to help when I'm stressed — I wonder if you'd be curious about it."
- "Some kids find that [activity] helps when things feel too big. I'm not sure if it would work for you."

Regulation Activities That Often Work in PDA

- Physical movement — jumping, running, climbing (body discharge of anxiety)
- Sensory play — water, sand, clay, fidget tools
- Creative expression — art, music, building, writing
- Screen time and gaming — often a genuine regulation tool, not just avoidance
- Animals — pets, videos of animals, time in nature
- Humour — shared laughter is powerfully regulating

Timing Matters



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Regulation skill building can only happen inside the window of tolerance — when the child is already regulated. Trying to teach during or after a crisis does not work. Build these conversations into calm, connected times — not as a response to a meltdown.

Progress looks different in PDA

Don't measure progress by the child performing a regulation technique on demand. Measure it by gradual increases in window size, faster recovery time, and occasional spontaneous use of a strategy. These are huge achievements.