



PDA girls at school are often managing an enormous amount invisibly. Understanding what's really happening — and what genuinely helps — can change the trajectory for these students.

**The school reports 'no concerns'**

The school reports 'no concerns'. The parents are exhausted. Both are telling the truth. This is the PDA girls' school paradox — and it needs a different response than scepticism.

## What PDA Girls Are Managing Invisibly at School

### The Masking Load

Many PDA girls put extraordinary effort into appearing compliant and socially competent at school. They study social rules, mimic peers, manage their reactions, and hold themselves together. This costs enormous energy.

### The Sensory Environment

Classrooms, corridors, and cafeterias are high-sensory environments. A PDA girl may be tolerating a level of sensory input that is genuinely overwhelming — but she's masking her response. The bill comes at home.

### The Demand Accumulation

A school day involves hundreds of demands — sit here, do this now, finish by this time, work with this person. Each demand adds to the accumulated load. By the end of the day, the tank is empty.

## Warning Signs in School-Age PDA Girls

- After-school meltdowns that seem disproportionate to the school day
- School attendance that is slowly but increasingly difficult
- Frequent physical complaints (headache, stomach ache) on school mornings
- High academic performance that suddenly declines
- Reports of 'lovely behaviour' at school while home is in crisis
- Withdrawing from school friendships without apparent reason
- Increasing school refusal in Year 5–7 as demands increase

## Reasonable Adjustments That Actually Help

### Language and Communication

- Indirect, collaborative language: 'I wonder if we could...' rather than direct commands
- Offering choice within non-negotiables: 'Would you like to start with maths or literacy?'
- Avoiding public correction — all feedback privately



- Written communication or advance notice for new expectations

## Environment Adjustments

- Quiet space or low-sensory room available at transition times
- Permission to use headphones during independent work
- Alternative eating space to the cafeteria
- Seated position that reduces sensory input (away from fans, noise sources)

## Task and Workload

- Flexible due dates wherever possible
- Project-based alternatives to timed tests
- Allowing her to demonstrate knowledge in her preferred modality
- Reduction in homework load during high-stress periods

## Social and Wellbeing

- No forced group participation — structured alternatives always available
- Wellbeing check-ins that are low-key and optional, not interrogation
- A key adult she can go to when regulation is low
- Peer support strategies that don't involve public awareness raising about her needs

## The Home-School Partnership

The most protective factor for PDA girls at school is a functional home-school partnership — where parents and teachers are working from the same understanding. This requires schools to trust what parents report at home, even when it doesn't match school observations.

- Hold regular check-ins with parents — not just when things are in crisis
- Share information about upcoming changes or stressors in advance
- Avoid positioning 'fine at school' as evidence against the diagnosis
- Invite parents into strategy development — they know their child's nervous system best

## Key Takeaways

1. PDA girls are often managing enormous invisible load at school
2. 'Fine at school' and 'in crisis at home' are both true — one is masking
3. Adjustments to language, environment, and task design make a significant difference



4. A strong home-school partnership is one of the most protective things a school can offer
5. Early adjustment is far better than waiting for the school refusal crisis

### **Helpful Tip**

The PDA Teacher Handbook for Australian Schools (available at [pdaaustralia.com.au/shop](http://pdaaustralia.com.au/shop)) includes a full section on PDA girls in the classroom, with scripts and practical tools for educators.