



PDA North America

Levels 1 & 2 Certificate Program

pdanorthamerica.org



**“One of the most
dangerous
forms of human error is
forgetting
what one is
trying to achieve.”**

-Paul Nitze-



Traditional

"The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few."

Groups are viewed as more important than individuals, and **obedience & conformity** are exalted & enforced. Difference is inconvenient to this paradigm and ignored/excluded.

Children are inherently bad

Adults maintain their centrality in a fear-based narrative that, if they don't control children with punishment/rewards, the child will become **parasitic or malicious** towards society.

The Social Contract

Rational economics and behaviorism view people as driven by **self-interest** (i.e., pleasure and pain) and learning by **conditioning**. Authority figures attempt to hijack the natural process by artificially inserting punishments & rewards. Its effectiveness, however, depends on the recipient accepting the group or society's **social contract**, e.g., shared goals and deference to authority.

Why is Traditional popular?

It's easier. Behavior is **observable and measurable**, you can see it, count it, and it feels productive. Abstract variables like identity, agency, and safety cannot be seen or measured. It also poses as the **only approach** there is, and it **"feels right"** to anyone who lived it, who often can't understand why someone else wouldn't.



Low Tension

Attachment & Trauma-informed

Humans are a social species and need **safe relationships** - not force - to thrive. PDA children need at least one person who likes, listens, and respects them before they'll grow and flourish.

Children are inherently good

Kids do well if they can (Ross Greene), but they can't (and eventually *won't*) if disabled by social norms. They need **psychological safety** and access to ND-affirming skills and coping mechanisms.

"Lacks a social identity."

PDA kids do not recognize group rules & authority, usually feeling trapped by them instead. If traditional tactics aren't working, stop using them. Appeal to their individualism: **Discovery, creativity, innovation**, etc. They still crave a safe relationship with someone, who just may be their entire society, complete with a social contract. Be that person.

Why is Low Tension better?

It doesn't ignore invisible aspects of the mind because they're unwieldy. In keeping with **Cognitive Load Theory**, the mind cannot succeed when overloaded, so don't pile on. A modern society can afford to help people who are different and, given numerous global crises, we arguably **can't afford NOT to**.



Traditional

Low Tension

POWER

Hard, position, authority, hierarchy

Soft, inspiration, meritocracy

MOTIVATIONS

Extrinsic, rewards

Intrinsic, inner value

MISBEHAVIOR

"Bad choices"

Something wrong, dysregulation

WINNING

Adult has final say, wins

It's not about winning

IMPERFECTION

Sniping: "It's about time!" "Finally!"

Recognizes effort, protects it

GOALS

Adults' goals

Child's needs

SOCIAL

Friendships, group memberships

Relationship, one or two people

TEACH THEM

What to think

How to think

EVIDENCE-BASED

Research studies

Your kid

FOCUS

FACTS: Math, writing, history, science

ACTS: Life skills, experiences

EMPHASIS

FUTURE: College, job, house, partner

PRESENT: Play, practice, fail, love

HIDDEN CURRICULUM

No need to teach it

Must teach it explicitly, no shame

TIMING

Immediately, directly

Later, under better regulation

EXPRESSION

Adults expect child to articulate problems

Adults trust their observations

CONNECTION

Talking, confiding, confessions

Unsaid, gestures, time spent together

MEDICATION

"No way!"

Maybe?



Why Low Tension Learning works

Cognitive Load Theory

- Cognitive bandwidth consists of skill & energy, and is finite
- Mental health issues consume most or all of it
- Adding pressure usually just piles on, rather than alleviates

Misattribution

- Of emotions, problems, solutions
- "Kicking the cat" (hint: It's not about the cat)
- Often too concrete, or an easier target

Beta Region Paradox

- Small annoyances are often tolerated, but contribute to a vague sense of dissatisfaction or overwhelm
- Don't underestimate the power of small improvements

Systems Theory

- How to solve unsolvable problems? The mind is a system, improvements in one area improve others indirectly. Families and schools are systems, too.



And Other PDA Communication Tips

Get Strategic

DON'T say what you need to say

Instead say what they need to hear

(Rhetoric lecture by Prof. Michael Drout)

Separate their reaction from the grievance

Handle emotions before logistics

No Sniping or Snarking

The damage is lasting, hard to recover

“Why can’t you do that all the time?”

“It’s about time!”

“I told you so.”

“Finally!”

“I won’t accept your apology until it’s genuine!”

Badgering the Witness

Telling isn’t teaching

Words can show or undermine credibility

Adult can become the demand

Words need to count, don’t waste them

Get consent to speak, they’re free to say no

Emotional Tones

Rejection sensitive, right?

Empathy is a sense! Overload!

Emotions can be too much or too invasive

Avoid you/I/me pronouns

Talk about things using the/that/it

Don’t celebrate, except quietly/peacefully

Modeling

Model non-reactivity despite tension

Model confidence in uncertainty

Model thinking through chaos

Think out loud, connect dots forward and back

Talk less about what matters (emotions, love)

Talk more about what doesn’t (psychology, planning)

Be goofy/curious, it suggests safety, and powerful

Create Distance and Explain

“Don’t blame me, I just work here.”

“It wasn’t my idea.”

“It’s the law.”

“It’s the law *of physics*.”

Validation

Beware over-validating: Hidden hierarchy

Teach flattery & other people’s needs

Do you see what they see?/“You’re vs. that’s right:

(Chris Voss, Secret to Winning YouTube video)

Charisma University (YouTube)

Discretion is the Better Part of Valor

Not every statement needs a response

Silence is okay

Distraction is also okay:

Hey, look, a squirrel!

Stub your toe

Answer a question they didn’t ask

Get something wrong they’ll correct

Let them use an excuse/save face

Let them walk away (unless unsafe)

Accept their apology



Communication
is the
currency
of
Relationship.



What's a Demand?

A request or expectation.

Direct: "Brush your teeth!"

Subtle: "Time for lunch."

Implied: Someone said hello, you're supposed to say it back.

Self-imposed: Hobbies, vacations, paying bills, needing sleep

New! *By Sandra McConnell, PDA Mama Bear*

Demands of action: "Put your shoes on."

Demands of thought or feeling: "You'll love it!"

Demands of identity: "Nice kids share their toys."



12 Types of Boundary Violations

Most of the demands below are of thought/feeling or identity, and PDA'ers boundaries are often very sensitive.

Below are categories & examples, but they are not exhaustive.

#1 Judging

- Commentary
- Value-Laden words
- Good/bad
- Entitled to an opinion
- Not an opinion
- Just trying to help

#2 Sniping

- Passive aggressive
- Perfect is better than meh
- Blaming
- Gaslighting
- Demeaning nicknames

#3 Adversarial

- Devil's advocate
- Hard pill to swallow
- Normalizing
- Encouraging
- Expecting child to articulate

#4 Assumptions

- Projection
- Catch 22
- Loaded question
- Precommitment

#5 Emotional

- Emotions as words
- Emotions as drama
- Guilt tripping
- Expecting appreciation

#6 Comparing

- Positive Other
- Medical Model
- Evidence-based

#7 Extrinsic

- Commands
- Threats, ultimatums
- Punishing/public shaming
- Taking away supports
- Tokens/charts
- Rewards

#8 Ambiguity

- Vague/abstract
- Implied/subtextual
- Metaphorical
- Mixed messages
- Hidden Curriculum

#9 Telling isn't Teaching

- Bicycle by blackboard
- Knowing something they don't
- Withholding information, toying
- Teaching what they already know
- Reminding them repeatedly

#10 Abandonment

- Ignoring, ghosting
- Giving up, love is lost, all is lost
- Love is earned, has a price
- Rejecting reconciliation

#11 Playing the Hero/Victim

- Adult is equalizing/must win
- Incensed at the audacity
- "I had it worse and I'm okay"
- "Thank God for me"
- Infinity words (always, never, etc.)

#12 Dehumanizing

- Sense of owning the child
- Child owes them something
- Cannot comprehend masking
- Denies child's senses/feelings
- Denies child's pain/needs
- Denies child's personhood



Examples of Boundary Violations

Exercise: Identify what boundaries these statements violate. Many of them violate more than one.

1. Why do you play that silly game all the time?
 2. Why'd you attack that other student?
 3. You're not making respectful choices.
 4. Oh, look who finally decided to join us!
 5. I don't get it, you're fine at school, you come home and BOOM.
 6. Come with us, you'll love it!
 7. Grandma loves you and just wants to see you, she won't be around forever you know.
 8. If you don't finish the assignment, I can't give you a gold star.
 9. "I don't know" isn't a real answer.
 10. Maybe if you tried seeing it from their side you wouldn't have this problem anymore.
 11. Tell me what's wrong. I can't fix it if you won't tell me.
 12. You seem angry.
 13. Your brother's not like this.
 14. You should be out there making friends.
 15. This happens every time, you always make everything so hard.
- A. See? That wasn't so bad, was it.
 - B. I just wish you wanted more out of life.
 - C. I keep telling you what to do, you just don't listen.
 - D. You'll understand someday.
 - E. Wow, I'm so impressed with you, I knew you could do it!
 - F. Why can't you just get along with people?
 - G. Oh, you don't really believe that.
 - H. What will your teachers think? What will your friends think?
 - I. You do you.
 - J. Do you want people to like you or not?
 - K. I do everything for you and this is the thanks I get?
 - L. Do what you want, I don't care anymore.
 - M. I don't like this music you listen to.
 - N. Why would you dye your hair, it's already pretty.
 - O. I had it harder than you and I turned out okay.
 - P. If you spent all this energy on doing the task rather than avoiding it, you'd be done by now.
 - Q. You can't change the world, that's just how it is.



Avoiding Boundary Violations

Respecting boundaries creates safety, and safety leads to healing, exploration, and growth.

1. **IDENTIFY** which boundaries the PDAer is sensitive to, and avoid them.
2. **REASSESS** if words are needed; perhaps a gesture would work better?
3. **SEEK CONSENT** to make your comment or ask a question.
4. **DIFFERENTIATE YOURSELF**. Be clear, these are your thoughts, not theirs.
5. **ALLOW DISSENT**. They're allowed to disagree without consequences.
6. **DON'T SUBSUME**. Not, *"Everyone's like that."* Instead try, *"That's understandable."*
7. **NO AGENDAS**. We aren't changing them, we're empowering them.
8. **AVOID EMOTIONS**. Especially yours & theirs. Unless they bring it up first.
9. **DISCUSS THE WORLD**. Not them, not you. Talk about if/then relationships.
10. **EQUIVOCATE**. Use: *Sort of, sometimes, mostly*, etc., then pivot as needed.
11. **DON'T JUDGE, DON'T ARGUE**. Even if you think you should; it's adversarial.
12. **DON'T TEAR DOWN WALLS**. Walls mean safety, trust, & exploration.

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