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## **Neurodiversity-Affirming Support Framework for Schools (NASF): Reshaping Accommodations and Special Education Supports.**

### **NASF Guide for Developing Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) and Behavior Intervention Plans (BIP), for PDA, Autistic, and Twice Exceptional Students**

By Dr. Jennifer Huffman, Neurodivergent Neuropsychologist, The ABLE Center

A student's functioning at home and school is never just about behaviors. The Neurodiversity-Affirming Support Framework (NASF) is designed to re-envision outdated terminology that was focused on behaviors and behavior management toward a new process, a process of more holistically understanding and supporting neurodivergent students. Evolving our understanding of how to conceptualize and support neurodivergent children at school will not only help the student, their peers, and their teachers in the school setting, but it will also support their home functioning and provide a better pathway to long term educational and ultimately occupational success.

The Neurodiversity-Affirming Support Framework (NASF) represents a paradigm shift away from traditional behavior-focused approaches to one that values and affirms the diverse ways in which individuals experience and interact with the world. The goal of the NASF is to support the whole person, focus on their strengths, better understand their needs beyond the behaviors

that they express, and work together with the NASF team to create an environment where students with PDA, Autism, and Twice Exceptional profiles can succeed. It is designed to be, by its very nature, both neurodiversity and PDA affirming.

## **What is the Neurodiversity-Affirming Support Framework (NASF)?**

The NASF is an educational approach proposed by Dr. Huffman after her more than 25 years of working with neurodivergent students across school settings: public school, private school, homeschool, and higher education. Her model is inspired by understanding of neuropsychological and psychosocial functioning of neurodivergent children at home and school. While this approach could be used for any neurodivergent individual, it is particularly focused on supporting students with a Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) profile, Autism, or Twice Exceptional students (2e), student who historically have underperformed, struggled with attendance, and ultimately left formal brick and mortar schools for alternative options, often with associated school-related trauma/stress. Unlike traditional educational methods that primarily focus on identifying and modifying behaviors, the NASF framework emphasizes a holistic understanding of each individual's needs, strengths, and challenges in the educational environmental context.

The focus of this educational program is to provide information to support the student with their IEP or Section 504 accommodations to help them to be understood before challenging behavioral interactions that adversely impact their comfort and success in formal schooling become more prevalent. However, at a minimum, this approach is designed to provide an alternative to the traditional functional behavioral assessment and behavior improvement plan process in school for these students who need a more nuanced approach. With the goal of better supporting their functioning, decreasing their masking and anxiety, and reducing the exodus of neurodivergent children away from the public and private community school system.

## **Components of the Neurodiversity-Affirming Support Framework (NASF):**

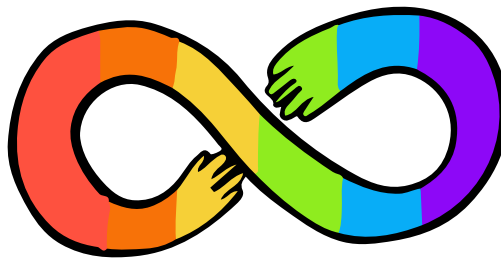
- *Individual-Centered Understanding:* NASF is designed to recognize the unique neuropsychological profile of each student. It is designed to understand the individual's experiences, preferences, triggers, and coping mechanisms. The more internally-focused and holistic understanding will guide the creation of personalized strategies that truly support the individual.
- *Strengths-Based Approach:* Rather than focusing solely on identifying and changing challenging behaviors, the goal of the NASF is to provide a plan to understand the student's strength and abilities and how they inform their internal process.
- *Collaborative Involvement:* Completing a NASF for a student involves collaboration between the student, their family, teachers, and healthcare professionals, when appropriate. This team

approach ensures that everyone has input from their respective specialty and unique understanding of the student and that the team can collaborate on their behalf for the best possible outcomes.

- *Flexible and Adaptable Strategies:* Understanding that what works for one student might not work for another, therefore, the NASF promotes flexible strategies tailored to the individual student's changing needs and circumstances.
- *Affirming Neurodiversity:* The NASF is based on the principle that neurological differences are a part of human diversity. It affirms and respects these differences, working to create environments where neurodiverse individuals can thrive.
- *PDA Affirming:* The NASF is based on the understanding and implementation of how Pathological Demand Avoidance, Autism and Twice Exceptional students present across settings and the appropriate supports, accommodations, and modifications to the environment to better support the child.

### **Benefits of Implementing a Neurodiversity-Affirming Support Framework:**

- *Enhances Understanding:* By focusing on a holistic profile of the student, educators and parents can better understand why certain behaviors occur at school (as well as home) and the underlying factors that initiate, support, and reinforce the behaviors.
- *Positive Environment:* Affirming a student's unique neuropsychological profile helps in creating more positive and inclusive learning and living environments.
- *Empowers Students:* By recognizing and building on strengths, students feel more empowered and supported by their school team.
- *Collaborative Success:* With a team-based approach, there is unified support, reducing conflicts and ensuring consistent strategies across different settings.



## Recommended Practices:

### Implementing the Neurodiversity-Affirming Support Framework in School

- *Education Phase:* Teachers, Staff, and Administration are Educated About Neurodiversity, Autism, PDA, and Other Neurodivergent Concepts

Learning about PDA and identifying children with possible PDA in the classroom is an important first step, these strategies can be implemented even without a diagnosis. See the following for information about identifying PDA in students.

#### [Checklist for Identifying Signs of Pathological Demand Avoidance \(PDA\) in Students](#)

- *Connection Phase:* Connecting and engaging with the student and restoring relationships will be needed in order for the NASF to be successful in improving school, and often by extension, home functioning.
- *Assessment Phase:* Collect comprehensive data on the individual's history, preferences, strengths, and challenges through observations, interviews, and questionnaires. This includes assessing the current school based plans and determining the successes and on-going challenges with that plan.
- *Planning Phase:* Develop personalized support strategies that are proactive rather than reactive. Consider connection levels with staff, sensory needs, communication preferences, and emotional regulation techniques. Create specific plans based on understanding of the unique neuropsychological profile of students with PDA, Utilize into the plan specific strategies focused on equalizing behaviors, demand avoidance, declarative language use, and a trauma informed approach to periods of dysregulation.
- *Implementation Phase:* Apply the strategies in school and request feedback from school and community providers regarding changes in presentation across settings to identify possible changes related to school-based initiatives.
- *Review and Adaptation Phase:* Regularly review the plan's effectiveness through ongoing communication among team members, school team, parents, individual, community providers, and make necessary adjustments to better support the individual.

# **Modifying a FBA/BIP to NASF Guidance Tool for Children with PDA**

## *Step 1: NASF Education Phase*

### Teacher/Staff Education About Neurodiversity and PDA

- Learn about Neurodiversity and PDA: Understand the general Pathological Demand Avoidance profile and how it may impact home, school, and social functioning.
- Check your local state education department website for webinars and professional development training opportunities related to neurodiversity affirming and trauma informed school practices.
- Learn about the PDA Student's Unique Profile: Each PDA individual is unique in their strengths and obstacles. Use the recommended PDA exploratory guide to learn more about your student.
- Evaluate the School's Level of PDA and Neurodiversity Understanding: Schools who acknowledge PDA but do not modify the environment are not truly supporting the PDA student. To be truly PDA-affirming, schools must understand PDA, recognize it in their students (even when no formal identification has occurred), and be prepared to implement PDA appropriate supports and accommodations in the school setting to support the child's functioning in that setting.

## *Step 2: Connection/Restorative Relationship Phase*

### Building Trust and Rapport and Repairing Damaged Relationships.

- Establish a Safe Environment: Ensure the student feels safe and understood. Build a trusting relationship before starting the assessment.
- Collaborative Approach: Involve the student, family, and other key stakeholders in the process to gather comprehensive insights.
- Student Engagement: When the student is comfortable with you, join into their world by learning and engaging in their interest along side them, then moving toward interacting with them when they are comfortable, and then introducing more varied topics that interest them. The student should not have to enter your world/engage with your interests to connect with you.

## *Step 3: ENGAGE! NASF Assessment and Planning Phase*

Translating an FBA/BIP to the NASF : Focus on the INTERNAL process of the child which is resulting in EXTERNAL behaviors. Gather student-focused information through student self-reports, play sessions, and diagnostic interviews to highlight the students voice as much as possible.

#### A. Gather Comprehensive Data

- Behavioral Observations: Observe the child in various settings to identify patterns and triggers. Note the context, antecedents, behaviors, and consequences. Observe for signs of trauma reactions, equalizing behaviors, and verbal and nonverbal safety cues between individuals (teachers/staff) in the environment and the child.
- Interviews and Questionnaires: Use trauma-informed interview techniques to gather information from the child, parents, teachers, and other relevant individuals. Focus on understanding the child's perspective and experiences.
- Review Records: Examine the child's history, including any trauma or adverse experiences, to understand potential underlying factors influencing behavior.
- Ask the Student: Once you have established a relationship with the student, allow them the opportunity to share their challenges and what they feel that they do well. If you connect with them and incorporate them into the overall plan, they will be a more active participant and you will make progress faster at reducing their overall stress (and therefore the stress within their classroom).
- Create a PDA Profile: Using the provided PDA profile worksheet, create a PDA profile for your student and connect the underlying challenges (sensory, communication, anxiety, executive functioning, learning, social, emotional differences, etc.) that may both support and adversely impact their functioning in school (See below).
- Be Aware of Home Functioning: This profile must include home functioning, as when a child attends school, stress at home in a PDA or Autistic child is intrinsically related to their stress at school (often hidden by masking).
- Be Aware of Masking: Children with PDA and Autism are prone to masking or camouflaging their true selves. This is often associated with trauma responses that make them appear to be a "perfect student." Just because those students do not show external meltdowns or are disruptive to the class/environment, this does not mean that the impact on them is any less problematic. In fact, these are the children who will show severe dysregulation at home despite "being on their best behavior" at school. Remember that home stress for a PDA'er or Autistic student is a school issue.

#### B. Identify Triggers and Functions

- **Analyze Data:** Look for patterns in the data to identify specific triggers, the presence and likely purpose of equalizing behaviors and the functions of the behavior (e.g., avoidance, seeking control, reducing anxiety).
- **Consider Trauma Impact:** Recognize how past trauma may influence current behaviors and responses. Understand that behaviors may be coping mechanisms. Evaluate the level of stress from school-based incidences and the individuals involved that could be contributing to a heightened stress response in the school system. Monitor for fight, flight, freeze, fawn, and feigning responses.
- **Consider the School Environment:** Examine relationships/connections, sensory overwhelm, ability to access breaks, level of autonomy, level of dysregulation the overall classroom or environment, and learning, social, and executive functioning challenges and demands in the classroom.

C. Identify the Neurocognitive Aspects of PDA to Support the Student’s Functioning.

**PDA Neuropsychological Profile**



Profile created by

Dr. Jennifer I. Huffman

**Overview**

Each individual with PDA is different. Often what one observes externally in a child provides little information as to the complexity of challenges occurring internally.

An understanding of underlying strengths and challenges is needed. Use the following guide to identify and summarize what is known about a child and what is needed to be explored.

**PDA Neuropsychological Profile Summary**

Cognitive	
Executive Functioning	
Language	
Attention	
Memory	
Academics	
Social	
Emotional-Behavioral	
Motor	
Sensory	
Additional Concerns:	



- *Attention*

Chunking Tasks: Break tasks into smaller, manageable chunks to help maintain attention and reduce overwhelm.

Visual Supports: Use visual schedules and cues to help the child stay focused and understand what is expected. While some people also use timers, this usually only works when the child picks the timer options and does not experience demand avoidance or extreme anxiety from the feeling of pressure.

Frequent Breaks: Allow for frequent, short breaks to help the child reset and maintain attention.

- *Learning*

Multisensory Instruction: Use a variety of sensory inputs (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) to cater to different learning styles and enhance engagement.

Repetition and Reinforcement: Provide repeated opportunities to practice skills and reinforce learning in different contexts.

Scaffolded Support: Gradually reduce support as the child becomes more competent, ensuring they feel successful at each step.

- *Executive Functioning*

Goal Setting: Help the child set small, achievable goals and celebrate their accomplishments to build confidence and motivation.

Organizational Tools: Provide tools such as planners, checklists, and graphic organizers to help the child plan and organize tasks.

Self-Monitoring: Teach the child self-monitoring techniques to help them recognize and manage their own behavior.

Shifting: Evaluate the child's ability to shift from one task or activity to another. Determine if they benefit from extra time, prompts, or cues to shift or if they need to be allowed to shift at their own pace.

- *Processing Differences*

Pacing: Allow the child to work at their own pace, providing extra time as needed to process information and complete tasks.

Simplified Instructions: Use clear, concise language and check for understanding to ensure the child comprehends instructions.

Alternative Assessments: Offer different ways to demonstrate learning, such as oral presentations, projects, or visual representations.

#### D. Hypothesize Function

Develop Hypotheses: Formulate hypotheses about the function of the aspects above, considering both the internal processes and external observable behaviors.

*Step 4: NASF Implementation Phase:* Determining how to put the NASF into action

#### A. Incorporate Trauma-Informed Practices into Interventions

- Reduce Demands: Minimize direct demands and provide choices to reduce anxiety. Use indirect requests and collaborative problem-solving approaches.
- Create Predictable Routines: Establish consistent and predictable routines while allowing for flexibility to accommodate the child's need for control.
- Teach Coping Skills: Introduce and practice coping strategies to help the child manage anxiety and stress. This could include mindfulness, relaxation techniques, and self-regulation skills.

#### B. Modify the Environment

- Safe Spaces: Create safe spaces where the child can retreat when feeling overwhelmed.
- Safe Person: Identify who the child's safe person is at school and determine their access to them throughout the day. Modifications to access may be needed as well as determining how the child can request access to their safe person without using words when unable to do so.
- Sensory Considerations: Consult with the school or districts occupational therapist to evaluate sensory safety and need for sensory diet. Address any sensory sensitivities by modifying the environment to reduce sensory overload.
- Demand/Task Modifications: Lower demands, increase choice, allow for the modification of activities to be interest-based activities, allow for technology to be used as needed. Modify language using the declarative language model.

#### C. Positive Reinforcement

- **Individualized Rewards:** Use individualized and meaningful rewards that do not add pressure or feel like demands. Focus on intrinsic motivation and positive reinforcement that is important to the child. Use their interests!
- **Celebrate Small Successes:** Acknowledge and celebrate small steps and successes to build confidence and resilience. However, this may also feel like a demand to the student, so monitor their reaction to positive reinforcement and modify accordingly.

#### D. Team Problem-Solving

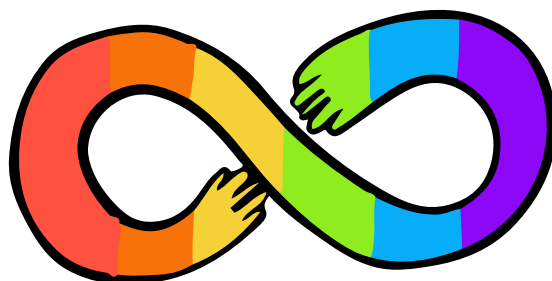
- **Involve the student, caregivers, special education team members, and service providers:** Collaborate with the student and this problem solving team to develop solutions and strategies. Empower the student by giving them a sense of control and ownership over their support plan.
- **Regular Check-Ins:** Schedule regular check-ins to review progress, make adjustments, and provide ongoing support.

#### E. Supportive Relationships

- **Build Strong Relationships:** Foster strong, supportive relationships with trusted adults who can provide consistent and empathetic support.
- **Trauma-Informed Training:** Ensure that all staff working with the child are trained in trauma informed practices and understand the PDA profile.

#### F. NASF Review and Adaption Phase

- **Continuous Monitoring:** Regularly monitor the effectiveness of the BIP and make necessary adjustments based on the child's progress and changing needs.
- **Flexible Approach:** Be prepared to adapt strategies as needed, maintaining a flexible and responsive approach to the child's needs.



# **Neurodiversity-Affirming Support Framework (NASF) for Schools:**

## **Implementation Guide for Administration**

### **Step 1: Foundation and Training**

#### **Formation of NASF Team:**

- Include teachers, special education staff, school counselors, administrators, and, if possible, external specialists knowledgeable in neurodiversity.
- Designate a key coordinator for the NASF initiative. Preferably someone who is openly neurodivergent or has neurodivergent family members.

#### **Training and Professional Development:**

- Conduct comprehensive training on neurodiversity, PDA, and the principles of NASF for all staff.
- Utilize workshops, seminars, webinars, and online courses from experts in the field.
- Include practical strategies, case studies, and role-playing scenarios to illustrate concepts.

#### **Awareness and Buy-In:**

- Hold informational sessions for staff to understand the importance and benefits of NASF.
- Highlight success stories and research that support a neurodiversity-affirming approach.

### **Step 2: Assessment and Understanding**

#### **Initial Assessment:**

- Gather comprehensive information about the student, including medical history, personal interests, sensory preferences, and behavioral patterns.
- Use multiple sources: interviews with parents, caregivers, and the student (if appropriate); observational data; and previous assessments.

#### **Behavioral and Needs Evaluation:**

- Develop a detailed profile for each student, identifying strengths, areas of difficulty, triggers, and effective coping strategies.
- Include input from the student to understand their perspective and preferences.

### **Step 3: Development of NASF Personalized Support Plans**

#### **Personalized Support Plan (PSP):**

- Create a NASF-supported PSP tailored to each student's unique needs and strengths.
- Include specific strategies for communication, sensory regulation, emotional support, and academic accommodations.

#### Goals and Objectives:

- Set realistic and achievable goals that focus on enhancing the student's strengths and addressing their needs.
- Ensure goals are specific, measurable, achievable, and relevant to the child and the context in which they do best.

#### Step 4: Implementation of Strategies

##### Classroom Strategies:

- Implement sensory-friendly classroom setups (e.g., flexible seating, quiet corners, sensory tools).
- Utilize student-created and approved visual schedules, clear instructions, and consistent routines.
- Provide options for demonstrating understanding (e.g., oral presentations, visual projects) that align with the student's strengths.

##### Modify Behavioral Interventions to Student-Centered Interventions:

- Use proactive, positive behavior support techniques.
- Assume competency and support the child's development of agency.
- Develop individualized behavior plans that include sensory breaks, coping mechanisms, and safe spaces.

##### Flexible Adaptations:

- Adjust teaching methods and curriculum delivery to suit the student's learning style (e.g., hands-on activities, visual aids).
- Allow flexible deadlines and alternative assignments as needed.

#### Step 5: Continuous Monitoring and Adaptation

##### Regular Review Meetings:

- Schedule regular check-ins with the NASF team, including teachers, parents, and relevant stakeholders, to review progress and make necessary adjustments.
- Maintain open communication channels for ongoing feedback.

#### Data Collection and Analysis:

- Use a variety of data sources (e.g., academic performance, behavioral logs, observational notes, child input, parent input) to track progress and identify areas for improvement.
- Focus on ways for the child to communicate their internal processes and area of measurable need, such as executive functioning, sensory overwhelm, challenges with reliable communication .
- Adjust strategies based on data-driven insights.

#### Professional Development:

- Offer ongoing professional development opportunities to stay updated on best practices and new research in neurodiversity, Autism, and PDA.

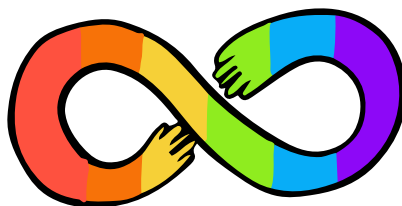
### Step 6: Building a Supportive Community

#### Peer Education:

- Educate students about neurodiversity through age-appropriate workshops, materials, and activities.
- Foster an inclusive classroom environment that celebrates differences and promotes acceptance.
- Use neurodiversity-affirming lessons in the social-emotional and science based curriculums.

#### Family Engagement:

- Involve families in the planning and implementation process.
- Provide resources, workshops, and support groups for parents to understand and advocate for their child's needs.



## What Can Parents and Students Expect with a NASF-friendly School:

### 1. Comprehensive Assessment:

- Schools will gather detailed information about your child, including their strengths, needs, and preferences.
- This involves input from you, your child, teachers, and other relevant people.

### 2. Personalized Support Plan (PSP):

- A PSP will be created for your child, outlining individualized strategies for support in the classroom.
- The plan includes specific goals that focus on building strengths and addressing needs.
- To assist with the creation of this plan, please use the following form All About Me with PDA (link is below) and provide this to your child's school.

[About Me: Understanding My Pathological Demand Avoidance \(PDA\) Worksheet](#)

### 3. Implementation of Strategies:

- Teachers will use various strategies tailored to your child's unique learning style and needs.
- This may include sensory-friendly classroom setups, visual schedules, and flexible teaching methods.

### 4. Monitoring and Adaptation:

- Your child's progress will be continuously monitored, and the PSP will be adjusted based on ongoing feedback and data.
- Regular meetings with the NASF team will help ensure that the support remains effective and appropriate.

### 5. Building a Supportive Community:

- Schools will educate peers about neurodiversity, fostering an inclusive and accepting classroom environment.
- Families will be involved in the planning process and provided with resources to support their child at home.

## How You Can Be Involved:

### 1. Share Information:

- Provide detailed insights about your child's strengths, challenges, triggers, and effective strategies to the school's NASF team.

[About Me: Understanding My Pathological Demand Avoidance \(PDA\) Worksheet](#)

### 2. Participate in Meetings:

- Attend regular meetings with the NASF team to review your child's progress and contribute to planning and adjustments.

### 3. Maintain Open Communication:

- Keep open lines of communication with teachers and NASF staff to ensure everyone is informed and working together.

### 4. Advocate for Your Child:

- Be your child's advocate, ensuring their needs are being met and their strengths are being recognized.

### 5. Utilize Resources:

- Take advantage of workshops, support groups, and resources provided by the school to better understand and support your child's unique needs.