

Our non-negotiables, and understanding PDA

What a neuroaffirming autism class is built on



“ No child should have to earn our warmth.

Our five non-negotiables

1 

Unconditional positive regard

Accepting and valuing each child as they are.

2 

Regulation first

Nervous system safety before anything else.

3 

Connection over compliance

Relationships, not rewards and consequences.

4 

Monotropic learning

Learning through deep interests and flow.

5 

As much autonomy as possible

Real choice, real say, every day.



Unconditional positive regard

- ✓ Accept and value the child as they are
- ✓ It builds trust, safety and connection
- ✓ Respond with empathy, respect and consistency
- ✓ It aligns with the NCSE Relate Framework: relationship-based support and understanding

“ This is the true predictability piece.

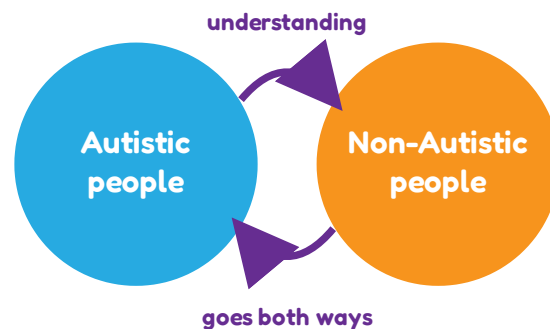


↔ The double empathy problem

A theory from Autistic researcher **Dr Damian Milton** (2012): communication breakdowns between Autistic and non-Autistic people are a **two-way** issue, not a one-sided deficit.

In school, Autistic students are often expected to do all the adapting, even though they have the least power to change the environment.

“ **Staff adapt too.**



🎯 Monotropism

The way many Autistic children learn and process information: focusing deeply on their interests and entering a flow state. This brings great joy, learning and regulation. **Interrupting flow can be traumatic.**

An adult-led timetable



Switch, switch, switch. Learning becomes like factory work.

Monotropic learning

one deep dive: flow, joy, learning

Can a student ever go deep, and experience Autistic joy?



“ **We can offer structure and predictability without adult-led timetables.**

↔ The transitions trap

Work systems ask children to make many transitions every hour. What happens when they can't, or don't want to?



What we're really seeing is distress from a mismatch: an environment that doesn't suit the learner. A chosen task a child goes back to again and again is probably regulating for them.

Predictability, not rigidity

- ✓ Knowing what, and who, the child can count on
- ✓ Access to what they need, when they need it
- ✓ All communication supported, always
- ✓ Safety and access never conditional on compliance

We honour capacity



Capacity is not fixed, it fluctuates. Rest and wandering matter. Burnout is real. **Safety and connection come before academic expectations.**

Child-led is not support-free

One class. Individual needs. Individual supports.

Structure

One child thrives on a predictable schedule.

Connection

Another benefits from 1:1 support.

Independence

Another works alone, with gentle invitations.

Regulation

Each child builds routines that feel safe.

PDA: Persistent Drive for Autonomy

More on PDA for educators:
neurodiversityireland.com

For many Autistic children with a PDA profile, being directed or controlled can trigger a powerful stress response. **This is not a child being difficult. It is a nervous system under threat.**

What the child is experiencing, and the label it often gets:

Fluctuating capacity → **"Inconsistent"**

Saying no → **"Defiant"**

Experiencing distress → **"Attention-seeking"**

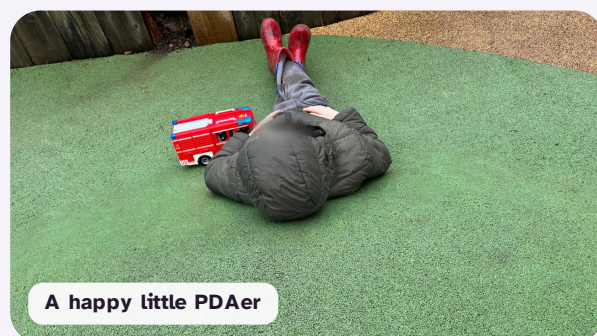
Questioning everything → **"Argumentative"**

Avoiding an activity → **"Lazy"**

Needing control → **"Controlling"**

Get curious instead

- ❓ What is this child communicating?
- ❓ What is happening in the environment?
- ❓ Who's asking? Who holds the power?
- ❓ Is autonomy genuinely present?



A happy little PDAer

The key mindset shift

Based on the NCSE Relate Framework

Regulation first

Meet sensory and emotional needs before anything else.

Follow their interests

Curiosity, play and monotropic flow.

Understand the stressors

Look beyond the behaviour.

Protect autonomy

Genuine choice. Less power imbalance.

► Next: Part 3, NCSE Relate, planning and assessment