

## Introduction to PDA

PDA is not recognised in major diagnostic manuals like the DSM-5 or ICD-11. However, it is increasingly accepted in UK clinical and academic settings. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) does not provide separate guidelines for PDA. This means identification is dependent on expert clinicians and local pathways (Christie et al., 2022). As a result, many PDAers may have had multiple prior diagnoses or be in the process of reassessment.

Some adults and older students may also self-identify as a PDAer if there have been limited opportunities for diagnosis and validating their experience is important.

## Definition and characteristics of PDA

Pathological demand avoidance (PDA) is widely regarded as a profile on the autism spectrum, characterised by:

- An overwhelming need to avoid everyday demands, often due to heightened anxiety.
- Use of social strategies to elude demands, including distraction, negotiation, procrastination, or flattery.
- Surface sociability, masking deeper social understanding challenges and heightened anxiety.
- Rapid mood changes and impulsivity, with swings from compliance to intense avoidance and extreme distressed behaviours.
- Ease in role-play and pretending, as a means of control or escape.

- Obsessive behaviours, frequently focused on people or relationships.
- Need for control as a way of reducing anxiety.
- Intolerance of uncertainty, to a greater extent than the general Autistic community.

## Parenting a PDAer

Parenting a child or adult with Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) requires flexibility, patience, and being willing to try different approaches. PDAers can feel extreme anxiety around demands and loss of autonomy. This means that traditional parenting approaches are less likely to work and can often make things worse. A low-demand environment and working with your child, can often be the best ways forward to help build trusting relationships.

## Considerations when parenting a PDAer

A great first step in finding new ways to parent, could be trying to understand and accept your child's challenges. By trying to see things through the lens of their life it can help parents to be gentler and more compassionate in their approach. Common challenges PDA children face could be:

- Demands feel overwhelming: even small everyday requests can trigger extreme anxiety and avoidance behaviours. Demands from their own bodies, such as needing the toilet, can also build anxiety levels. There

may be a number of demands causing your PDA child stress which they are not even consciously aware of.

- Traditional discipline raises anxiety: rewards and consequences often fail, as PDAers may resist external control instinctively. Being shamed for something “wrong” can cause them to feel a loss of autonomy. This can be very triggering and lead to a meltdown.
- Feeling unsafe: PDAers may feel vulnerable and uncomfortable due to overwhelm, anxiety and sensory challenges. This can be worsened by feeling misunderstood or like no-one believes what they’re saying.
- Feeling trapped by rigid rules: children’s lives are often dictated by rules set by parents, teachers and adults in general. For a PDAer this might lead to feeling frustration at the loss of control, especially if they do not understand why the rules are in place.
- Needing independence: even from a very young age PDAers show a preference for developing and learning in their own way.

## Suggestions for parenting a PDAer

Thinking about these challenges, and others that you might see your PDAer experience, you can start to change your approach

to support them better. Some areas you might like to consider are:

- **Trust and connection:** a solid bond built on trust allows your child to feel safer and less anxious. Knowing that you have their back will help them to take steps they may not have done previously and eventually try new things.
- **Low-demand environment:** can be created by removing as many pressures as possible and helping your child when they ask.
- **Flexibility:** a common challenge with finding things that might help, is that what works one day, may not work the next. Once something becomes a regular routine or expectation it can start to look like a demand. Changing approach and coming up with new ideas can help to avoid this.
- **Indirect language:** offering choices, suggestions, or observations rather than direct orders can encourage rather than “tell”. For example, saying “It’s cold outside today, I think I’m going to wear my coat” rather than “Put a coat on”.
- **Prioritise and Compromise:** taking a step back and thinking about what is an essential boundary or request, and what could be dropped. For example, eating something is important, but sitting at a table to do it is

less so.

- Humour and playfulness: engaging a PDA child through being silly or role-playing can make tasks feel less demanding. It can also sometimes even help to diffuse distressed behaviour.
- Validation of feelings: listening to when your child is trying to show or tell you how they are feeling is important in building a trusting relationship. Acknowledging their struggles and suggesting PDA friendly approaches might offer support without increasing anxiety.

For more information see:  
[Childhood - PDA Society](#)