

# Pathological Demand Avoidance



## What is PDA?

With limited evidence to date from research, there is *no* currently agreed upon definition of PDA as a diagnostic label. For this reason, it may not be possible to obtain a diagnosis.

However, there *is* general agreement that a **PDA profile** does exist, and that it describes children and adults whose main characteristic is an extreme avoiding of everyday demands. This profile is generally considered to be part of the autism spectrum.

## The PDA Profile

A child with a PDA profile will be likely to:

- have very high levels of anxiety
- *resist and avoid the ordinary demands of life (e.g. 'please put your shoes on') to an extreme extent* (the demands create intense anxiety)
- appear sociable but lack some deeper understanding of social rules
- use social strategies as a way of avoiding demands, e.g. distracting you, giving excuses
- have excessive mood swings and appear very impulsive
- appear comfortable in role play and pretence
- display obsessional behaviour that is often focused on other people

Note: All children may avoid demands at times, but this does not mean they fit the PDA profile!

## Understanding PDA

- PDA is characterised by very high levels of anxiety.
- *The avoidance of demands in PDA is not a choice, in that moment a child cannot comply.*
- Sudden demands made on the child in particular can cause immediate high levels of panic.
- Implicit demands made on the child may result in their offering 'excuses' and avoidance – the extreme panic will set in when the excuses run out.
- A child with PDA may avoid demands that are placed by others *or* placed by routines, or even by the child themselves, (e.g. the thought 'I need to get up' can itself cause a child anxiety, and lead to an inability to comply with their own demand and get up – even if they want to).

*"...there is...part of me going no I can't do that, I can't do that, and it's part of me that controls...that's the person driving my brain at that moment and that's so difficult to communicate." Isaac Russell*



- Some days demands may be possible for a child with PDA, other days not at all. It can fluctuate.
- PDA does not disappear with age. Adults with PDA will continue to find demands very hard.
- See Issac Russell: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qCXwBh2saQ>

## Strategies

Children with PDA will need *different* strategies.

- **Structure:** Not no structure but *flexible* structure. Try depersonalising structure – create a schedule for the class, or for a puppet to follow. Or try more flexibility – invite the child to design their schedule each day from a list of (teacher chosen) activities.
- **Positive Approaches:** Play to a child’s strengths. Use their love of role-play and try conversations between puppets to discuss difficult topics (e.g. the schedule for the day). Pretend to be quiz contestants from a TV quiz to answer subject related questions, or pretend to be a famous sportsperson to do PE. It can be easier for a child with PDA to comply with demands when they are pretending to be someone else.  
*Allow the option of saying no.* A person with PDA needs to feel like they have some control.
- **Empathy:** Remember the child is not choosing to be so anxious. They are doing their best. The art of supporting children with PDA is to know how many demands you can place that day, without causing them to become overwhelmed.
- **Low arousal:** Keep it low arousal, reduce control. Only make the demands you really need to – pick your battles wisely. Only key staff should place demands, other staff should avoid off hand demands (e.g. ‘can you pick that pencil up’). *Any* demands (explicit or implicit) will raise a child’s anxiety levels and it is important to keep this as low as possible. Remember they may also have sensory needs, and that they may pick up on your stress!
- **Links:** Work with parents closely, they are experts on their child.

### When you really need a student to follow a demand try:

Choosing your words carefully. Instead of demands you could use: ‘do you mind...’ ‘how do you feel about...’ ‘when you have finished...’ or ‘could you ...’. You will need to keep changing the way you phrase demands however, or your child will realise what you are doing. Try having a running list of ideas of potential words and phrases and keep adding to it!

*Remember to use a child strengths:*

**Role play**

**Novelty**

**Distractions**

**Games**

**Keeping it casual**

## Developing a child's skills for the future

- It is important we support children to learn strategies to manage demands - their PDA will continue into adulthood.
- Children will not learn to cope with demands by simply having demands placed on them! They need to learn *strategies*.
- It can be helpful to start by implementing strategies *for* students. When they mature enough then gradually enable them to take over the strategy themselves – with praise!
- Strategies can include for learning how to follow demands by pretending to be someone else, using distractions (to avoid thinking about the fact they are complying), or telling themselves they 'might' complete a task rather than 'will' for example.
- Watch Riko (who has PDA) explain how she uses strategies to support herself:

**Riko:** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rcr\\_CT11cng&t=122s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rcr_CT11cng&t=122s)

## Resources

<https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/>

<https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/resources/resource-category/webinars-and-videos/pda-society-webinars/>

Harry Thompson – PDA - public speaker, PDA Emissary and Consultant, and the author of The PDA Paradox

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCUOrWY2IW8NL4vfYsIkGgGg#>

### Books

Understanding Pathological Demand Avoidance Syndrome in Children – A guide for parents, teachers and other professionals by Phil Christie, Margaret Duncan, Ruth Fidler and Zara Healy

PDA by PDAers – From Anxiety to Avoidance and Masking to Meltdown. Compiled by Sally Cat

Managing Family Meltdown the Low Arousal Approach and Autism by Linda Wood and Andrea Page

PDA PARADOX by Harry Thompson