



PDA Resource Booklet  
For parents, carers and professionals

# **Understanding PDA**

## **(Pathological Demand Avoidance / Persistent Drive for Autonomy)**

*A Resource Booklet for Parents, Carers, Educators and Professionals*

### **1. What is PDA?**

PDA stands for Pathological Demand Avoidance, although many people now prefer the term Persistent Drive for Autonomy.

PDA is widely understood as a profile within autism where everyday demands, expectations, and loss of control can trigger intense anxiety and distress.

Demands may include:

- Brushing teeth
- Getting dressed
- Going to school
- Answering questions
- Following routines
- Internal demands such as hunger, toileting, or tiredness

PDA is not simply “bad behaviour,” stubbornness, or defiance. Many PDA individuals genuinely want to complete tasks but experience a nervous system threat response when demands feel overwhelming.

### **2. Understanding PDA.**

Research and lived experience suggest that PDA is closely linked to anxiety, nervous system dysregulation, sensory overload, and an intense need for autonomy.

For a PDA individual, demands can feel unsafe or threatening. Even small requests may trigger:

- Fight
- Flight
- Freeze
- Fawn responses

Many PDA individuals experience:

- Intolerance of uncertainty
- High levels of masking
- Emotional exhaustion
- Sensory sensitivities
- Burnout

Traditional approaches such as strict rules, reward charts, punishments, or pressure often increase anxiety and make things worse.

### **3. How PDA May Present**

Every PDA individual is different, but common traits include:

- Avoiding everyday demands
- Using distraction, humour, negotiation, or excuses
- Needing control over situations
- Extreme emotional responses
- Rapid mood changes
- Difficulty with transitions
- Appearing sociable while masking anxiety
- Becoming distressed when expectations increase
- Avoiding tasks they actually want to do

Some children may appear confident at school but completely collapse emotionally at home due to masking and burnout.

#### **4. Understanding the PDA Nervous System**

PDA is often best understood through a nervous system lens rather than a behaviour lens.

When demands increase, the brain may interpret this as a threat. The body reacts automatically through stress responses.

Fight may look like:

- Yelling
- Arguing
- Aggression
- Refusal

Flight may look like:

- Running away
- Hiding
- Leaving the room
- Avoidance

Freeze may look like:

- Shutdown
- Staring blankly
- Unable to speak
- Unable to start tasks

Fawn may look like:

- Agreeing to avoid conflict
- People pleasing
- Saying “yes” but later avoiding the task

Understanding these responses helps adults respond with empathy rather than punishment.

## **5. PDA and School**

School can be extremely challenging for PDA students because of:

- Constant demands
- Social pressure
- Sensory overload
- Transitions
- Lack of autonomy
- Performance anxiety

Helpful strategies include:

- Collaborative language
- Flexible timetables
- Reducing unnecessary demands
- Offering choices
- Using indirect requests
- Building trusted relationships
- Allowing movement and sensory breaks
- Prioritising emotional regulation over compliance

A child who “holds it together” at school may still be struggling significantly internally.

## **6. PDA Scripts and Helpful Language**

The way demands are communicated can significantly affect anxiety levels.

Instead of:

- “Put your shoes on now.”

Try:

- “I wonder if your shoes want to come with us?”

Instead of:

- “You need to tidy up.”

Try:

- “Shall we do this together or later?”

Instead of:

- “Brush your teeth.”

Try:

- “Do your teeth feel ready for a clean?”

Instead of:

- “Go to bed.”

Try:

- “My body is feeling tired, I’m going to sleep.”

Other helpful approaches:

- Use humour and playfulness
- Reduce direct commands
- Offer genuine choices
- Use collaborative language
- Give processing time
- Avoid power struggles

PDA-friendly communication focuses on connection, safety, and autonomy.

## **7. Supporting Emotional Regulation**

PDA individuals often require co-regulation before they can self-regulate.

Helpful supports include:

- Calm environments
- Predictability without rigidity
- Safe sensory spaces
- Movement breaks
- Emotional validation
- Reducing pressure
- Recovery time after stressful events

During distress:

- Stay calm
- Reduce talking
- Lower demands
- Avoid consequences in the moment
- Focus on safety first

After regulation returns, collaborative problem-solving can happen gently.

## **8. PDA in Teens and Adults**

PDA does not disappear with age. Teens and adults may experience:

- Burnout
- Anxiety
- Difficulty with work demands
- Executive functioning challenges
- Relationship stress
- Difficulty with authority

- Masking and exhaustion

Many adults describe:

- Wanting to do tasks but feeling physically unable to start
- Feeling trapped by expectations
- Avoiding even enjoyable activities
- Deep shame due to misunderstanding from others

Supportive approaches remain centred around autonomy, flexibility, and reducing pressure.

## **9. Misunderstandings About PDA**

PDA is frequently misunderstood.

PDA is NOT:

- Bad parenting
- Manipulation
- Laziness
- Deliberate defiance
- “Just anxiety”
- Attention seeking

Many PDA individuals are highly empathetic, creative, intelligent, funny, and deeply sensitive.

Behaviour is communication. Avoidance usually signals overwhelm, anxiety, or loss of safety.

## **10. Practical Strategies**

Helpful PDA strategies often include:

- Pick your battles
- Reduce unnecessary demands
- Prioritise connection over compliance
- Use low-demand approaches during burnout
- Offer autonomy and collaboration
- Build trust
- Support sensory needs
- Respect communication differences

Important reminders:

- PDA individuals are not trying to be difficult.
- Anxiety and nervous system overwhelm are real.
- Traditional behaviour systems often increase distress.
- Connection, flexibility, and understanding are key.

Every PDA person is different. Listening to lived experience and adapting support to the individual is essential.

### **Further Reading and Useful Organisations**

- PDA Society – <https://www.pdasociety.org.uk>
  - Neurodevelopmental Collective –  
<https://www.neurodevelopmentalcollective.com>
- National Autistic Society – <https://www.autism.org.uk>
- Ross Greene – Collaborative & Proactive Solutions –  
<https://livesinthebalance.org>

*This booklet is intended as an educational resource and does not replace professional assessment or medical advice.*