

PDA (Pathological Demand Avoidance) is widely understood to be a profile on the autism spectrum, involving the avoidance of everyday demands and the use of 'social' strategies as part of this avoidance. PDA individuals share autistic characteristics and in addition have many of the 'key features' of a PDA profile:

- resisting and avoiding the **ordinary demands** of life
- using **social strategies** as part of the avoidance
- appearing '**socially able**' but this may **mask** underlying differences/difficulties in social interaction and communication
- experiencing intense **emotions** and **mood swings**
- appearing comfortable in **role play, pretence** and **fantasy**
- intense **focus**, often on other **people** (real or fictional)
- a **need for control**, often driven by **anxiety** or an **automatic 'threat response'**
- conventional approaches in support, parenting or teaching are **ineffective**

Autism is dimensional, this means that it varies a lot from one person to another. A PDA profile describes one way in which autism can present.



Demand avoidance in PDA is a question of can't not won't: PDAers often describe it as a neurological tug of war between brain, heart and body.

can't
not
won't



With PDA, demands of all types, including lots of things that you might not think of as a demand, can trigger an



automatic threat or anxiety response and a feeling of panic can rapidly set in.

The approaches that help can seem a bit unconventional: a partnership based on trust, flexibility, collaboration, careful use of language & balancing of demands works best.

- Pick battles
- Anxiety management
- Negotiation & collaboration
- Disguise & manage demands
- Adaptation



Because PDA is often missed, misunderstood or misdiagnosed, it's important for us all to have PDA on our radar.



How PDA may look in school

- not present in a way that might make you suspect autism
- present very differently at school compared to at home due to masking
- have difficulties with attendance: 70% of children with a PDA profile of autism are not in school or regularly struggle to attend; this should be treated as a health and/or SEN need rather than truancy
- have experienced multiple exclusions from an early age, or may have slipped under the radar
- see themselves as equal to adults, or want to reverse roles with you

A PDA child may ...

- have poor self-esteem (not always immediately apparent as surface behaviours may seem robust)
- find emotional regulation very difficult
- be ambivalent about success, and may destroy work on completion especially if praised
- desire friendships, though may inadvertently sabotage through a need for control
- engage extensively in fantasy/role play
- say the work is boring or that they already know everything
- use charm, imagination or shock tactics as part of avoidance

"We thought Zoe may be autistic but her needs were very different to other autistic pupils we had supported in school before, and none of our usual approaches helped. Searching for answers led us to PDA. Seeing Zoe through this lens enabled us to truly understand her and successfully adapt our practices by building trust and embracing a flexible and collaborative approach" – Zoe's teacher



Good practice & helpful approaches

- Be willing to challenge and adjust your own mindset and to keep doing so!
- Believe, support and work closely with families – learn as much as you can about your student before you meet them.
- Focus on building a trusting relationship with your PDA student first before attempting learning (this may be with just one member of staff initially).
- Collaborate – focus on the end goal rather than the means of getting there; negotiate as much as possible; adopt a child-centred approach focusing on a student's needs and strengths.
- Be led by the student – PDA students need to see a meaningful purpose to learning and often thrive when able to follow what they're passionate/inquisitive about or when something becomes relevant/useful to their lives.
- Personalise learning – provide genuine options and choices over what work is completed, when, where, how and who with.
- Recognise that outward behaviours are usually underpinned by emotional, social and sensory overload – try to identify signs of escalation and divert long before crisis point is reached; put in place proactive and positive plans for when things go awry.

Keep in mind: what works today, might not work tomorrow... but may work again next week

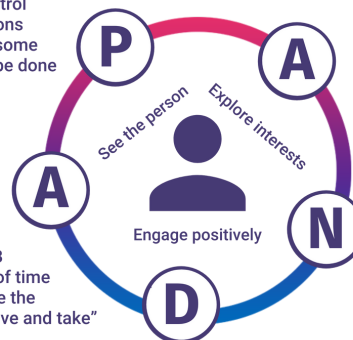
- Be flexible and less directive – altering phraseology and tone is sometimes all that's required.
- Be a guide/facilitator – listen to the student, join in and learn together.
- Let go of some expectations – uniform, lining up, full time attendance, homework, recording progress in conventional ways ...
- Provide a quiet retreat area which can be accessed whenever your PDA student needs it.
- Use reflective practice and support key staff – learn from tricky times and move on without judgement.
- Adopt a whole school approach to inclusivity and provide access to PDA training & relevant key documentation for everyone who comes into contact with your student.
- Remember the PANDA:

Pick battles

- Minimise rules
- Enable some choice & control
- Explain reasons
- Accept that some things can't be done

Adaptation

- Try humour, distraction, novelty & roleplay
- Be flexible
- Have a Plan B
- Allow plenty of time
- Try to balance the amount of "give and take"



Anxiety management

- Use low arousal approach
- Reduce uncertainty
- Recognise underlying anxiety & social/sensory challenges
- Think ahead
- Treat distressed behaviours as panic attacks: support throughout & move on

Negotiation & collaboration

- Keep calm
- Proactively collaborate & negotiate to solve challenges
- Fairness & trust are central

Disguise & manage demands

- Phrase any requests indirectly
- Constantly monitor tolerance for demands & match demands accordingly
- Doing things together helps



Further information

There's lots of information on our website including

- books
- education case studies
- EHCP guide
- guidelines for best practice including the Autism Education Trust's guidelines: [The Distinctive Clinical and Educational Needs of Children with Pathological Demand Avoidance Syndrome: Guidelines for Good Practice](#)
- training courses provided by the PDA Society and third parties

Please start here: <https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/working-with-pda-menu/info-for-education-professionals/>

You may also like to sign up for our **quarterly newsletter** with a round-up of relevant news, information & training opportunities: <https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/professionals-newsletter> and follow us on **social media** ...



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