

Pathological Demand Avoidance

Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is a profile that sits within the autism spectrum. It is characterised by an intense anxiety-driven need to resist and avoid everyday demands, even those that might seem ordinary or enjoyable.

Children and adults with PDA are not simply being defiant; their avoidance is rooted in a heightened sense of threat and loss of control when demands are placed on them. This anxiety can be so strong that it feels overwhelming, leading to strategies such as distraction, negotiation, withdrawal, or sudden outbursts.

Key features often seen in PDA include:

- **Extreme avoidance of demands:** Everyday requests, such as getting dressed, eating, or going to school, can trigger high levels of anxiety and resistance.
- **Use of social strategies to avoid demands:** For example, distracting the adult, making excuses, humour, or becoming intensely focused on something else.
- **A strong need for control:** The child may try to direct situations or conversations to feel safer.
- **High levels of anxiety:** Demands are experienced as overwhelming, and avoidance is an attempt to manage that anxiety.
- **Intense emotional responses:** Meltdowns or shutdowns may occur when the child feels trapped or unable to escape a demand.
- **Comfort with role play and imagination:** Many children with PDA use pretend play as a way to manage or escape demands.

Professionals increasingly recognise PDA as part of the autism spectrum, but it is still debated and not always formally diagnosed. Support is usually based on adapting approaches to reduce anxiety, provide choice and control, and build trust, rather than relying on traditional behavioural methods.

Here are some approaches and responses that parents may find useful:

1. Reduce perceived demands

Children with PDA often experience demands as overwhelming, even when they seem small. Parents can help by presenting requests indirectly or by embedding them in play. For example, instead of “put your shoes on now”, a parent might say, “I wonder if your shoes will be ready before mine”. This makes the request feel less like a demand.

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2. Offer choices and collaboration

Framing tasks as joint activities can reduce pressure. Instead of insisting on compliance, offer genuine choices, and wherever possible allow the child to have a sense of control. Collaborative problem solving (“How shall we do this together?”) helps the child feel respected and involved.

3. Use humour and imagination

Playfulness, gentle humour or role play can help to reduce the child’s anxiety and resistance. For example, turning a routine into a game or pretending to be characters while carrying out a task can make the demand feel less direct and more manageable.

4. Focus on relationship and trust

Connection is more effective than control for children with PDA. Building a secure relationship, where the child feels understood and accepted, makes it easier for them to trust parental guidance. Calm, empathetic responses when they resist can prevent escalation.

5. Flexibility and pacing

Routines may still help, but flexibility is essential. If the child is showing signs of distress or avoidance, it may be more helpful to pause, reframe, or return to the request later. Recognising early signs of rising anxiety allows parents to intervene before a full shutdown or meltdown occurs.

6. Reduce anxiety triggers

Transitions, unpredictability and sensory challenges can raise anxiety. Preparing the child gently for upcoming changes, using visual supports if helpful, and allowing extra time for transitions can reduce the likelihood of avoidance behaviours.

7. Reframe expectations

Progress with PDA children may look different to peers. Parents may need to adjust expectations, focusing on small steps and celebrating effort and engagement rather than strict compliance.

8. Emotional validation

When avoidance or distress arises, acknowledge the underlying feelings rather than focusing solely on the behaviour. For example, saying “I can see this feels really hard for you” shows empathy and reduces the child’s sense of being pressured.

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9. Avoid power struggles

Attempts to insist or escalate consequences usually backfire, increasing anxiety and avoidance. Instead, stepping back, staying calm, and waiting for the child to regain a sense of control is often more effective.

10. Look after parental wellbeing

Parenting a child with PDA can be very demanding. Accessing peer support groups, professional guidance and respite where possible is important for sustaining patience and creativity in responses.

Strategies to Try:

Morning routine and getting ready for school

- **Indirect requests**
Instead of: *“Get dressed now.”*
Try: *“I wonder if your jumper will get on before mine does.”*
- **Offer choice**
“Would you like to put your socks or your top on first?”
- **Humour and play**
“Shall we see if the clothes want to jump onto you by themselves?”

Mealtimes

- **Invite rather than instruct**
Instead of: *“Sit at the table now.”*
Try: *“I’ve made your favourite spot look really cosy, shall we see if it feels comfy?”*
- **Choice with control**
“Would you like to start with pasta or the vegetables?”
- **Game approach**
“Let’s see who can take the crunchiest bite.”

Homework or learning tasks

- **Shared responsibility**
“This looks a bit tricky. Should we solve it together as detectives?”
- **Offer options**
“Would you like to write with the blue pen or the pencil?”
- **Time flexibility**
“We can do a little bit now and take a break, then come back later if you want.”

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Transitions and leaving the house

- **Advance preparation**
“In about ten minutes we will need to head out. Do you want to choose a toy for the car while I get my shoes?”
- **Role play**
“Shall we pretend we are explorers getting ready for a mission?”
- **Collaborative tone**
“We both need to be ready. What should we do first?”

Bedtime routine

- **Reduce pressure**
Instead of: *“It’s bedtime now.”*
Try: *“Let’s see how many stories we can fit in before the lights go off.”*
- **Choice within structure**
“Would you like the dinosaur pyjamas or the rocket pyjamas tonight?”
- **Playful transition**
“Shall we sneak like quiet mice into bed and see if we can surprise the teddies?”

When avoidance or distress occurs

- **Acknowledge feelings**
“I can see this feels hard for you. It’s okay, we can pause.”
- **Step back, then reframe**
“I’ll leave this here for when you feel ready.”
- **Offer control**
“Do you want to tell me when you’re ready, or should I check in later?”

General guiding principles

- Focus on relationship, not compliance.
- Keep language light, playful and indirect.
- Avoid escalating demands when the child resists.
- Celebrate effort and engagement, not just outcomes.
- Prioritise calm and connection over rules.