

# PATHOLOGICAL DEMAND AVOIDANCE SCHOOLS GUIDE



## What is Pathological Demand Avoidance?

PDA is a profile that some believe is a subset of behaviours displayed by autistic people, and others believe is a profile that can be applied to those without autism too. It is not a condition that can be diagnosed by most clinicians as it does not feature in the main diagnosis manuals they use (ICD-11 and DSM5-TR). However, there is no debate amongst experts, including clinicians, around the existence of the demand avoidant profile and that this profile occurs because of an extreme and highly active threat/survival response to requests, demands and instructions.

## Why demands feel so overwhelming

Demands, requests and instructions may trigger:

- Fight, flight, freeze or dissociate responses
- High anxiety or panic
- Fear of failure or exposure
- Sensory and emotional overload.

**Avoidance is a survival response and coping strategy, not a choice.**

## Why understanding PDA matters

When PDA is misunderstood, students may be seen as:

- Oppositional or manipulative
- Capable but unwilling

This can lead to:

- Escalation and relationship breakdown
- Increased anxiety, meltdowns or shutdowns
- School avoidance or exclusion.

## Signs a student may have a PDA profile

- Strong resistance to everyday demands
- Avoidance through delay, humour or negotiation
- Rapid escalation when pressured
- Extreme reactions to feeling controlled
- Needing things to be on their terms
- Appearing confident but emotionally fragile
- Doing better with choice or indirect requests.

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## What you can do

**Use a relational approach for a person with PDA rather than imposing a sense of 'authority' and 'discipline'**

- Act as a partner, guide and support – doing so is skilful, not giving in and builds all-important trust
- Spend time getting to know the pupil – their interests, pets names, favourite teams, etc
- Power struggles and stand-offs increase fear and mistrust.

## Reduce the sense of demand

- Use **declarative or wondering language** (use PocketPal PDA Language Card templates I have devised)
  - "I wonder if..."
  - "Let's see what happens if..."
- Reframe, delay or remove demands where possible
- Offer choices to support the pupil's need to feel secure and safe.

## When students are dysregulated

- This is a survival response of Fight, Flight, Flop or Dissociate. Think Panic Attack and 'Can't, not won't', not of malicious and defiant origins
- Lower or remove demands and expectations
- Give space, time and calm reassurance.

## Feedback and praise

- Avoid public praise or pressure-based rewards
- Use quiet, private feedback (use PocketPal PDA Language Card templates I have devised) and instead of 'You've done that really well' say 'I think you did that maths well because of the way you spent time thinking about it'.

## Make environments feel safe

- Agree discreet ways to ask for help
- Be flexible with routines, transitions and expectations
- Create Safe Spaces/Regulation Stations/Pastoral Rooms
- Make sensory adjustments and use Sensory Circuits and Sensory Diets to support regulation.

## Work with families

- Don't assume parents are fussing, over-anxious or to blame for their child's behaviour
- It is exhausting (and often embarrassing) parenting a child with PDA and working collaboratively with you, with mutual support and appreciation for each other's efforts, will help you both
- Parents and home are normally the safe people and spaces, so learn from their successful strategies.

## Key messages

**PDA behaviour is driven by survival responses and anxiety, not defiance.**

**Establishing trust, flexibility and collaboration reduces distress and increases engagement.**