

# Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA): A Guide for parents and teachers

## What is Pathological demand avoidance?

Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is characterised by an overwhelming need to avoid and resist everyday demands, which is closely linked to high levels of anxiety and a strong drive to maintain control. Although not currently recognised as a separate diagnostic category, PDA is widely discussed as a distinct presentation within autism.



It is important to emphasise that this pattern of avoidance is not the same as deliberate defiance or oppositional behaviour. Instead, the resistance is deeply rooted in the child's anxiety response. Everyday requests, such as putting on shoes, starting homework, or joining a class activity, can feel intensely overwhelming and even threatening. For many children with PDA, these demands can trigger significant stress, leading to behaviours that may appear challenging but are in fact protective strategies.

## Key Characteristics of PDA



### Avoidance of everyday demands

Surface sociability: children may appear confident and sociable, but this often masks underlying social difficulties.

A desire to manage situations and outcomes is common, often linked to underlying anxiety.

Children may shift quickly from calm to distressed, particularly when demands are introduced.

tasks that feel unimportant, challenging, or uninteresting can be very difficult to complete.

Intense interests or repetitive behaviours may develop as a way of managing anxiety.

## Not All Demands Are the Same

### Direct demands

These are explicit instructions or requests from adults. Examples include "Finish your worksheet" or "Come and sit down".

### Indirect demands

Indirect demands are less obvious but still communicate an expectation. For example, saying "Everyone else is getting ready now" or "It's time for us to tidy up" places subtle pressure on the child to conform.

### Internal demands

Internal demands usually arise from within the child rather than from adults. These may include a strong desire to complete an activity perfectly, or personal standards that are difficult to meet.

## How can we help?

- Reduce perceived demands- Reframe tasks as choices or invitations rather than instructions.
- Use indirect language: Phrases such as "I wonder if..." or "Shall we try..." can feel less pressurising.
- Prioritise relationships: Focus on building trust and connection to reduce resistance.
- Be flexible: Allow greater autonomy and be prepared to negotiate where possible.
- Collaborative problem-solving: Involve the child in decision making to give them a sense of control.
- Stay calm and consistent: Respond with steadiness and avoid escalating conflict.
- Seek professional support: Specialist assessment and guidance can help clarify needs and shape strategies.



Recognising PDA allows us to see resistance as an expression of anxiety rather than deliberate defiance. When we respond with understanding and the right support, children with PDA can feel safe, build confidence, and thrive both at home and in school.

