

Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA)

Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is characterised by an anxiety-driven need to resist and avoid everyday demands and expectations, often to protect a sense of autonomy and emotional safety. People with a PDA profile often experience extreme distress when they feel their autonomy is threatened, and their avoidance is a coping strategy – not defiance.

A profile of autism

Currently, PDA is not a formally recognised standalone diagnosis in the international diagnostic manuals like the DSM-5 or ICD-11. In Australia, PDA is typically understood as a profile of autism, rather than a separate condition. That means someone might receive a diagnosis of autism and clinicians, educators or support teams might note that the person shows a PDA profile or presentation.

Key features associated with PDA

- Individuals with PDA experience an anxiety-driven need to resist and avoid everyday demands. These aren't just big or formal instructions – they can be simple things like being asked to sit down, answer a question or follow a routine. This avoidance isn't about being difficult; it's a protective response to preserve a sense of autonomy and emotional safety.
- People with PDA often use social strategies as part of their avoidance. This might look like distraction, humour, negotiating, making excuses, withdrawing into fantasy or refusing altogether. These strategies are intelligent, adaptive ways of managing overwhelming situations.
- Someone with a PDA profile might appear socially able on the surface – perhaps engaging confidently in conversation or seeming very articulate. But underneath, there can be significant challenges in understanding unspoken social rules, boundaries and expectations. This disconnect often contributes to anxiety and difficulties in peer relationships.

Our purpose
a different brilliant®

Understanding, engaging
and celebrating the strengths,
interests and aspirations of people
on the autism spectrum.



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- People with PDA often experience intense emotions and rapid mood swings. These emotional shifts are frequently linked to situations where their sense of autonomy feels threatened or when demands start to build up. What might look like sudden anger or shutdown is usually a stress response, not a behavioural problem.
- A strong need for control is another core feature. This isn't about being bossy or manipulative – it's about creating predictability and safety in a world that often feels overwhelming and unpredictable. Maintaining control over decisions, activities and timing can significantly reduce anxiety for someone with a PDA profile.
- Finally, individuals with PDA may display obsessive behaviours, but unlike some other Autistic profiles where these are often focused on objects or special interests, PDA obsessions tend to be more social in nature. This might mean becoming intensely attached to certain people, roles, or social dynamics, sometimes to the point of extreme loyalty or aversion.
- Some individuals with PDA may be skilled at masking or camouflaging their difficulties in certain situations, making it challenging for others to recognise their needs and struggles.

Managing PDA

Managing PDA involves addressing the unique characteristics and needs of individuals who exhibit this profile. Recommendations include:

- **Reducing demands:** Since individuals with PDA are highly sensitive to demands, one of the primary strategies is to reduce demands in their environment. This can involve minimising instructions, expectations and pressure.
- **Flexible and collaborative approaches:** Traditional behavioural interventions that rely on strict rules and consequences may not be effective with individuals with PDA. Instead, a more flexible and collaborative approach that involves negotiation and choice-making can be beneficial.
- **Building trust and rapport:** Building a positive and trusting relationship with the individual is crucial. This can help reduce anxiety and resistance to demands. Trust is often established through empathy, understanding and consistency.
- **Anxiety management:** Addressing anxiety is a key component of managing PDA. Strategies may include teaching relaxation techniques, providing sensory accommodations, and helping the individual identify and manage their anxiety triggers.

- **Communication support:** Communication can be challenging for individuals with PDA. Speech and language therapy or alternative communication methods, such as visual supports or assistive technology, can be helpful.
- **Sensory regulation:** Creating a sensory-friendly environment and offering sensory regulation strategies can help reduce anxiety and meltdowns.
- **Parent and caregiver training:** Parents and caregivers benefit from training and support to better understand and manage PDA behaviours. This can help create a consistent and supportive home environment.
- **Peer and social interaction:** Encouraging peer interaction and social skills development is important. However, this should be done in a way that respects the individual's need for autonomy and choice.
- **Gradual exposure:** Gradual exposure to demands and transitions can be helpful. This involves slowly introducing challenges and allowing the individual to build tolerance over time.

Additional resources

Pathological Demand Avoidance Society: pdasociety.org.uk

Reframing Autism – PDA and Autism: A Guide for Families: reframingautism.org.au/pathological-demand-avoidance-pda-and-autism-guide-for-allies

Based on the idea of a different brilliant®, Aspect's approach:

- Respects difference and diversity
- Builds a person's skills based on their strengths, interests, aspirations and support needs
- Develops autism-friendly environments
- Supports others to understand and embrace autism and to develop respectful supportive interactions.