



Hindlip First School  
Tibberton First School



# Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA)

This guidance has been written by our partners at  
Perryfields Primary PRU.



**Perryfields Primary PRU**

## Pathological Demand Avoidance

**Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is a condition which is part of the Autism Spectrum which has an overwhelming need to avoid or resist demands.**

**Avoidance of ordinary demands is the principal and most debilitating characteristic of PDA. It's driven by the child's uncontrolled ANXIETY which can feel like a PANIC ATTACK.**

**Children with PDA differ from other children with autism as they can appear sociable, and appear to have a good understanding but that is only on the surface.**

**They will endlessly procrastinate, and they will be manipulative towards others, finding ways of what will work with a particular person, although not having empathy for them.**

**If the child only uses the strategies of kicking, shouting or running away to resist demands then it isn't PDA. They will use distracting strategies, such as "I like your earrings" or "Is that a new scarf?" There is also a lot of excusing, because they know that adults expect a reason, (where a child with ASD may not have developed enough socially to know that is required) so they will say "I'm sorry I'm too busy," or "My arms are tired."**

**Strategies that can support children with Autism can make things worse for children with PDA.**

**Children will often respond by saying 'No' to what they're asked or told to do, even if it's something they actually enjoy. If saying 'No' doesn't work they may use the following tactics to avoid demands:**

**Delaying**

**Distracting**

**Negotiating**

**Charming**

**Making excuses**

**Falling to the ground**

**Shouting**

**Explosive behaviour**

## Allow some control

A child with PDA needs to feel they have some control. Using non-negotiable words gives the impression that you have made a decision for them and taken away their control. Avoid using 'demand' words such as:

- Need
- Must/Must not
- Can't
- Now
- Will/won't
- By (time/date)

Many of these avoidance techniques require adequate social and language skills. Children with PDA may appear to be verbally competent, but may understand less than we think. Although they may be highly sociable, they usually struggle to understand where they fit in the social hierarchy (e.g. that adults have more authority than children), and their need to be in control can mean that their peer relationships can be challenging.

Children with PDA are often extremely skilled when it comes to role play.

They may become easily engrossed in fantasy and become very involved in particular characters and confuse pretending with reality. Some research has described this as a coping mechanism because it is a separates them to outside demands.

## Important Points

### 1. Develop a strong relationship

It is important to develop a strong relationship with a child who has high anxiety. The more you understand them the easier it will be to distract them from a crisis and make you feel confident enough to diffuse a situation.

### 2. Prepare the child ahead of time

Children with PDA need to know what is going to happen as this gives them a sense of being in control, and give them processing time.

A visual timetable can create a sense of independence and choice which reduces anxiety e.g. these can be made with the child and used to help the child understand what is happening. It is important to use them in a flexible and non-confrontational way, and that they are created and referred to with the child, rather than being done 'to' the child. Children may like to draw their own symbols.

### **3. Create space**

**Children with PDA find it hard to regulate their own feelings. Make sure there is safe space in the school where they can go to feel calm.**

**Maybe a small tent or a bean bag with 'Calm Box' that has a variety of sensory objects, such as playdough, stress balls, bubbles, soft fabrics , to encourage the child to self soothe and regulate their emotions when they are feeling sad, cross, angry, anxious etc.**

### **4. Monitor signs of anxiety**

**The behaviour and mood of children with PDA can change very quickly. It is important to monitor for signs of increased anxiety, which can be reduced by decreasing demands. It is important that staff members are aware of these signs. Step back when the child is managing well but be available to intervene if the child becomes anxious. At the first signs of stress cut back the demands on the child.**

**As the child gets older encourage them to begin to identify their own stress levels and teach them the skills to communicate this. Create a feelings board that is available to children so they can place their photo or name by the feeling which best matches their mood, and decide what they need.**

### **5. Keep calm**

**It is important to regulate our own feelings first as children with PDA panic so look for the adults around them to be calm. We can then assist them to regulate their own anxiety.**

## **How to avoid demand avoidance**

**During a school day the level of demands on children can feel overwhelming. You can find ways to disguise the demands you are making, so as to reduce the child's anxiety. Although these strategies can feel a bit long winded, overall they save time and encourage children engage far better. It's never a direct route from A to B, so be prepared with strategies and resources to gently lead the child to where you want them.**

## Use indirect language

**“I wonder if we can...”**

**“Let’s see if we can make something...”**

**“I can’t see how to make this work...”**

**“Shall we see if we can beat the clock?”**

**“Who do you want to help us today?”**

## Try to avoid saying:

**“It’s time for you to...”**

**“You’ve got to...”**

**“You must...”**

**“Do you want to help us today?”**

## Allow take up time

Suggest what you would like to happen at the start of the session, but don’t expect it to happen straight away. Allow the child their own time to come around to the idea.

## Use the child’s interests

Using characters that they are interested in can help depersonalise demands, as you are not personally asking them to do something. For example, if the child loves Frozen or Disney, try to find a character voice you can use to make requests or you could find a toy or puppet to represent the character.

## Give the child choices

Giving simple choices will help reduce anxiety and gives them a sense of having some control, while you actually have the overall control i.e. "Do you want to write first or draw the picture first?" So doing the work is a given, some things do happen, they have no choice about that, but they do have the choice of how it happens.

## Humour

If you feel that the child is becoming anxious try some humour as this is a great distraction. You could make jokes, be silly or feign ignorance. This makes the demand less scary.

## Distraction

Distraction is a useful way of giving time to ease the child's anxiety. For when the child is finding something really stressful say, "Well that's okay, why don't you just come and do some jobs for me? You don't have to go to class now, you can give me a hand."

## Supporting children's social needs

We sometimes need to help children with PDA to understand the social interactions by teaching them, as we do for children with other forms of autism such as social stories or comic strip conversations.

## Reduce Anxiety

### ✓ Be prepared

Have a variety of activities available to the child, and think through how you will present them.

### ✓ Be flexible

Be prepared to reduce demands or change your approach if the child begins to panic.

✓ **Be indirect**

Finding ways to ask without being too direct. Be flexible – be prepared to adjust the final outcome. The final result might be different to what you expected it to be at the beginning.

✓ **Pick your battles**

Think about what is important for the child, where you can be flexible and where there is no choice.

✓ **Be sensitive to the child's anxiety and panic**

We don't tell children off who are having panic attacks, we support them to calm down and self-regulate.

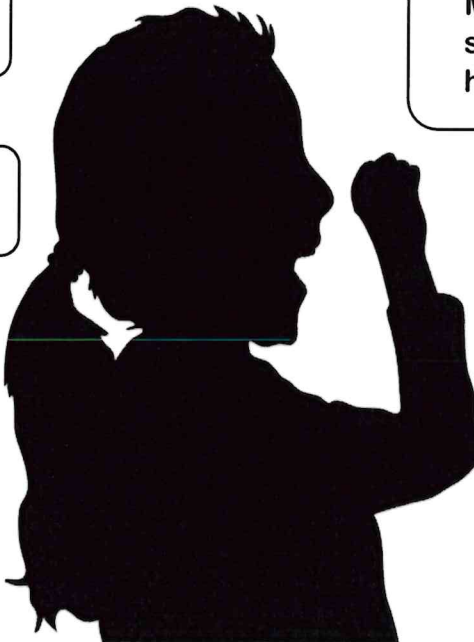
**REMEMBER .....**

To be flexible with me

I need to have control

To give me choices

The type of language  
I will respond to



My anxiety is often so severe it feels like I am having a panic attack

I am not giving you a hard time - I am having a hard time

To stay calm when you are with me

## Supporting Strategies

### Accommodate

- Sit the child on the edge of the class
- Maximise the incidental learning
- Use interests as motivators
- Be aware of the anxiety triggers so the relationship and knowing the child is key

### Support

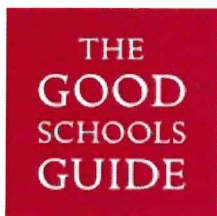
- Be flexible – be prepared to adjust the goalposts. The end point does not need to be the same as the start point.
- Consider ‘meet and greet’ at the start of the day to talk about any anxieties and the day ahead.
- Use creative breaks to ‘chunk’ the session.
- Establish a relationship built on trust and a sense of fairness.
- It is important to remain calm.
- Try to ignore negative behaviours. Pick your battles!
- Abandon the typical adult/child dynamic.
- Focus on and enjoy their interests and strengths, use this to motivate the child.
- Give more choices and disguise expectation, such as presenting two tasks, both with the same objective, one task should be easier than the other.
- Learning is not an initial priority.
- Avoid direct instructions for example, “This group line u.”.
- Give a child work without comment and leave them to it. Maybe put it in a box so they can discover the task for themselves.
- Reduce the demands when they are struggling.

- Typical ASD strategies such as repetition, routine, rewards do not work.
- Rewards – don't use the same one long term but try surprise rewards as these may not work in the usual way.
- Set challenges such as “I don't think you can do this by the time I come back!”
- Variety is often effective.
- Slow down your decisions if being out manoeuvred.
- Resist the temptation to have the last word yourself.
- Take nothing personally.
- Balance tolerance and demands: when their tolerance slips reduce the demand.
- Establish the non-negotiable such as - nobody gets hurt, stay in school and respect property.
- Try to understand the child better, not to change them
- Use humour.
- Be intuitive, positive, creative and flexible. Back down when necessary.
- Use indirect praise.
- Use drama and role play.
- Depersonalise. Try thinking out loud. “I wonder if....?”

## Anxiety

- Meltdowns, think of as panic attacks, give lots of reassurance and ignore poor behaviour.
- Use a non-confrontational style, use indirect language (see above).
- Give the child space. Use neutral tone of voice and body language.
- Give them time – don't be afraid of silence.
- A safe space or a 'bolthole' within the classroom or in school to go to in times of high anxiety or struggling to manage the behaviour.
- Allow access to stress relievers.
- Quality of the relationship is fundamental.

## Information researched and gathered from:



## Reading suggestions



**PDA Paradox - Harry Thompson**  
**Understanding Pathological Demand Avoidance in Children - Phil Christie, Margaret Duncan, Ruth Fidler, Zara Healy**