

# PATHOLOGICAL DEMAND AVOIDANCE (PDA): A QUICK GUIDE FOR TEACHING STAFF

## WHAT IS PATHOLOGICAL DEMAND AVOIDANCE?

Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is usually seen as a part of the autistic spectrum. Children are usually diagnosed as Autistic first, but not always. Not all professionals recognise or will diagnose PDA, therefore we tend to use the term "PDA Profile" to help us identify a child who has these needs. Children and young people with PDA may have an intense anxiety and need to control their environment, especially in response to any demands – real, immediate, environmental or perceived. Even those linked to things they enjoy or want to do, can still trigger extreme anxiety. Behaviours that may appear oppositional are self-protective responses to anxiety, not intentional defiance.

A child or young person with a PDA Profile requires a flexible, relationship-based approach that prioritises trust and emotional safety over compliance.

## HOW CAN PDA PRESENT? (SIGNS TO LOOK OUT FOR):

- Avoidance of everyday demands using subtle avoidance such as negotiation, distraction, excuses, diverting, withdrawal or humour. Or immediate refusal, opposition, demanding control or meltdown.
- Sudden changes in mood or tolerance when they feel under threat or control is lost. Can seem to have extremes of high or low energy in the same day.
- Intense need for autonomy and control over tasks or timing. Can become highly demanding of others.
- Some may use role-play, fantasy, objects (such as a toy or puppet) or scripting as coping strategies. These become a 'mask' or 'gatekeeper' to the demands.
- Difficulty with transitions, group work, or perceived unfairness. An intense dislike of authority or hierarchy. Can act like they are an adult.
- There can be differences between home and school presentation – often masking in school, then exploding or shutting down at home.
- Often highly intelligent, self-motivated and expert in their chosen interests, able to learn when doing something else but listening in on the lesson, have areas of high ability (often self-taught), creative, justice orientated, kind, honest and have mature sense of humour.
- You may see autism traits alongside the PDA demand avoidance, but traditional autism support approaches will usually not work. Visual timetables, direct language are interpreted as direct demands and cause more direct stress.
- Another link to autism is that many children and young people with a PDA profile have many sensory processing needs and can react to noises, smells, people, visual and touch triggers in their environment.

# UNDERSTANDING PANDAS - PAEDIATRIC AUTOIMMUNE NEUROPSYCHIATRIC DISORDER ASSOCIATED WITH STREPTOCOCCAL INFECTIONS

## INITIAL STEPS IF YOU THINK A CHILD IN YOUR SETTING SHOWS SIGNS OF PDA

1. Build a co-regulating relationship – Become a trusted partner, doing things as a team, not an authority figure demanding compliance. Emotional safety has to come first – you won't succeed trying to insist they do what you say.
2. Listen to and believe parents/carers – Their insights are vital, especially as school attendance can vary and children may mask in one environment.
3. Work with your SENCO and external professionals to plan individualised support and assessment where needed.

## UNDERSTANDING THE PANDA APPROACH

The PANDA helpful approaches are a framework developed by the PDA Society to help adults support children and young people with a PDA profile. It prioritises connection, flexibility, and reducing anxiety through five key principles: <https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/pda-approaches/panda-as-a-way-in/>

- **P – Prioritise and Compromise:** Choose what really matters and let go of unnecessary demands.
- **A – Anxiety management:** Recognise that avoidance is driven by fear, not defiance. Always seek to reduce their anxiety first.
- **N – Negotiation and collaboration:** Involve the child in decisions to increase their sense of control.
- **D – Disguise demands:** Use declarative language rather than direct instructions, invitations to think and wonder and blame other things (eg, the weather as to why coats are a good idea).
- **A – Adaptation:** Be flexible and inventive with work tasks, be creative, use novelty and develop interest based projects with them.

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## PDA-FRIENDLY SUPPORT BY SETTING: 1. PRIMARY SCHOOL

- Be their partner. Use indirect invitations over direct instructions (e.g., "I wonder if we can...").
- Offer choices and involvement in decisions.
- Create low-demand safe spaces for calming and co-regulation.
- Use storytelling and imaginative play to encourage learning.
- Develop a supportive team around the child and develop a plan based on the PANDA approaches (see below).

## PDA-FRIENDLY SUPPORT BY SETTING: 2. SECONDARY SCHOOL

- Allow flexibility in timetables and movement around school.
- Make sure all teachers have an understanding of PDA and how to support the young person without giving direct demands in their lessons.
- Personalise and adapt expectations around homework, uniform and attendance.
- Use negotiation and collaboration rather than imposed instructions.
- Make sure they have an agreed way out and respect / allow it when they need it.
- Link learning to special interests where possible. Allow self-directed learning when they can't access lessons.

## PDA-FRIENDLY SUPPORT BY SETTING: 3. COLLEGE / 6TH FORM

- Respect autonomy and identity - provide control over their own schedules, showing clear flexible choices of timetable and tutors.
- Use mentoring rather than management approaches. Offer self-study with a coach if they can't attend classes.
- Offer flexible deadlines and alternative work formats.
- Avoid public pressure - allow opt-in participation in presentations/group work.
- Plan for attendance anxiety with reduced or flexible options.

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## KEY RESOURCES

PDA Society - [www.pdasociety.org.uk](http://www.pdasociety.org.uk) | <https://www.declarativelanguage.com>

## RECOMMENDED READING:

Ruth Fidler and Phil Christie - *Collaborative Approaches to Learning for Pupils with PDA*

Clare Trueman - *The Teacher's Introduction to Pathological Demand Avoidance*

Laura Kerbey - *The Educator's Experience of Pathological Demand Avoidance*

Laura Kerbey - *The Teens Guide to PDA*

Eliza Fricker - *The Family Experience of PDA*

## TRAINING: :

CPD-accredited PDA training available via PDA Society

Lynn McCann (specialist teacher) [www.reachoutasc.com](http://www.reachoutasc.com)

Clare Trueman, Laura Kirbey, Libby Hill also provide excellent training on PDA support in schools.