# PDA - Approaches that help

*Written from lived experience & information available on the*
*PDA Society's website: https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/ (October 2025)*

PDA stands for **Pathological Demand Avoidance** and is widely understood to be a profile found in some autistic people. Some people prefer to refer to it as: Pervasive Drive for Autonomy, Extreme Demand Avoidance, or just being a PDAer.

For more information about the PDA profile please see our '**Introduction to PDA**' summary leaflet or take a look at our website. For information on 'approaches that help' support a PDAer please read on.

For many PDAers, feeling **safe** and having **trusted people** whom they can turn to for help is key to reducing anxiety. Traditional support approaches often cause more harm than good; fixed routines, praise and rewards although well-meaning can increase anxiety and reduce trust.

Instead, focus on understanding the PDAer. Flexibility, creativity, **compassion** and **co-regulation** will likely be a lot more helpful than seeking compliance and control. Try turning jobs into collaborative challenges or games, embrace technology to help with tasks, or maybe try to see how many activities you can manage before a favourite song ends – be creative and try to incorporate interests or novelty to help make transitions easier.

Remember the stress caused by demands can affect every aspect of life. Responses are **anxiety-driven** rather than a wilful action or choice and a PDA nervous system is sensitive to threats so having **control over autonomy** is important and really helps.

## PDA Society - PANDA

To share information about flexible approaches the **PDA Society** created the PANDA mnemonic as a memory aid. Keep in mind, these are overlapping ideas that support each other, not separate strategies to apply one by one. PANDA stands for:

**P** – Prioritise and compromise (pick your battles)
**A** – Anxiety management
**N** – Negotiation and collaboration
**D** – Disguise and manage demands
**A** – Adaptation

Further information on each of these ideas can be found via the PDA Society's website – '**PANDA as a way in'**.

## Trust & Safety

Good support means building strong relationships founded on **trust**. A PDAer will need to feel both **safety and stability** in their environment. Consistency, actively listening, showing empathy, remaining calm and offering acceptance without judgement are things that may help build trust with a PDAer, however it is important that the PDAer believes that an individual's responses are genuine and reliable or trust may be broken.

**Collaboration not dictation** is essential. Relationships based on control or an uneven power dynamic especially where the PDAer feels manipulated, forced or controlled, creates high anxiety and can cause more avoidance. Instead listen, respect autonomy, and share decision making. It is also important to recognise that distressed behaviours are panic attacks so encouraging self-compassion will help enhance emotional wellbeing and reduce stress.

If a PDAer feels there is an imbalance in a relationship they are more likely to: take control, resist authority/hierarchy, delay/avoid tasks, have a strong sense of justice, and contradict or correct others. They will try to 'level the playing field' by restoring their emotional balance through these **equalising behaviours**. We can support a PDAer to **restore the balance** by validating their feelings, being willing to negotiate/adapt and, by being transparent about expectations, and reasons behind rules/decisions to ensure they feel respected and understood.

Remember a PDAers nervous system is often in high alert so demonstrating kindness and reassurance will help lower the perceived threat and regain a sense of safety, personal freedom and control. Responses aren't a conscious decision but a way of trying to regulate heightened stress and anxiety, so shaming, blaming and chastising will never help, but **co-regulating** support may help support self-regulation.

## Collaboration

Dr Ross Greene, from Lives in the Balance and author of 'The Explosive Child' has developed the **Collaborative and Proactive Solutions** model which can be a helpful way to support PDAers. It focuses on understanding that challenging behaviours arise when children lack the skills to meet expectations, not because they want to be difficult. It looks at working with the child via three steps:

1) Empathy and listening to the child's concerns

2) Defining the problem by explaining your concern calmly

3) Invitation by working together on a solution. For a PDAer this approach reduces stress and gives a sense of control.

Please refer to the **'Lives in the Balance' website** for more detailed information.

## Low arousal

**Low arousal approaches** that don't rely on rules and consequences are generally more helpful to PDAers; these look at changing the behaviour of the caregiver and environment to offer support. It promotes low-stimulation, predictable and calming environments; looks at reducing the frequency and intensity of demands; emphases the need for caregivers to manage their own verbal and non-verbal (body language) responses in a calm, neutral and non-confrontational way. Offering choices, having flexible and adaptable routines, understanding sensory needs and managing social interactions to avoid overwhelm are all considered to build on mutual support and respect.

## Planning & Language

Some PDAers like to have **spontaneity** with little advance notice as this helps reduce their anxiety. For others clarity with a **detailed plan** can be helpful as it can take some of the uncertainty away, but both generally appreciate an **exit strategy** as this promotes a sense of control. Discussions around what an activity might look like, how you'll get there, timings, location, people who might be there, items that can be taken, etc may all help. Don't forget to agree when it may be necessary to physically leave, how will this be communicated to each other and, what sensory tools might be helpful in different situations, etc.

Finally, thinking about the type of language and words we use can help reduce anxiety. Avoiding 'demand words' (eg. must, now, need, stop, no, etc) and making **indirect requests** can be more helpful to a PDAer:

*I wonder if we might… How do you feel about… Let's see if there's a way to…*

**Declarative language** is also a helpful tool as it shares information but allows the PDAer to engage on their own terms. It encourages curiosity rather than insisting on commands being carried out and, invites a more equal dynamic rather than this being one-sided. It's not about asking lots of questions but about stating out loud what one knows or thinks in the form of a comment that doesn't require a verbal response eg. *"I seem to have lost my keys, I wonder where I put them", "Those flowers are really beautiful", "I'm really looking forward to playing a game later"*.

**Humour** can de-escalate a tense situation, or provide a distraction, it can make demands feel less authoritarian but be careful that this doesn't come across as condescending by mistake.

Created by **Odyssey PDA** – connecting PDA families through peer support

For information about the support group & how we can help please see:
https://www.odysseypda.co.uk/