

PDA Indicators Checklist

A reflective tool for parents and professionals

This reflective checklist is designed to help parents, carers, educators and professionals notice patterns that may suggest a Pathological Demand Avoidant (PDA) profile.

It is not a diagnostic tool, and should not replace professional assessment. Instead, it can be used to inform discussions with professionals, guide support planning, and shape understanding of a child or young person's needs.

Use this checklist to reflect on what you see consistently across time and contexts, rather than isolated incidents. PDA is complex and often misunderstood. What matters most is recognising how anxiety, autonomy, and perceived control influence the child's responses to everyday life.

Section 1: Relationship with Demands

These indicators relate to how the child responds when asked, expected, or encouraged to do something, even activities they enjoy.

- Avoids or resists ordinary demands (e.g., getting dressed, eating, leaving the house) in ways that seem extreme or out of proportion to the request
- May refuse, distract, negotiate, or make jokes to avoid doing what's asked
- Can become anxious, angry, or withdrawn when a demand is repeated
- May appear unable to comply even when they want to ("I can't" rather than "I won't")
- Becomes distressed by or avoidant of internal demands, such as needing to eat, drink, or use the toilet
- Displays cyclical patterns of compliance and avoidance – seems able to meet demands one day but not the next
- Seems to dislike praise and can perceive it as a demand to perform in a certain way again

PDA Indicators Checklist

A reflective tool for parents and professionals

Section 2: Need for Control and Autonomy

- Shows strong need to be in control of themselves and their environment
- May struggle with hierarchy or perceived authority (e.g., teachers, parents, supervisors)
- Tries to lead play or direct others, sometimes becoming distressed when others don't follow
- Prefers activities that allow independence, choice, and shared decision-making
- Displays anxiety when control is removed or uncertain

Section 3: Social Communication and Masking

- Shows strong need to be in control of themselves and their environment
- May struggle with hierarchy or perceived authority (e.g., teachers, parents, supervisors)
- Tries to lead play or direct others, sometimes becoming distressed when others don't follow
- Prefers activities that allow independence, choice, and shared decision-making
- Displays anxiety when control is removed or uncertain

PDA Indicators Checklist

A reflective tool for parents and professionals

Section 4: Emotional Regulation and Anxiety

- Experiences intense, fast-shifting emotions
- Shows panic or distress when pressured or rushed
- Difficulty self-regulating once overwhelmed
- May show aggression, meltdowns, or shutdowns when dysregulated
- Appears remorseful or confused after an episode of dysregulation
- Finds it hard to identify or verbalise emotions (“I don’t know why I’m upset”)
- Benefits from co-regulation with a trusted adult rather than behaviourist approaches e.g. time out

Section 5: Sensory Processing and Environment

- Highly sensitive to sensory input (noise, light, textures, crowds, smells)
- Seeks sensory control (e.g., turning off lights, choosing clothes, avoiding certain spaces)
- Becomes overwhelmed in noisy or unpredictable environments
- Experiences sensory triggers as “demands” on the nervous system

Section 6: Coping, Safety and Recovery

- Requires significant decompression time after social or structured activity
- May express guilt, shame or sadness about behaviour once calm
- Feels safer with familiar adults and consistent environments
- Benefits from low-demand, choice-led, relational approaches
- Responds best to curiosity, validation, and collaboration rather than consequence-based systems

PDA Indicators Checklist

A reflective tool for parents and professionals

Reflection Prompts (end section)

Take a moment to consider:

- Do these patterns seem mostly consistent across different settings (home, school, public)?
- How does the child's anxiety or need for control show up in everyday life?
- When is the child most at ease – what helps them feel safe?
- What happens when demands are reduced or reframed collaboratively?

If many of these indicators resonate, it may be helpful to seek an autism assessment with a clinician experienced in the PDA profile. Whether a formal diagnosis is sought or not, this understanding can guide the creation of support plans, calm plans, and educational adaptations that focus on emotional safety, autonomy and trust.

© SENDinMama 2025

This checklist is not a diagnostic tool. It is an awareness and reflection resource based on current research, lived experience, and trauma-informed practice.

For more resources and information, visit www.sendinmama.com

PDA Indicators Checklist

A reflective tool for parents and professionals

Notes for Professionals

This reflective checklist can be used to inform discussion and support planning, particularly when working with children or young people whose needs are not fully understood through traditional autism or behaviour frameworks.

Suggested professional uses:

- As part of information gathering for EHCP applications, Early Help assessments, or SEND reviews.
- To guide multi-agency discussions where PDA traits may be influencing presentation and engagement.
- As a training reflection tool to build practitioner awareness of how anxiety, autonomy, and control intersect.
- To support communication with families, ensuring their insights are valued as lived expertise.

When using this resource, remember:

- PDA is not a standalone diagnosis in the DSM-5 or ICD-11, but is recognised in UK practice and research (see *Frontiers in Education*, 2024).
- The aim is not to label, but to understand behaviour through a lens of safety, relationship, and collaboration.
- Children showing PDA traits often need individualised, flexible, and relational approaches rather than compliance-based strategies.

Professionals can direct families to SENDinMama's Resources Hub for further downloads, articles, and training information:

→ www.sendinmama.com/resources-hub

© SENDinMama 2025

This checklist is not a diagnostic tool. It is an awareness and reflection resource based on current research, lived experience, and trauma-informed practice.

For more resources and information, visit www.sendinmama.com