

Introduction to PDA



Written from lived experience & information available on the PDA Society's website: <https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/> (September 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.

PDA was first identified by **Professor Elizabeth Newson in the 1980s** while assessing children for autism. She found a group of children who met some, but not all characteristics of autism, and presented very similarly to each other; amongst other things, displaying an extreme avoidance to everyday demands.

A PDAer therefore **requires very different support and understanding** to an autistic person without a PDA profile.

The main characteristics of a PDA profile include:

- resisting and avoiding the ordinary everyday demands of life
- using 'social' strategies as part of the avoidance
- appearing sociable, but lacking some understanding
- experiencing intense emotions and mood swings
- appearing comfortable in role play, pretence and fantasy
- focusing intently (hyperfocus) on special interests, often involving other people
- a need for control which is often driven by anxiety or an automatic 'threat response' in the face of demands
- a tendency not to respond to conventional approaches in support, parenting or teaching

Can't NOT
Won't

It's important to remember that a PDA profile of autism is still **a spectrum** and presents differently in different people - for instance, sometimes it may be internalised, where avoidance may seem more subtle or passive, and in other cases it may be externalised and obvious.

(Identifying & Assessing a PDA profile - Practice Guidance' published by the PDA Society, 2022)

Demand Avoidance



The demands a PDAer can or can't manage **may change from day-to-day** based on their anxiety levels and ability to cope; they need to feel in control and have autonomy. PDAers may also mask difficulties, leading to high variation in their behaviour, and perceived coping ability, depending on the environment and people they are around. It's helpful to view avoidance as 'I can't manage something in this moment. rather than I won't do it'.

In PDA, demand avoidance is **not intentional defiance**. It is instead associated with **high levels of anxiety**, as a response to perceived threats to autonomy, and an intolerance of uncertainty. Think of it as a protection mechanism or safeguarding themselves from harm.

Demands can be **everyday things** like, getting out of bed, going to school/work or sticking to a routine. Demands can also be internal feelings (eg. hunger or tiredness), social demands, or internal expectations; even enjoyable things can become demands such as replying to friends, hobbies or playing games.

The key thing to remember is that PDA demand avoidance **occurs in every context** not just in one place like school, or with unfavoured tasks like undertaking chores.

When faced with a demand, a PDAer may use **avoidance strategies**. These can range in intensity based on anxiety levels and many other factors. Initial strategies might be to distract, negotiate, or delay a demand. Further efforts may include creating dramatic excuses for why something can't be done or trying to take control of people or the situation.

Social strategies, such as humour, flattery, switching focus or withdrawing may also be used.

If avoidance attempts fail and anxiety is not reduced, then the situation can rapidly escalate to intense **panic responses** such as, running away, hiding, anger, meltdowns, shutdowns, and other distressed behaviours.

Flight, fight, freeze, flop, or fawn responses, including meltdowns and other distressed behaviours are an **internal threat response** to high levels of stress and **anxiety**. PDAers have a highly sensitive nervous system, so when tolerance is low or stress has accumulated, seemingly small or ordinary tasks may lead to an extreme emotional response, which can be helpful to see as a **panic attack**.

PDAers often experience intense mood swings and impulsivity; their anxiety levels are often very high due to being surrounded by demands and uncertainty.

Other PDA characteristics



Although marked demand avoidance is the most significant, it's **not the only trait** in a PDA profile. Some PDAers may regularly engage in roleplay and pretend, sometimes to an extreme extent. This can also appear in their avoidance strategies, which may involve fantasy excuses or pretending to be a different person or animal to try and avoid demands.

In interactive situations PDAers may **appear sociable**, but under the surface have many difficulties in social communication and their depth of understanding. These may become more apparent over time and when trying to form deeper friendships.

When feeling calm and safe they may be outgoing and extroverted; otherwise, they may be more withdrawn and introverted. PDAers may copy or mimic social interactions to try to fit in, and can often be **controlling**, as a way of reducing their anxiety.

Like many autistic people, PDAers may display **'obsessive'** behaviour and interests. However, with PDA, this is more likely to be aimed towards people, either real or imaginary, such as a sibling or a favourite character. They may want to spend all their time with this person and may feel very attached to, and safe around them but, this can change suddenly if the relationship starts to feel like a demand.

Approaches that help

For many PDAers feeling **safe** and having **trusted people** whom they can turn to for help is key. Traditional support approaches often cause more harm than good as fixed routines, praise and rewards although well-meaning can increase anxiety and reduce trust. Flexibility and focussing on understanding the PDAer by using **compassion** and **co-regulation** will be more helpful than control and seeking compliance.

For more information about approaches please see our **'Approaches that help'** summary leaflet.

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/>

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