



# What is PDA?

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PDA is a small but distinct profile of autism. PDA is an acronym that stands for Pathological Demand Avoidance or Persistent Drive for Autonomy. The first being the original and prominent name where the latter is newer and preferred by many individuals.

PDA was identified in the UK in the 1980s. It has recently gotten more attention in the US and Canada since PDA North America was established in March 2020. Many families, educators and therapists have not heard of PDA. Since it is not in the DSM, many professionals do not accept it as a diagnosis. But things are changing.

This profile shares common traits with autism. They include differences in:

- Sensory differences
- Lack of Interoceptive awareness
- Difficulties with social understanding
- Obsessive traits and can have strong interests
- May focus on details instead of the big picture, including less important details
- Struggles with emotional regulation
- Anxiety

Differences in this profile are:

- An anxiety-based need for control
- Avoidance of everyday tasks
- Includes avoidance of things they like and want to do
- Does not respond to rewards and consequences- both feel like pressure
- Does not respond well to imposed structure or routine set by others
- Enjoys spontaneity/novelty and often do not like routines
- Enjoys pretending and role play
- Are very interested in social interactions
- Can act very different in different environments
- Makes eye contact

Key factors to understand with PDA:

- PDA is **not** ODD
- PDA is not a stand-alone diagnosis
- People who fit this profile share similar characteristics but each person is an individual
- Traditional supports and interventions for autistic individuals do not work and can make things worse for a PDAer
- Have sensitive nervous systems and can easily go into fight, flight or freeze states
- Frequent mask to fit in so people can easily miss that they need support
- Avoiding demands is not a choice for individuals on the profile. It is not a matter of “won’t”. It is a matter of “can’t”.

