



What is Pathological Demand Avoidance?

by Sandra R McConnell in partnership with PDA North America

Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is a profile on the Autism spectrum. It is characterized by avoiding simple, everyday demands due to an undercurrent of extremely high anxiety that makes them feel trapped. Avoidance behaviors can include ignoring, stalling, excessive silliness, negotiating, claiming physical incapacity, falling asleep, running away, bizarre or shocking behaviors, or verbally or physically lashing out at others. The most extreme behaviors are actually a loss of control that's more akin to a panic attack, commonly called a meltdown.

Presentation

- **PDA is not the same as other disorders.** It is distinguished from Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) and attachment disorders because it is specifically associated with Autism and high levels of anxiety.
- **Surface level social skills.** PDA children seem especially adept at “masking” or hiding their Autism, making diagnosis a challenge. Careful observation will reveal veiled Autistic features.
- **Does not recognize traditional social relationships.** Owing to their Autism, PDA children do not appear to understand or recognize traditional social relationships, including the concepts of authority, tradition, and other social norms. Expectations that they obey that which they don't understand, and feel, increases anxiety and avoidance behaviors.
- **Transitions are challenging.** Although children with PDA may resist routines due the demand this places on them, many still do not like unexpected change. This is sometimes called Autistic Momentum.
- **Sensory differences.** Like classic Autism, children with PDA are often prone to

Approaches

- **Let them make choices.** Choosing their own clothing, games, etc., even if not your personal favorite, can give the PDA child a sense of freedom that alleviates anxiety. It also strengthens the relationship with the adult.
- **Use indirect language.** Rather than giving the PDA child commands, suggest, persuade, and inspire. Be excited, and make suggestions.
- **Explain with logic.** When demands are explained as part of the natural world, with real world consequences, they make more sense to the PDA, and this reduces anxiety. It also depersonalizes the demand away from you, so that the child doesn't blame you.
- **Use distraction.** Before a meltdown occurs, change the subject to something that's not associated with the demand or stress in general.
- **Set the tone with positive emotions.** Even the best phrases can evoke anxiety in the PDA child if they had negative undertones. Underpin your words with curiosity and comfort. Use smiles, empathy, humor.
- **Reduce the use of punishments and rewards.** Both rewards and punishments can be perceived as methods of control. Allude to the natural causes and consequences of activities

overstimulation from the environment, as well as sensory seeking behaviors. Complex, noisy environments can amplify anxiety and exacerbate avoidance behaviors.

- **Inconsistent behavior across environments.** PDA children will often behave very differently at home versus at school, due to the different relationships with people, sensory levels, and anxiety levels associated with each. This is often described as a “Jekyll and Hyde” presentation.
- **Fantasy and role play.** PDA children often have active imaginations, with a heavy reliance on fantasy and role play to escape from demands and/or to relieve stress. This may appear as a heightened interest in video games.
- **Special interests in people.** Just like in classic Autism, PDA children have intense, special interests; however, their special interests tends to focus on specific people.
- **High IQ and/or unusually bright.** Many PDA children are described as intelligent, creative, and unusually bright. This may contribute to their ability to “mask” their autism using surface level social skills.
- **Emotionally sensitive.** PDA children, like other Autistic children, can be extremely sensitive (and accurate) when it comes to perceiving the emotions of others and reacting to them accordingly, especially negative emotions.
- **Unusual or higher level ethics.** PDA children are usually sensitive to perceived injustices, and may not be interested in typical activities. These inner motivations can lead to feelings of isolation, greater anxiety, and avoidance of traditional activities; however, their motivations can also provide a way to connect and understand their unique perspective and ideas.

and behaviors both good and bad to generate enthusiasm, caution, or respect.

- **Be patient, be flexible.** Since changes can be perceived as demands, interrupt activities gently, and provide advanced notice whenever possible. If they don’t respond or begin showing other avoidance, don’t immediately add urgency to the demand. Be patient, as they will often engage with you on their own, especially if your prevailing emotion is patience.
- **Encourage natural learning.** When it’s safe to do so, let the PDA child experiment and learn lessons on their own, even if you know what the outcome will be. Don’t let them fall into any traps, of course, but forecast the outcome with them, and then let them engage in the activity anyway. This will help them develop their problem solving and prediction skills, and build your relationship with them due to your wisdom and the trust you have in them.
- **Look for early signs of overstimulation.** PDA children are often getting overstimulated long before they begin showing it with avoidance or meltdowns. Early signs of overstimulation include covering their ears, tired eyes, slowing down or speeding up, increased crankiness or silliness, and increased resistance. It may help to simply assume they are overstimulated in noisy, complex environments and proactively provide breaks and assurance.
- **Encourage positive control.** PDA children are autistic and need both social skills and knowledge about the world. During times of calm, teach them about how the world works, such as classroom schedules, friendship, and traditions. Then teach them how to control their world using positive control techniques. For example, teach them that if they say please or give someone a compliment, they’re more likely to get what they want. Arrange for their success by enlisting others to respond positively to your child’s emerging attempts at positive control. Continue adding new, positive skills as they catch on. Strategy, logic, and debate are great concepts for PDA child.