



Neuropsychology
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Checklist for Identifying Signs of PDA in Children

By Dr. Huffman, Neurodivergent Neuropsychologist and Fellow PDA'er

Parents/caregivers can use this checklist to identify potential signs of Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) in their children. This checklist is not a diagnostic tool but can help parents recognize behaviors that may warrant further evaluation by a neurodiversity-affirming healthcare professional. This information is based on Dr. Huffman's experience working with PDA'ers as well as her lived experience. This is a work in progress, so please feel free to comment and make suggestions!

Attention and Executive Functioning

- Difficulty sustaining attention on tasks that are not of their choosing or interest.
- Appears distracted or disengaged during activities.
- Struggles with planning, organizing, and time management.
- Difficulty following multi-step instructions.
- Challenges in managing emotions and self-regulation.
- Difficulty with praxis; they might struggle with planning and doing movements or actions. It is not that they do not want to do things; their brain has a harder time figuring out *how* to do them. They are often left feeling like they know it but cannot access it or do it without executive functioning supports. This is often interpreted as willful defiance.

Sensory Issues

- Over-sensitive or under-sensitive to sounds, lights, textures, or other sensory inputs.
- Easily overwhelmed by sensory stimuli, leading to meltdowns or shutdowns.
- Seeks out or avoids certain sensory experiences (e.g., loud noises, bright lights).
- Difficulty with understanding or avoiding body cues (hunger, fatigue etc.) referred to as interoception.

Anxiety and Demand Avoidance

- Exhibits extreme avoidance of everyday demands and expectations.
- Experiences high levels of anxiety, particularly when faced with demands.
- Meltdowns or shutdowns when feeling overwhelmed or pressured.
- Uses strategies to avoid demands, such as distraction, negotiation, or withdrawal.

Identifying PDA in Children

Communication Issues

- Difficulty expressing needs or understanding social cues.
- Struggles with both verbal and non-verbal communication.
- Miscommunications often lead to frustration and increased anxiety.
- Uses alternative communication methods (e.g., picture cards, communication devices).

Learning Issues

- Uneven learning profile, excelling in some areas while struggling in others.
- Resists traditional teaching methods and standardized approaches.
- Engages more readily in hands-on, experiential learning activities.
- Prefers tasks and activities that align with their strengths and interests.

Processing Issues

- Difficulty with problem solving in new situations especially when pressured or around others.
- Often process information more slowly despite strong cognitive abilities.
- Process information “off-line” meaning that they need more time to think about and understand information before they can respond or act.
- Typically need extended time on tasks to complete the task to their best ability.
- When feeling pressured or anxious, they often lose their ability to process, learn, or retrieve new information.
- They consistently think “out of the box.”

Social Interaction and Preferred Interests

- Intense interests or passions that dominate conversations and activities.
- Difficulty engaging in social interactions that do not involve their preferred interests.
- Uses preferred interests to connect with others.
- May appear socially adept in areas of interest but struggle in other social contexts.

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Identifying PDA in Children

Emotional and Behavioral Regulation

- High levels of emotional sensitivity and reactivity.
- Difficulty identifying and expressing emotions.
- Frequent mood swings or emotional outbursts.
- Uses coping mechanisms such as rocking, spinning, or other repetitive behaviors.

Safety and Trauma-Informed Concerns

- Displays heightened sensitivity to stress and changes in routine.
- Requires a predictable and consistent environment to feel safe.
- Exhibits signs of trauma or heightened anxiety in response to stressors.
- Benefits from a calm, patient, and empathetic approach from caregivers.

Additional Concerns

- Difficulty making and maintaining friendships.
- Often feels misunderstood or different from peers.
- Shows signs of demand avoidance in various settings (e.g., home, school, social situations).
- Experiences physical symptoms related to anxiety (e.g., stomachaches, headaches).
- Seems to have greater difficulties when standard parenting techniques, especially behavioral methods, are used.
- They do not appear to recognize status and hierarchy or actively work to gain control in settings where status and hierarchy are clear.
- Children with PDA are at risk for failure to launch toward independence due to the above challenges. They often need executive functioning accommodations and supports to bridge between school and the workforce.

Next Steps

If you check multiple items on this list and have concerns about your child, consider the following steps:

1. **Consult with a Pediatrician:** Take the checklist to your appointment and discuss your observations and concerns with your child's pediatrician. Your pediatrician may not be PDA aware, so share PDA resources with them, such as PDA North America.
2. **Seek a Specialist:** Request a referral to a specialist, such as a neuropsychologist developmental pediatrician, child psychologist, or child psychiatrist, who has experience with autism spectrum conditions and PDA. I recommend that you explicitly ask the clinician or their team prior to making the appointment whether they have experience with assessing for and consulting on PDA.

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3. **Request a Comprehensive Evaluation:** Once you have found the right resource, ensure that the evaluation includes assessments of attention, executive functioning, sensory processing, anxiety, communication, and learning.
4. **Explore Neurodiversity-Affirming Assessments:** Find providers who conduct using a neurodiversity-affirming approach, such as the MIGDAS-2 (Monteiro Interview Guidelines for Diagnosing the Autism Spectrum, Second Edition), and who consider the child themselves an important member of the assessment team due to their internal experience which is often difficult for others to assess.
5. **Collaborate with Professionals:** Work with a multidisciplinary team to develop an individualized support plan for your child. Typical team members may be the specialist providing the evaluation, the child's school, if your child is in school, the pediatrician, an occupational therapist and speech therapist (if neurodiversity affirming). You as a parent are an important member of the team and your child when capable.

For more information, please see the following PDA Resources:

PDA North America www.PDANorthAmerica.org

PDA Society www.PDASociety.org.uk

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