



# A Brief Guide for Babysitting a PDA Child (Pathological Demand Avoidance)

## Understanding PDA

Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is characterized by extreme anxiety around demands, leading to avoidance and distress. Children with PDA often struggle with direct instructions and need a flexible, collaborative, fun approach. For PDA children having a sitter or nanny can be a stressful experience as it deviates from their most trusted individuals so we've compiled some tips to help you have an enjoyable and connecting experience for those in your care. **Babysitters that are PDA-knowledgeable and affirming are true treasures!**

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## Key Strategies for Success

### 1. Build Rapport & Reduce Pressure

- **It's all about the relationship:** it's important you engage in the relationship with PDAers authentically, coming as you are. Authenticity = safety and soothes their nervous systems.
- **Be a Buddy/Get on their Level:** PDAers can get very anxious when they feel someone has power over them. Show them you're on their team by approaching them as an equal, not as an authority figure. Collaborate at every opportunity for success and relationship-building.
- **Lower the Bar:** Keep your expectations low for how much interaction to expect from a PDA person when first getting to know them. Allow space and bring your own activities for "parallel play" until you develop a rapport.
- **Engage in their special interests** and let them teach you about them. They will love to be the experts if you're asking for their knowledge and to show and teach you something they're knowledgeable and passionate about. (note: they can smell a lie from a mile away, so please don't pretend to not know something you do!).
- **Use playful language and indirect requests** (e.g., "I wonder if you'd like to brush your teeth together?" instead of "Go brush your teeth").
- **Allow choices** and shared decision-making (e.g., "Would you like to eat dinner now or in 30 minutes?")
- **Let them win**, or play collaborative games versus competitive. Losing is an extreme loss of autonomy and most PDA children have extreme anxiety over losing.



## **2. Stay Flexible & Adaptable**

- Offer a loose routine with room for changes. Avoid strict schedules for success.
- If a demand is met with resistance, step back, reframe, turn it into a game, or pivot to something different if possible.
- Provide plenty of time for transitions with indirect language and avoid sudden changes. (e.g. "when we head to the park in 20 minutes do you want to wear the red or blue shoes?", or "Do you want to head to the park in 10 minutes or 20 minutes?")
- Allow negotiation and flexibility with timing for tasks when possible. Negotiation is often the way a PDA kid can comply.

## **3. Use Indirect Communication**

- Phrase things as suggestions, options, or fun challenges (e.g., "Let's see if we can sneak like ninjas to the bathroom!").
- Get silly! Humor and role-playing can reduce anxiety about tasks and build connection between you.
- Avoid power struggles at all costs—if they resist, take a break and try again later.

## **4. Manage Anxiety & Meltdowns**

- Create a calm environment with minimal demands.
- Prioritize what you ask from them/pick your battles.
- If they become distressed, remain calm, quiet and reduce expectations.
- Avoid any punitive measures (e.g. no "time outs", and no threats to take things away, or tell on them, if they do not comply)
- Offer the "deep why" behind things that need to be done. PDA individuals need to buy into and understand why they have to do non-preferred tasks. When they can understand the "why" of an ask or request, often the "yes" comes much easier.
- Offer quiet time, sensory tools, or favorite activities to help them reset.
- If there is a problem, move on. You don't need to discuss it.



## 5. Safety & Support

- Keep communication open with parents about what is helpful and what is not.
- Identify potential triggers in advance and have a plan for de-escalation.
- Stay patient—PDA behaviors are driven by anxiety, not defiance.

**Most Important Tip:** The more you make tasks feel like a choice, a game, or an adventure, the more likely they will engage willingly!

**For Parents:** Try to make babysitting an opportunity for a routine with the person. Having a favorite safe dinner, special occasion (ordering a pizza, having a sweet treat, etc.). Setting up their rooms in advance, helping them pick out favorite books or activities to do with the babysitter. When the sitter arrives, have a plan for what's going to happen. If they'd like, ask them to give the babysitter a tour of the house before leaving. Should they be anxious about you leaving or about the babysitter having certain information, make sure you communicate it clearly to the babysitter in front of your PDAer so they can quiet that worry.