



A Brief Guide for Supporting Your PDA Grandchild (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. Instead of refusing on purpose, they may feel overwhelmed and unable to comply, even with things they enjoy. We've compiled some tips to help you have an enjoyable and connecting experience for your grandkids! Grandparents that are PDA-knowledgeable and affirming are true treasures!

Understanding Your Grandchild

- **Any and All Demands Can Feel Overwhelming** – Even small requests like “Put on your shoes” or requiring that they eat a meal at the table can trigger anxiety.
- **Control is Comforting for Them** – They may need to feel in charge of their environment to reduce stress.
- **Meltdowns are NOT Tantrums** – They happen when anxiety becomes too much to handle. They are not doing it on purpose and telling them to calm down will only backfire. Signal safety
- **Fluctuating Capacity** – Your grandchild may seem fine in some situations but struggle later due to cumulative stress. They may also seem fine coming with you to do a specific activity one day, and unable to do it the next time.

How You Can Help your Grandchild

- **Be Flexible** – Offer choices instead of direct instructions. (“*Do you want to put your shoes on now or after this video?*”)
- **Use Indirect Language** – Turn requests into playful suggestions. (“*I wonder if your coat wants to be worn today?*”)
- **Give More Time & Space** – Rushing or insisting can backfire and further escalate things. Let them ease into things.
- **Respect Their Need for Control** – Instead of saying “Come here,” try, “I’ll be over here if you want to join me.”
- **Be Their Safe Person** – A calm, accepting presence helps lower anxiety.



How you can Support Parents of the PDA Children

- **Trust What the parent is saying about PDA** – Trust when they say that low pressure parenting is best, and punitive measures do not work for their children.
- **Be curious, but don't offer parenting advice rooted in behaviorism** – We know that you've been there and done that, but please don't try to offer parenting advice as we can assure you, they've tried it all and what works is PDA accommodations. Listen to them without judgement.
- **How you can help** – Offer to do their laundry, cook a meal, offer to take the siblings of PDA child for a night, show understanding when they are not able to make all of the family functions due to the needs of their PDA child(ren). Learn about PDA and how to advocate for your grandchild.
- **Be their safe person** – Many parents of PDA children are judged at every turn. Be the person that is willing to listen without judgement and understand their needs.

How to Respond to a Meltdown

For a PDA child experiencing a meltdown, a grandparent (or any caregiver) can signal safety through a combination of body language, environment, and communication. Here are key ways to do that:

1. Stay Calm and Regulate Yourself

- Keep your tone gentle, neutral, and slow.
- Maintain a relaxed body posture (avoid crossing arms or appearing tense).
- Breathe deeply and slowly—children often pick up on the energy of those around them.

2. Reduce Pressure & Give Space

- Avoid direct demands or instructions. Even saying “It’s okay” might feel like pressure.
- If possible, step back and allow them space to regulate without feeling watched.
- Let them know they’re safe, but without requiring a response. (“I’m here if you need me.”)



3. Use Nonverbal Signals of Safety

- Open body language (no looming over them, no fast movements).
- Soft, slow movements instead of quick, reactive ones.
- If touch is comforting for them, a light hand on the back or a familiar object nearby may help.

4. Reduce Sensory Overload

- If possible, dim harsh lights or reduce background noise.
- Offer noise-canceling headphones, a weighted blanket, or a favorite comfort item.
- Avoid sudden sounds, high-pitched voices, or trying to talk too much.

5. Use Indirect or Playful Approaches When Ready

- If the child responds well to humor or distraction, use it lightly (but don't force it).
- Offer a non-demanding choice (e.g., "I'm going to sit here and watch a show—want to join?").
- Mirror their emotions subtly—acknowledging their feelings without overwhelming them.

6. Validate Without Overwhelming

- Say things like:
 - "That was really tough, huh?"
 - "I get it, I'm here."
 - "You don't have to talk right now."
- Less is more. Avoid too many words, questions, or reassurance if they seem to escalate more from verbal interaction.
- You don't need to process or discuss the meltdown. It won't be helpful.

7. Follow Their Lead in Recovery

- Some kids need total quiet; others need a familiar activity or item to re-regulate.
- Offer a simple transition option
- Let them set the pace—forcing recovery too soon can restart the meltdown.



What to Avoid

- **Avoid Rigid Expectations** – Forcing compliance increases distress.
- **Avoid Bribing** - Reward systems generally backfire with PDA individuals as it's a pressure to perform.
- **Avoid Punishing** – Punitive measures (i.e. time outs, taking loved items away) only backfire and increase anxiety. PDA is anxiety-driven, not a behavior choice.
- **Avoid Taking It Personally** – If they resist or meltdown, it's not about you.

Most of All...

Your grandchild isn't being difficult on purpose. It's their body's automatic way of reacting to stress or feeling overwhelmed—like a built-in alarm system that goes off when something feels too much, even if there's no real danger.

Your grandchild will thrive with understanding, patience, and love. By meeting them where they are, you can create a special and trusting bond.