



# A Brief Guide to Being Friends with a PDA Child (Pathological Demand Avoidance)

## Understanding PDA

PDA kids feel anxious about demands and expectations (things they “have to” or “should” do), making it hard for them to follow rules and requests from other people. PDA people love and appreciate friends who are patient, understanding and fun.

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## How to Be a Good Friend to a PDA Child or Teen

### 1. Be Flexible & Go with the Flow

- PDA people feel safe and calm when they feel in control. When choosing activities, make sure everyone’s opinion counts.
- If your PDA friend does not want to do something, try to suggest something else or take a break. Trying to push an activity may make them give more “Nos”.
- Flexibility as Fun: Sometimes your PDA friend may change their mind a lot. If you are able to be flexible in those moments, playing can feel exciting and fun. If you’re not able to, be honest and take a break.

### 2. Make Things Fun, Not Demanding

- **It’s Great to Collaborate:** PDAers love teamwork! Play activities where you are working together as a team. Competition can be very hard for your PDA friend, especially if they lose or fall behind others. Working together instead of competing against each other may be more fun, as competition causes lots of anxiety.
- **Turn ideas into a game or a challenge** ("I bet we can build the tallest tower!"). Your PDA friend will feel more calm instead of just telling them what to do.
- **Choice = Calm:** try to give choices instead of instructions. ("Do you want to play inside or outside?"). Choice helps your PDA friend feel more calm.
- **Please don’t tell them what to do:** avoiding bossing your PDA friend around will help them feel calm and connected to you. When they feel they’re being bossed around, it can make them feel anxious.



### 3. Be Kind & Understanding

- **Different is okay:** Your PDA friend may want to do a game or activity differently than the way you're doing it, or differently than how an activity may usually be done. They may also need time alone. Know that this is part of what keeps your PDA friend feeling calm in their bodies and that's okay! Choice helps them feel in control of their time with you.
- **Things are not always what they seem.** Sometimes your PDA friend may get overwhelmed or upset and it may feel like they're upset with **you**. Your PDA friend wants you to know these feelings in their bodies may feel so big, they become too much inside and explode. This is a reaction to what's happening in their bodies and is not personal. Giving some space helps your PDA friend feel safe enough to calm down.
- **Meltdowns are overwhelming.** Sometimes the sensory overwhelm and big feelings get SO big, they overflow into something called a meltdown. Your PDA friend may say or do hurtful things in those moments to you, themselves or others, that they may feel really bad about later. It's important to know that in a meltdown, your PDA friend cannot control their reaction and they do not mean what they say and do in those moments. They also may feel a lot of shame about their reaction that they could not control. If you can try to stay calm and give space to them, that will help your PDA friend become calm and regulated. They may worry that you may not want to be their friend, so it's important to tell your PDA friend their meltdowns don't change your relationship and that you're still friends.

### 4. Respect Their Boundaries

- **Quiet Time:** Sometimes you may find your PDA friend might not want to talk or play with you. It may feel like they don't like you, but actually it's just that their bodies sometimes need to be alone to be calm.
- Your PDA friend will be happier to participate in activities when friends let them decide how much they want to join in on the fun instead of trying to force them.
- **No is no:** If your PDA friend says "no" to something, please don't try to force their "no" into a "yes".



## 5. Be a Supportive Friend

- Just like you, your PDA friend wants to be liked for who they are. The more they feel safe with you, the more themselves they can be, and safe, calm and happy they can feel. Show them you like them just the way they are.
- **Curious?** Learn about your PDA friend's brain! Ask them questions you may have or read a book to learn more. We have included a list of books for kiddos on neurodivergence and PDA below\*\*
- Sometimes, like you, your PDA friend may have a hard time with something and need some help with kind words. Letting them know you've got their back and believe they can do it can be all they need to try again.

**Most Importantly,** your PDA friend wants to be treated the same as you and anyone else: with kindness, curiosity and understanding.