



Supporting PDA (Pathological Demand Avoidance) in Education: A Short Guide for Educators

Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is characterized by extreme anxiety around demands, leading to avoidance and distress. People with PDA often struggle with direct instructions and need a flexible, collaborative, or sometimes fun approach. For PDA people, school can be a near impossible task full of demands. According to a 2018 survey by The PDA Society, **70% of PDA children cannot access traditional education. 95% reported the cause was emotional distress.** We've put together a brief guide for educators on how to effectively work with PDA learners.

1. Understand the Why Behind the Behavior

- **Demand avoidance isn't defiance.** It's often a **response to overwhelming anxiety** or a loss of perceived autonomy.
- PDAers may appear controlling or oppositional, but their behavior is usually self-protective, not malicious.
- PDAers aren't being difficult on purpose—their avoidance is often a **response to anxiety**, especially when they feel overwhelmed or powerless.
- What looks like defiance is often a **fight-or-flight response** triggered by everyday expectations.
- What you see on the outside may be very different from what is going on inside the student.

2. Focus on Collaboration, Not Compliance

- Instead of insisting on compliance, **invite them into the process.** Use **curiosity, humor, and flexibility** to ease pressure.
 - Try: "Let's figure this out together" or "How do you think we should start this?"
- Collaborative approaches build **trust, autonomy, and buy-in**—all essential for PDAers.
- Use **negotiation, choices, and collaboration** instead of direct demands.
 - Try: "Would you like to do this now or after break?" vs. "You need to do this now."
- Use **indirect, declarative language**: "I wonder if this might be a good time to look at your math assignment..." vs. "Do your math assignment now."



3. Lower the Pressure

- Prioritize collaboration over competition. Competitive environments (like races, points systems, or class rankings) often heighten anxiety and avoidance for PDAers.
- Instead, foster **team-based, cooperative activities** where students can contribute in their own way.
 - Group problem-solving, shared projects, and paired learning often work better than competitive games or "who's first" tasks
 - But PDAers should not be forced to work in groups and should have the option of working alone
- Emphasize **personal growth and creativity** rather than comparison or performance.
- Reduce the intensity of demands by:
 - Using **humor or roleplay**
 - Making tasks part of a **game or narrative**
 - Framing activities as optional or for someone else's benefit
- Keep your tone light and **non-authoritarian**.
- Decrease repetitive or redundant assignments
- Classwork and homework will probably need modifications

4. Build Trust and Relationship

- Connection is key. PDAers respond better to **mutual respect and emotional safety**.
- Avoid power struggles—**relationship over rules**.
- Stay calm, consistent, and predictable, even when things get tricky.
- A strong **relationship of trust** is more effective than any reward or consequence.
- Be **calm, responsive, and non-authoritarian**. Focus on emotional safety.
- Avoid power struggles—**your connection is the most powerful tool you have**.



5. Flexibility is Essential

- Rigid routines or consequences often backfire.
- Create **low-arousal environments** and offer safe exit strategies when anxiety spikes.
- Be ready to **adapt on the fly**. PDAers may respond differently to the same situation from one day to the next.
- Offer **exit strategies**, sensory breaks, or quiet spaces. Based on their need not a schedule. Don't require them asking for the break.
- Breaks should not be time limited.
- Validate their emotions—"I can see this is really hard for you right now"—and let them lead when possible. Noting that they may not be aware of their emotions.
- If the student is dysregulated, give time, space and quiet. Do not talk at them. Make yourself less dominant. Often the best thing to do is nothing, just wait.
- Behavioral approaches will backfire.
- Accommodations and supports can be offered to the whole class as PDAers often do not want to be singled out.
- Focus on learning, not completing work or assignments
- Use interests to engage

6. Support Autonomy and Control

- Let them have **genuine control** where possible.
- Involve them in **planning their own learning**.
- Offer choices throughout the day to maintain a sense of agency.
- Allow them to opt out of tasks
- Get consent whenever possible especially before touching their belongings
- Allow for different ways to demonstrate learning
- Have a personalized approach best done collaboratively that include modifications and accommodations



7. Communicate with the Team

- Share what works and what doesn't with colleagues and parents/carers.
- Make sure a substitute is introduced to the student and there is a plan to make the student comfortable. The sub will not be able to act like someone the student has a relationship with.
- PDAers may behave differently in different settings and adults need to support their fluctuating needs
- Consider involving professionals familiar with PDA for support.
- Listen to and trust the parents, they are the experts of their own child.

8. Rethink Rewards and Consequences

- Traditional **reward systems (stickers, charts, praise for compliance)** can **increase demands, increase anxiety** and trigger avoidance.
 - The expectation to “earn” something or the pressure of being watched can feel coercive.
- Instead of external rewards, **celebrate intrinsic motivation**, curiosity, and effort.
 - Try: “I love how you thought about that” or “That was a really creative way to do it.”
- Avoid punishments or behavior charts—they can escalate distress and shut down communication
- Praise can build pressure



Quick Tips for the Classroom

- Use soft suggestions (“I wonder if..”), not firm instructions
- Offer choices and negotiate
- Expect the unexpected, and stay flexible
- Prioritize connection over correction
- Celebrate effort, not just outcomes
- Use indirect, flexible language
- Offer autonomy and real choices
- Focus on connection, not compliance
- Ditch the sticker charts—build relationships instead
- Emphasize collaboration, not competition
- The student may need more support interacting with peers than is obvious
- What you see on the outside may not be happening on the inside. Many children mask their stress and overwhelm
- Learn more about educating PDA Students and about the specific students you are supporting-there is no one size fits all

Learn more at www.pdanorthamerica.org