



PARENT TOOLKIT

Pathological Demand Avoidance



Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is a profile within the autism spectrum, characterised by **resistance to everyday demands**, high anxiety, and a need for control. Children with PDA may appear defiant, controlling, or socially manipulative, but these behaviours are **driven by anxiety and a need to feel safe**, rather than deliberate misbehaviour.

Understanding PDA

- PDA often presents as:
 - Avoidance of demands or requests
 - Extreme anxiety in situations perceived as controlling
 - Mood swings or emotional outbursts
 - Socially strategic behaviour (“testing” adults, negotiating, distracting)
 - Excellent social awareness in some contexts
- Resistance is usually **anxiety-driven**, not oppositional defiance.
- Understanding behaviour as a **coping mechanism** rather than willful defiance is essential.

Reducing Conflict

- **Use indirect language** instead of direct commands:
 - Instead of “Put your shoes on,” try “I wonder what would happen if we put shoes on now.”
- **Offer choices and control:**
 - Allow your child to have input in routines, timing, or tasks.
- **Collaborative problem solving:**
 - Brainstorm solutions together rather than issuing ultimatums.
- **Pick your battles:**
 - Avoid unnecessary power struggles; focus on essential tasks.
- **Humour and playfulness:**
 - Light, playful interactions can reduce anxiety and increase cooperation

Supporting Emotional Regulation

- Use **co-regulation**: stay calm, slow your breathing, and model composure.
- Introduce **self-soothing tools**: weighted items, fidget toys, calm spaces.
- Use **emotion coaching** to help identify and name feelings.
- Encourage **breaks or escape spaces** when your child feels overwhelmed.
- Celebrate small steps towards emotional control rather than perfection.

Managing Demands and Anxiety

- **Reduce overt demands**; present requests as **negotiable or optional**.
- Use **soft, gentle prompts** and avoid pressure language.
- Offer **gradual exposure** to challenging tasks, paired with praise and reassurance.
- Visual schedules or “flexible routines” help children anticipate and prepare for transitions.
- Reward **cooperation and problem-solving** rather than compliance alone.

Supporting Social Interaction

- Encourage social skills through **structured, low-pressure activities**.
- Use **role-play** to practise negotiation, perspective-taking, and sharing.
- Respect their need for autonomy in social situations; allow self-directed participation.
- Praise **prosocial behaviour**, cooperation, and collaborative problem-solving.

Tools & Approaches

- **Low-demand environments**: reduce unnecessary pressure and maintain flexibility.
- **Visual supports and schedules** that allow choice and control.
- **Zones of Regulation** or emotion thermometers for self-awareness.

- **Reward and token systems** tailored to individual motivation.
- **Parenting programmes** adapted for PDA, such as “Collaborative & Proactive Solutions” or specialised autism parenting courses.

Organisations & Support

- **National Autistic Society (NAS)** – PDA guidance, resources, and parent forums.
- **PDA Society** – Specific information, strategies, and a parent community.
- **Local autism support groups** – Many provide PDA-specific workshops.
- **Therapists specialising in PDA** – Occupational therapy, counselling, and anxiety management.

Supporting Yourself as a Parent

- Parenting a child with PDA can be emotionally demanding.
- Seek **peer support and parent forums** for practical tips and reassurance.
- Practice **self-care**: short breaks, relaxation, and supervision.
- Reflect on your own responses; maintaining calmness helps regulate your child.
- Celebrate **small victories** — even minor cooperation is progress.

Children with PDA respond best to **collaboration, flexibility, and empathy** rather than direct demands. By reducing pressure, offering choices, and supporting emotional regulation, you can reduce conflict, build trust, and help your child thrive. Your patience, creativity, and understanding are transformative.