

PDA for Educators

The term PDA stands for **Pathological Demand Avoidance**. This is widely understood to be a profile found within some autistic people. The most obvious characteristic of PDA is a determined avoidance of so-called “common” demands of life, including expectations and things the person enjoys doing.

This avoidance is often driven by feelings of **anxiety** or a **stress** response to demands, rather than choice. PDAers may describe it as a tug of war between **brain, heart and body**.

Key traits you might see include:

- Resisting and avoiding the **everyday demands** of life.
- Using social strategies as part of the **avoidance**.
- Appearing confident socially but struggling with **connection or communication**.
- Experiencing intense emotions and mood swings.
- Creativity, role play, or masking through pretending.
- **Intensely focusing**, often on other people (real or fictional).
- A need for **control**, often driven by anxiety or an automatic “threat response”.

How PDA can show up in school

Children with a PDA profile may:

- Present very differently at school compared to at home due to masking.
- Have difficulties with attendance - over 70% are not in school or struggle with regular attendance.
- Have experienced multiple exclusions from an early age.
- See themselves as equal to adults, or want to reverse roles with you.
- Have poor self-esteem.
- Find emotional regulation very difficult.
- Find praise overwhelming and destroy work when it's complete.
- Want friendships but unintentionally sabotage them due to a need for control.
- Engage extensively in fantasy/role play.
- Say the work is boring or that they already know everything.
- Use avoidance tactics that are creative, charming or surprising.



“We thought Zoe may be autistic but her needs were very different to other autistic pupils we had supported in school before, and none of our usual approaches helped. Searching for answers led us to PDA. Seeing Zoe through this lens enabled us to truly understand her and successfully adapt our practices by building trust and embracing a flexible and collaborative approach.” – Zoe’s teacher

Traditional strategies like firm boundaries, routines, rewards or consequences are often unhelpful for PDA children. In fact, they can increase anxiety and lead to more avoidance.

Supporting a PDA student often means taking a different approach. Flexibility, collaboration and trust-based relationships are key. What works today might not work tomorrow – but may work again next week.

Some students may be reluctant to accept support if it makes them stand out or feel different to others.

Some useful approaches include:

- Getting to know the student before introducing learning - this may take time.
- Building trust first, with one key adult if needed.
- Focusing on collaboration – negotiating rather than instructing.
- Allowing choice and control – in what, when, how, and with whom learning happens.
- Adapting expectations – e.g. homework, flexible attendance, alternative ways to demonstrate or record learning.
- Rethinking behaviour – most surface behaviours stem from anxiety or overload and are a way to communicate.
- Staying ahead of escalation by using proactive plans and recognising early signs of distress.
- Changing your language – tone and phrasing really matter.
- Creating a safe space to retreat that’s always available.
- Reflecting without judgement – tricky times can offer valuable insight.
- Supporting staff and sharing the approach across the whole school.
- Offering PDA-specific training and sharing relevant resources with everyone working with the student.

Find out more:

We have further practical information to help you support PDA students on our website:

<https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/research-professional-practice/education-professional-practice/>

