

# Tips for supporting a child in the classroom

A school environment is often filled with demands and triggers for sensory & emotional overload, which often leads to high anxiety levels for a child with PDA.

**Ground rules** need to be **as few as possible but then maintained** using techniques such as passing over responsibility to a higher power e.g. a health and safety rule, de-personalising (using imaginary characters or visual clarification), giving choice or negotiating.

**Adjust your demands according to the child's tolerance level** – when anxiety is high, reduce demands and when anxiety is low you may be able to increase demands accordingly.

Take pride in your ability to **work in collaboration with the child** – aiming to prove you are the boss will be counterproductive.

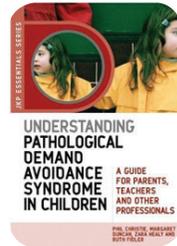
It may help to **give instructions in an indirect, non-confrontational style** – practice 'asking without asking' e.g. "I wonder if someone might be able to help me do this....."

Have a **safe place or several areas** where the child can go to be alone when they are overwhelmed.

When a child 'melts down' use **quiet tones, give them space and reassurance**. Try to think of it as a panic attack.



# Recommended reading & useful links



**Understanding PDA Syndrome in Children**, Phil Christie, Margaret Duncan, Ruth Fidler, Zara Healy, 2011, Jessica Kingsley Publishers [jkp.com/uk/understanding-pathological-demand-avoidance-syndrome-in-children.html](http://jkp.com/uk/understanding-pathological-demand-avoidance-syndrome-in-children.html)

**PDA - Reference Booklet for Health, Education and Social Care practitioners**, The PDA Society  
[www.pdasociety.org.uk/resources/awareness-matters-booklet](http://www.pdasociety.org.uk/resources/awareness-matters-booklet)

**Educational Strategies Booklet**, Positive PDA  
[www.pdasociety.org.uk/education/educational-strategies-booklet-from-positive-pda](http://www.pdasociety.org.uk/education/educational-strategies-booklet-from-positive-pda)

**The Distinctive Clinical and Educational Needs of Children with PDA Syndrome: Guidelines for Good Practice**, Autism Education Trust [www.aettraininghubs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/5.2-strategies-for-teaching-pupils-with-PDA.pdf](http://www.aettraininghubs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/5.2-strategies-for-teaching-pupils-with-PDA.pdf)

**How can I help a child with PDA at my school**, Jilly Davis  
[www.autism.org.uk/professionals/teachers/lessons-breaktimes/pda.aspx](http://www.autism.org.uk/professionals/teachers/lessons-breaktimes/pda.aspx)

## Further Information

You can find more **advice and support** via the PDA Society website and our enquiry line [www.pdasociety.org.uk](http://www.pdasociety.org.uk)

## Connect with us on social media

 @thepdasociety and  @pdasociety



# A Teacher's Guide to Understanding Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) – Part of the Autism Spectrum



# What is Pathological Demand Avoidance?

**PDA is a diagnostic profile** that is seen in some children on the autism spectrum. Children with a PDA Profile will share difficulties with others on the autism spectrum in the following areas:

- Social Communication Difficulties
- Social Interaction Difficulties
- Restrictive and Repetitive patterns of behaviour, activities and interests

Children may also have other conditions alongside their PDA, for example Sensory Issues, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Mental Health issues.

Children who present with the PDA profile are driven to avoid everyday demands and expectations to an extreme extent. **“PDA is best understood as an anxiety driven need to be in control and avoid other people’s demands and expectations.”** *Understanding Pathological Demand Avoidance in Children. Christie, Duncan, Fidler & Healy (2011).*

**Even ordinary daily tasks** such as getting dressed, eating a meal and going out (even to an enjoyable place) **can be very challenging** for a child with PDA. They will often go to extreme lengths to avoid demands – this is what is meant by the term ‘pathological’.

A child with PDA might **avoid demands in lots of different ways** from simply refusing, making an excuse, distracting, negotiating or doing / saying something shocking. If these avoidance strategies fail, the child may have a **meltdown** which is best viewed as a panic attack. This may take the form of challenging behaviour, withdrawal or some children may run away.

# Characteristics of the PDA Profile

Children with PDA can appear to have **better social understanding and communication skills** than others on the autism spectrum which means that some of their difficulties may be less obvious at first.

**The key features of a PDA profile are:**

- Resisting and avoiding ordinary demands
- Appearing sociable but lacking depth in understanding
- Excessive mood swings and impulsivity
- Comfortable in role play and pretend, sometimes to an extreme extent
- Obsessive behaviour, often focused on real or imagined people.

The behaviour of children with a PDA profile can vary between settings or at different times e.g. **a child can be anxious at home, but appear calm at school.** This may be a coping strategy for the child. Therefore, it is important for teachers to be aware that the child’s behaviour in school may not be indicative of the difficulties that parents face at home.

In other children, the **demands at school can lead to severe ‘meltdowns’** within the school environment and/or school refusal. This can be difficult for both teachers and parents alike.



# Implications for education & teaching staff

The strategies that tend to be successful for many children on the autism spectrum may need **considerable adaptations** for a child with PDA, where an **entirely different emphasis is often required.**

**“Children with PDA can be challenging for teachers, as traditional behaviour management techniques such as structure, routine and rewards that can work for children with autism are generally ineffective. They may even cause more anxiety and possibly inflame situations for children with PDA.”** Jilly Davis, teacher at The National Autistic Society’s Robert Ogden School

Children with PDA can be **exceptionally demanding** in the **pressures** that they can place on **individual staff and teams.** Working in a creative, flexible and adaptive way can be both **physically and emotionally draining.**

Therefore, access to **training, opportunities for communication, planning and mutual support** is important for teaching staff working with a child with PDA.

