

Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA)

Understanding PDA

- Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is a profile within the autism spectrum characterised by an extreme avoidance of everyday demands and expectations, driven by high anxiety and a need for control. Students with PDA often:
 - Exhibit high levels of anxiety when demands are placed on them.
 - Appear sociable but may struggle with social understanding.
 - Use social strategies (e.g., distraction, negotiation, withdrawal) to avoid demands.
 - Demonstrate sudden changes in mood or behaviour.
 - Require flexible and individualised approaches that prioritise autonomy and trust.
- PDA is not formally recognised in all diagnostic manuals, however many clinicians and educators acknowledge its characteristics and adapt their approaches accordingly.

Guiding Principles

Relationship Before Compliance

- Building a trusting, low-demand relationship is key. Students with PDA are more likely to engage with adults who respect their autonomy and work collaboratively.

Anxiety is the Driver

- Avoidance is not defiance; it's often a protective response to overwhelming anxiety. Reducing anxiety should be the foundation of any support plan.

Flexibility Over Firmness

- Traditional behaviourist approaches (e.g. strict routines, rigid boundaries, rewards/consequences) often escalate avoidance behaviours. A flexible, student-led approach is more effective.

Practical Strategies

1. Reducing Perceived Demands

- Rephrase instructions as suggestions or collaborative options (e.g. "I wonder if we could try..." instead of "You need to...").
- Offer choices and open-ended invitations ("Would you like to start with drawing or reading?").
- Use visual supports to reduce verbal demands.
- Build in 'opt-out' or 'pause' options to reduce pressure.

2. Creating a Low-Demand Environment

- Establish predictable routines but allow for flexibility.
- Avoid confrontations—withdraw demands rather than escalating.
- Use indirect language (e.g. "Some students are getting ready for maths" rather than "It's time for maths").
- Provide quiet spaces or sensory-friendly zones for regulation and retreat.

3. Supporting Autonomy and Control

- Involve the student in planning and decision-making.
- Use student-led interests as a gateway to engagement.
- Allow the student to lead the pace and structure of learning tasks where possible.
- Be open to negotiating expectations and adjusting plans.

4. Managing Transitions and Change

- Prepare students in advance with visual or social stories.
- Offer reassurance and support if routines change.
- Allow extra time for transitions and provide choices about how transitions occur.

5. Communication and Emotional Regulation

- Use affirming language and validate feelings (“I can see that’s really frustrating”).
- Teach and model regulation strategies (e.g. breathing techniques, sensory tools).
- Accept refusal as communication and respond with curiosity rather than correction.
- Avoid time-based sanctions (e.g. loss of break time), which can increase anxiety and reinforce avoidance.

Collaboration and Planning

- **Work with families:** Families often have insight into what helps and hinders their child’s engagement. Co-design support plans with them.
- **Use of Individual Support Plans (ISPs):** Clearly outline PDA-informed strategies and monitor progress regularly.
- **Multi-disciplinary input:** Engage school psychologists, occupational therapists, and speech pathologists for a holistic approach.

Staff Wellbeing and Support

- Working with students with PDA can be emotionally demanding. Access regular supervision, team debriefs, and peer support.
- Share successes and effective strategies in staff meetings to foster a culture of learning and collaboration.

Resources

- *PDA Society UK* (<https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/>)
- *Autism CRC Australia*
- Queensland Department of Education – Inclusive Education Policy
- Let me know if you’d like this adapted into your staff handbook layout, or if you want supporting visuals like a

Quick Reference Strategy Table: Supporting Students with PDA

Challenge Area	What You Might See	Helpful Strategies	What to Avoid
High anxiety around demands	Refusal, shutdown, aggression, or distraction when asked to do tasks	- Use indirect language - Offer choices - Use humour or novelty - Reframe tasks as games or challenges	✗ Firm instructions ✗ Pressure to comply ✗ Repeated demands
Need for control	Attempts to lead, negotiate, or avoid authority structures	- Involve student in planning - Allow flexible options - Negotiate outcomes	✗ Power struggles ✗ Top-down discipline
Social strategies to avoid	Charm, excuses, distraction, or selective mutism when under pressure	- Acknowledge communication style - Redirect gently - Allow time and space	✗ Interpreting behaviour as manipulative or deceptive
Difficulty with transitions	Anxiety, resistance, withdrawal or meltdowns during changes	- Prepare in advance - Use visuals and social stories - Offer transition supports (e.g. music, timers)	✗ Sudden changes ✗ Rushed transitions
Overwhelm in busy environments	Distress, hyperactivity, shutdown or flight responses in stimulating settings	- Offer calm, low-arousal spaces - Use sensory supports	✗ Overcrowded spaces ✗ Sensory overload

Challenge Area	What You Might See	Helpful Strategies	What to Avoid
		- Reduce group size when possible	
Meltdowns or shutdowns	Emotional outbursts or non-responsiveness during overwhelming moments	- Stay calm and non-intrusive - Validate feelings - Support recovery without questioning	✗ Consequences during meltdown ✗ Demanding explanations
Difficulty with traditional rewards	Avoids or refuses tasks even when motivated by usual incentives	- Use intrinsic motivation - Make tasks fun and meaningful - Celebrate effort, not outcome	✗ Behaviour charts ✗ Token economies

General Tips

- Prioritise connection over correction.
- View behaviour through a lens of anxiety and safety, not compliance.
- Document what works and share across the team.
- Flexibility and creativity are key!

