



Pathological Demand Avoidance: A Parent's Primer

by Sandra McConnell www.PDAMamaBear.com

Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is an unofficial profile on the autism spectrum characterized by an anxiety-driven need to resist demands. PDA children do not avoid activities they don't like, but rather the sensation of being trapped or controlled. They use tactics like ignoring, stalling, silliness, negotiating, faking illness or incapacity, falling asleep, running away, bizarre or shocking behaviors, verbally or physically lashing out, and finally a complete loss of control known as a meltdown. Despite being unofficial, PDA persists as an important distinction in order to specify the proper treatment approach, as traditional autism approaches can exacerbate their anxiety and avoidance behaviors.

Presentation

PDA isn't Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD). PDA is specifically associated with autism.

Surface-level social skills. PDA children seem especially adept at "masking" or hiding their autism, making diagnosis a challenge. Careful observation reveals veiled autistic characteristics.

Social misunderstandings. Owing to their autism, PDA children do not appear to be aware of social relationships and norms, such as authority, tradition, and social niceties. Therefore, expectations that they obey that which they don't understand increases their anxiety and avoidance behaviors.

Transitions are challenging. Although children with PDA resist routines due to the demand this places on them, they nonetheless do not like unexpected change. They also do not like stopping an activity before they are ready, otherwise known as autistic momentum.

Sensory differences. As with classic autism, children with PDA are prone to overstimulation from the environment, as well as sensory-seeking behaviors. Complex, noisy environments can amplify anxiety and exacerbate avoidance.

High IQ and/or unusually bright. PDA children are typically described as intelligent, creative, and unusually bright. This may contribute to their ability to "mask" their autism using surface-level social skills.

Inconsistent behavior across environments. PDA children will often behave very differently at home versus school, due to the inherent differences in these environments, such as their relationships with people, sensory levels, and number and type of demands. This is often described as a "Jekyll and Hyde" presentation.

Fantasy and role play. PDA children have active imaginations and rely heavily on fantasy and role play to escape from demands and/or to relieve stress, which is sometimes called a "stim." This may include a strong interest in video games.

Special interests in people. Just like in classic autism, PDA children have intense special interests; interestingly, PDA children tend to hyper-focus on specific people, both in real life and from fiction.

Emotionally sensitive. PDA children, like other autistic children, can be extremely sensitive when it comes to perceiving the emotions of others and reacting to them accordingly, especially negative emotions.

Unusual interests and ethics. PDA children are especially sensitive to perceived injustices, and may not be interested in typical social activities. Their unique inner motivations can lead to feelings of isolation, shame, and self-loathing. However, their motivations can also be a way to understand and connect with them.



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Strategies

Look for early signs of overstimulation. PDA children are often getting overstimulated long before they begin showing it with avoidance or meltdowns. Early signs of overstimulation include covering their ears, tired eyes, slowing down or speeding up, increased crankiness or silliness, and increased resistance. It may help to simply assume they are overstimulated in noisy, complex, or highly-social environments and proactively provide breaks and reassurance.

Set the tone with positive emotions. PDA children do not know how to self-regulate yet, so model the emotions and behaviors you value. Underpin your words with curiosity and comfort. Smile, be excited, and use humor. And rather than giving commands, try to inspire and persuade instead. Withhold judgment. Be their mentor and coach.

Use logic. When demands are part of the natural world, they make more sense to the child with PDA, and this reduces anxiety. It also helps them understand the social and sensory world around them. Talk about what you see and know about the everyday world, such as niceties, traditions, and emotions. Do this without turning the conversation into an expectation.

Let them make choices. Choosing their own clothing, games, etc., even if not your personal favorite, can give the PDA child a sense of freedom that alleviates anxiety. Encourage them to advocate for what they want, and be responsive when they use positive ways of asking. Pick your battles and let them win. And when they truly can't have what they ask for, logically explain why and chart a path together to obtain it.

Be patient, be flexible. Since changes can be perceived as demands, provide as much advanced notice as possible and interrupt activities gently. If they don't respond immediately, don't add urgency to the demand. Be patient, as they will often engage with you on their own, especially if your prevailing emotion is patience.

Play with them. Whether it's video games or pirates in the front yard, leverage their active imaginations to connect and teach them about the world naturally. Engage their senses and ask them to describe what they see and hear. Let them control the game and ask them curious questions about how it works. Patiently use these questions to guide them into being a good leader and storyteller. Encounter "problems" together and team up on how to fix them.

Teach positive control. PDA children are trying to escape from the anxiety of being controlled, but don't know how to control themselves or others yet. So teach them basic lessons about procedures, schedules, friendship, traditions, and other social norms. Then teach them how to change the things they don't like using positive control techniques, like speaking up for themselves, asking nicely, and giving people compliments. Ask them to pay attention to what works and what doesn't. Help them to identify the emotions of others and within themselves. And always continue adding new, positive skills as they catch on. Strategy, logic, and debate are great concepts for the advancing PDA child.

Questions? Email Sandra McConnell
PDAMamaBear@gmail.com

