



Pathological Demand Avoidance: A Teacher's Primer

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Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is an anxiety-driven need to resist demands, even simple ones, due to perceiving them as a trap or loss of freedom. Resistance can range from ignoring, stalling, silliness, claiming physical incapacity, falling asleep, running away, lashing out, and even a full-blown physical meltdown.

Children with PDA are on the Autism Spectrum, though they usually “mask” or hide it. Opposite of classic autism, these children resist routines instead of relying on them. Therefore, lowering anxiety overall and reducing strict routines and control over them will help them feel safe. Teaching them about the world, as well as positive control techniques, will help the student adjust and cope in the classroom

Strategies you can use immediately

Communicate psychological safety. Switch from being an authority figure to a mentor. PDA students are sensitive to positioning, and will react negatively to authority, negative judgment, anger, and disappointment. Use smiles, empathy, humor, and comfort instead, even and especially when they are struggling. Genuinely express that you love your job, love learning, and love them, as they often emulate what they see.

Check in. Frequently ask your PDA student how they are doing and reassure them. This provides safety. Start their day in a quiet, safe space before proceeding to the classroom; possibly at the end of the day, too.

Provide simple choices. Give the PDA student simple choices, such as where to sit, what color pencil to use, etc. This helps them feel a sense of control, and alleviates anxiety.

Deemphasize routines. Add variety to routines to allay the child's need for novelty.

Reduce the use of punishments and rewards. Both rewards and punishments are perceived as control by an authority figure. Both rewards and punishments should be light, in passing, and intrinsic to the event.

Clarify and review simple processes. The student has likely missed both overt and implied instructions, such as when/how to turn in homework. Privately and presumptively review simple procedures to ensure the student understood them. Check in with them until you are sure they're comfortable with it.

Clarify assignments. The PDA student has probably missed details regarding lessons plans. Post details about assignments including step-by-step instructions, dates, and expectations where all students can see. Consider both written and graphical formats.

Attain “buy-in” on demands. Don't command the student using authority. Explain demands in terms of their logical and personal benefits, as a function of a natural world, so that demands intuitively makes sense. Avoid using purely social reasons as explanations for demands.



Strategies you can use immediately, *continued*

Provide academic flexibility. Give the student reasonable choices in lessons and homework, such as how to take notes (written or drawn), which subject to focus on first, and formats for projects or tests (written versus verbal presentation). Involve the student in designing their own lesson plan, and incorporate their special interests.

Look for signs of sensory overstimulation. PDA students may become overstimulated in complex, busy environments, like a classroom or cafeteria. Overstimulation may precede a meltdown. Look for signs such as covering their ears, tired eyes, slowing down or speeding up, increased crankiness or silliness, and increased resistance. Check in or provide breaks as needed.

Provide an exit strategy. Give the student the option of exiting a stressful situation with a token or keyword. Sometimes just knowing they can escape makes escaping unnecessary.

Allow extra time. Students with PDA can become deeply focused in topics of special interest. Interrupt activities gently, with advanced notice. Be explicit with instructions, such as suggesting that they find a good spot to pause their project, save it for next time, to end the task in a few minutes. Be patient as they will often end on their own.

Don't force social interaction. Let the student observe groups first. Assign and clarify roles so that they can begin to understand how groups interact without the pressure of participation. Allow positive social interaction to continue when it occurs naturally

Strategies for long-term development

Reducing anxiety will be very helpful to the student in the short-term, but learning new coping skills will be the most useful to the student in the long-term. Any undesirable behavior must be replaced with a desirable behavior. Desirable behaviors must be taught, not simply expected. Below are some strategies to help a PDA child attain both freedom from anxiety, as well as techniques for self-control.

Build the relationship. This cannot be emphasized enough. The PDA student will simply not be receptive unless taught by someone who makes them feel safe, uncoerced, and unjudged. Check-ins can be used to support the student through difficult situations, like field trips and tests. Use humor frequently to remove tension from situations.

Teach social lessons. PDA children are autistic and need both social skills and knowledge about the world. Arrange a formal effort to teach them about classroom behaviors, friendship, and other social norms.

Teach study habits. Just like social skills, assume the PDA student doesn't know how to study. Teach them habits like skimming ahead in a book or assignment; outlining; journaling; identifying the purpose/topic; and talking it out loud throughout. Give them freedom to engage in these activities.

Teach failure. PDA children are perfectionists due to anxiety. Without embarrassing the PDA student, teach the value and safety of failing, as well as second chances.

Teach positive control. Teach the PDA student how to get what they want with positive control techniques. Strategy, logic, and debate are good tools for the PDA student. Arrange for success. For example, teach them that if they say please and start with a compliment, they're more likely to get what they want. Enlist another teacher as an accomplice to say yes to reasonable requests. Continue adding new, positive skills as they catch on.

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