

# Understanding PDA at Home, at School, and in the Playroom

A comprehensive guide about Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA), to be used by parents, teachers, and therapists.

\* Please note that each section is also summarised in dot-points, for brains that find consuming information this way easier.

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## Introduction

For many of us, life comes with its daily demands: getting ready for school, completing tasks, or following a routine. But for children with Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA), these ordinary demands can feel overwhelming. It's not about being stubborn or difficult; it's about their brain's response to stress. When faced with a demand, children with PDA can experience high levels of anxiety, which leads them to avoid or resist the request, sometimes in ways that might seem puzzling or frustrating.

PDA is a unique profile within the autism spectrum, and understanding it means seeing beyond the behaviour and into the emotional and neurological experience of the child. These children often crave control over their environment because it helps them to manage the anxiety that they feel in response to demands. When they don't have control, things can get tricky: both for them and for the adults that are trying to help.

In this resource, we'll explore what PDA looks like in different environments: at home, at school, and in the play therapy room. Most importantly, we'll talk about how we can better support these children, focusing not on the behaviours they display, but on their potential, their needs, and the amazing strengths they have.

## What is Pathological Demand Avoidance?

### Overview

Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is often misunderstood, but at its core, it's about anxiety; anxiety triggered by demands, even seemingly simple ones. Tasks like getting dressed, finishing homework, or following a routine may be manageable for most children, but for those with PDA, they can feel overwhelming and unmanageable. This isn't about being stubborn or defiant; it's the nervous system's response to the world, which feels threatening to them.

PDA is a part of the autistic experience, though it differs from other presentations of autism. Children with PDA experience the world through a heightened sense of anxiety, feeling constantly under threat. They process sensory and emotional data in a way that makes even small requests feel overwhelming. This creates an intense need to control their environment to feel safe. When they can't control what's happening around them, their nervous system goes into protective mode, which may look like avoidance, withdrawal, or aggression. Aggression in this context isn't about being "bad" or "difficult," but rather a response to emotional overload and the need to regain a sense of safety.

When faced with demands, children with PDA may react by avoiding tasks, withdrawing, becoming agitated, or retreating. In more intense moments, their anxiety can lead to aggression, which is part of their attempt to regain control in an overwhelming world that often feels out of their hands.



These reactions reflect the child's strength and resilience, not weakness. It takes immense effort to navigate a world that feels constantly overwhelming, and the child's desire for control is not about seeking power but about creating stability in a chaotic environment. Recognising this anxiety-driven behaviour helps shift our perspective, allowing us to approach children with PDA with patience, empathy, and flexibility.

Understanding PDA means recognising that it's not about opposition but about the child's instinctual response to feeling unsafe. Traditional responses, like imposing more demands or expecting compliance, only increase the child's anxiety. Instead, we need to focus on creating an environment where the child feels safe, understood, and empowered. Using supportive language, setting boundaries that are empowering, offering choices, and reducing pressure are essential strategies in helping children with PDA manage their anxiety and thrive.

Ultimately, understanding PDA is about seeing the child for who they truly are: strong, resilient, and uniquely experiencing the world. By adopting these approaches, we can help them navigate their challenges with confidence and feel in control of their responses.

#### ➤ What is PDA?

- **PDA is a part of the autism spectrum** and is characterised by an intense need to avoid demands, often driven by anxiety.
- **Children with PDA experience the world as threatening**, which leads to a need for control in order to feel safe.
- **Demand avoidance is a response to anxiety**, not intentional defiance. It's the child's nervous system reacting to overwhelming feelings of fear or stress.
- **PDA involves a complex mix of sensory, emotional, and social factors**, all of which contribute to the child's resistance to demands and expectations.
- **Children with PDA often experience high levels of anxiety**, and their behaviour is a way of coping with that anxiety, which may include avoidance, resistance, or even aggression.

#### ➤ What PDA is NOT

- **PDA is NOT just defiance or stubbornness.** It's an anxiety-driven response to perceived threats or demands, not intentional opposition.
- **PDA is NOT simply a behavioural problem.** It's a complex neurodevelopmental response to stress, often rooted in sensory overload, anxiety, and a need for control.
- **PDA is NOT about attention-seeking behaviour.** Children with PDA are often deeply overwhelmed, and their demand avoidance is a way to protect themselves from feelings of helplessness.

- **PDA is NOT a result of poor parenting.** It's important to recognise that the behaviours stem from a neurological difference, not from a lack of discipline or inconsistent boundaries.

## Neuropsychological Insights into PDA

Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is not just about behavioural challenges; it's rooted in the way the child's brain processes information, especially under stress. Understanding this from a neuropsychological perspective can deepen our understanding of the child's experience, offering insight into how their brain responds to the world and why certain behaviours emerge.

### The Role of the Anxious Brain

At the core of PDA is anxiety, but it's not just a passing feeling. It's neurologically driven. The child's nervous system is in a state of heightened alertness, constantly assessing their environment as threatening. This leads to what is called the fight-flight-freeze-fawn response, which is controlled by the amygdala, the brain's emotional processing centre. In children with PDA, this anxiety response can become disproportionate to the demand or request, triggering an overwhelming sense of being cornered or trapped.

Because their emotional regulation systems are heightened, they may struggle to process even everyday tasks in a calm way. The prefrontal cortex, which helps with executive function, such as planning, decision-making, and impulse control, might not be able to override the emotional responses triggered by the amygdala, making it harder for them to engage with demands in a typical manner.

### Demand Avoidance as a Coping Mechanism

For children with PDA, avoiding demands becomes a protective strategy. When faced with a demand, their brain essentially goes into survival mode, as if a threat is looming. This is often misinterpreted as defiance, but instead is a deep-rooted coping mechanism that has developed to avoid the emotional and physical distress caused by demands.

From a neuropsychological perspective, avoidance behaviours (such as refusal or aggression) are a self-regulation strategy that children use to cope with intense stress. It's their way of trying to regain a sense of control and calm. The child may not have the neurological capacity to make decisions or respond flexibly when the demand is perceived as a threat, so they resort to these behaviours as a way to reduce immediate distress.

### Sensory Processing Differences

Children with PDA often experience heightened sensory sensitivity. Sensory processing issues are common in autism, but in PDA, this sensory overload can exacerbate anxiety and



resistance to demands. For instance, the sensory input in a classroom: bright lights, noise, or even the feel of certain fabrics, can feel intolerable, intensifying the child's emotional response to the demand itself. This is why a low-demand approach, with sensory regulation strategies, is essential for managing their anxiety.

## The Role of Co-Regulation

Given the child's heightened state of anxiety and emotional dysregulation, co-regulation is vital in supporting a child with PDA. Co-regulation involves the adult's calm and predictable presence helping the child to regulate their emotions. The mirror neuron system, which helps humans understand and reflect the emotions of others, plays a key role here. When a child with PDA is in emotional distress, their ability to regulate themselves might be impaired. The calm presence of a trusted adult, however, can have a direct impact on the child's nervous system, helping to soothe the child's heightened state.

This is why the role of the safe person is so significant. The child with PDA needs to know they are safe and supported, which helps them begin to recalibrate their emotional responses. This type of emotional co-regulation helps the child develop the neural pathways needed for better self-regulation over time.

## Why Typical Responses Don't Work

Given that PDA is a neurobiological condition, typical parenting strategies or teaching methods that rely on consequences, rewards, or control can exacerbate the problem. This is because these strategies don't address the root cause: the overwhelming anxiety. For children with PDA, these typical approaches can heighten their sense of being trapped and reinforce their avoidance response. The stress of the situation is further amplified by the child's inability to override the instinctual fight-flight-freeze-fawn reactions.

In contrast, a neuroaffirming approach, which is based on compassion, patience, and flexibility, allows the child to feel safe and heard. By reducing demands, offering choices, and providing emotional support, we can help the child regain their sense of autonomy and control. This approach helps to calm the nervous system and prevent the escalation of stress, enabling the child to engage in a more regulated way.

### ➤ Key Neuropsychological Insights into PDA

- **PDA is anxiety-driven.** The child's response to demands stems from a heightened sense of anxiety, not intentional disobedience.
- **The amygdala (emotion centre of the brain) reacts to demands,** making the child feel constantly threatened, triggering fight-flight-freeze responses.
- **Demand avoidance is a self-regulation strategy,** as the child attempts to regain control and reduce overwhelming anxiety.



- **Sensory overload can exacerbate anxiety** in children with PDA, as they experience the world through heightened sensory sensitivity, making everyday tasks feel intolerable.
- **Co-regulation is vital.** The child benefits from the calm, steady presence of a trusted safe person, which helps to soothe their anxious nervous system.
- **Understanding PDA through a neuropsychological lens** allows us to support the child in a way that respects their unique way of processing the world, offering them tools for self-regulation and emotional resilience.

## PDA at Home

### Overview

At home, children with PDA may seem like they are constantly resisting or avoiding demands, and it can feel incredibly challenging for parents or caregivers. However, it is crucial to recognise that these behaviours are driven by the child's anxiety, rather than a desire to be difficult. What might seem like simple requests to others can feel overwhelming and even threatening to a child with PDA. The child is not intentionally being defiant, but instead, their nervous system is responding to the anxiety they feel when faced with demands.

One of the most effective strategies to integrate at home is adopting a low-demand approach to parenting, which helps reduce the pressure on the child and makes their environment feel less overwhelming. This doesn't mean abandoning expectations, but reframing how we present them. For example, rather than saying, "You need to clean your room," which can be experienced as a direct command, you could say, "I'm so worried that the toys are going to break if we don't take care of them – can you help me make sure they stay safe?" This shifts the focus off the child and makes the request about something else, like protecting the toys, which can feel less threatening. Similarly, instead of saying, "You need to finish your homework now," try, "I know you have a lot of work to do, but we can take a break when you're ready. You can start with the part you feel most comfortable with."

When setting boundaries, it's also important to shift the focus to our own experiences and needs. It's about making the boundary feel less like a power struggle and more like a mutual understanding of each other's needs.

Aggression in the home can be particularly difficult to navigate. It's important to understand that this aggression is not about defiance: it's a safety response to feeling out of control. In these moments, the child's nervous system has become overwhelmed, and their instinct is to act in ways that protect them. When aggression occurs, it's crucial to prioritise safety and manage the situation by ensuring that everyone is safe. At this stage, trying to redirect the behaviour or engage the child in conversation will not be effective, as they are reacting instinctively and are not in a state where they can process or respond in a regulated way.



In these instances, parents may find their own nervous systems reacting as well, and it's normal for emotions to rise. The most important thing in these moments is to stay as calm as possible and manage the environment to ensure safety for everyone. Once the child's safety response subsides, and there's distance from the situation, you can approach the child with empathy and reflect on what happened. Focus on repair, not perfection. Acknowledging the upset and offering a compassionate, calm response afterwards shows the child that even when there has been conflict, love and connection will remain. This sends an important message to the child about managing conflict in their interpersonal relationships.

The way our nervous systems react to one another can have a big impact on how these moments play out. In families where everyone's nervous systems are reacting to each other, whether through escalation or withdrawal, it's easy to fall into patterns that don't lead to resolution. Acknowledging this and taking time to pause, take deep breaths, and regulate before responding can help break these patterns. The goal is not to "get it right" every time, but to create a safe space where everyone's nervous systems can start to calm and reconnect.

One of the most powerful things we can do for a child with PDA is to let them know that we see and hear them, especially when they cannot express their emotions in words. When their body feels confusing, and their emotions seem overwhelming, having someone who acknowledges what they are going through can be incredibly validating. Saying things like, "I can see how upset you are feeling right now, and I understand that this is really hard for you" can be profoundly impactful. It helps the child feel seen and understood, which can bring a sense of calm amidst the chaos of their emotions. By naming their experience, we show them that their feelings are real, and that they aren't alone in what can often feel like a very lonely and overwhelming world.

Another key element of supporting a child with PDA is offering positive reflection and feedback, especially when they make an effort to engage, manage their emotions, or take small steps toward coping with demands. When you notice the child trying – even if it's a small step – acknowledge their effort. For example, saying, "I can see you're trying really hard to stay calm right now, and I'm so proud of you for that" can have a powerful effect. Positive reinforcement helps the child feel validated for their efforts, not just their outcomes. It reinforces their sense of self-worth and encourages them to continue pushing through difficult moments. Celebrating the child's attempts, no matter how small, builds their confidence and shows them that even when things are challenging, their efforts are appreciated and valued. This approach not only helps the child feel understood but also fosters a sense of accomplishment, creating a positive feedback loop that encourages further growth and emotional regulation.

It's also important to recognise that managing PDA can be emotionally taxing for parents and caregivers. The constant adjustments, the unpredictability, and the feeling of being on high alert can take a toll on your own well-being. In moments of heightened anxiety or resistance, it's natural for your emotions to rise, and it's okay to feel frustrated or overwhelmed. Acknowledging these feelings without self-judgment is important because it





helps you maintain balance. You're not alone in this, and seeking support, whether through therapy, peer groups, or simply taking time for yourself, is vital. By caring for your own emotional health, you ensure that you can continue to be a stable and supportive presence for your child. Remember, it's okay to take a break when needed; you're doing the best you can, and that's enough.

### ➤ Tips for Managing PDA at Home

- **Use a Low-Demand Approach:** Reduce the pressure of everyday tasks by phrasing requests in a way that offers control and choice. For example, instead of saying, "Do your homework now," offer choices like, "Would you like to start with the first or second problem?"
- **Make Boundaries About You, Not the Child:** Instead of saying, "You have to clean your room," try, "I'm worried this toy will break if it's not put away carefully." This shifts the focus to your need and reduces the sense of being controlled.
- **Offer Flexibility and Control:** Give the child a sense of control by offering choices and allowing flexibility in how tasks are completed. For instance, "You can wear your shoes, or I can help you put them on when you're ready."
- **Recognise and Respond to Their Emotional State:** Acknowledge the child's feelings and respond empathetically, such as saying, "I can see you're feeling really upset right now, and I understand this is hard for you."
- **Stay Calm and Manage Your Own Responses:** When the child becomes overwhelmed or aggressive, focus on staying calm and safe. It's okay for parents to step back and take a break if they need to regulate their own nervous system.
- **Use Positive Reinforcement and Gentle Praise:** Celebrate small successes and efforts with praise that focuses on their strengths. Acknowledge their resilience, such as, "I see you made it through that difficult moment, and I'm really proud of how you handled it."
- **Provide a Calm and Predictable Environment:** Reduce sensory overload by keeping the home environment quiet and predictable. Use visual schedules or calm reminders to help them feel secure in their day-to-day activities.
- **Repair After Conflict:** After a conflict, focus on reconnecting with your child. Acknowledge what happened and express understanding with statements like, "I know things got difficult, but we're okay now."

### ➤ What Doesn't Work with PDA

- **Rigid and Demanding Routines:** Trying to enforce strict routines or rigid expectations without flexibility can increase anxiety and resistance in children with PDA.

- **Punitive Consequences:** Using traditional discipline methods such as time-outs or punishment for defiance can escalate anxiety and reinforce the child's need to avoid demands.
- **Direct Commands:** Giving direct, imperative commands like "Do this now" or "Finish this immediately" can overwhelm the child and trigger their safety response.
- **Escalating Pressure:** Increasing pressure or giving ultimatums like, "If you don't do this, there will be consequences," can heighten anxiety and lead to more resistance.
- **Ignoring the Child's Emotional State:** Dismissing or invalidating the child's feelings by saying things like, "Stop being dramatic" or "Just calm down" can make them feel misunderstood and increase distress.
- **Positive Reinforcement Techniques (e.g., Sticker Charts):** Techniques like sticker charts or rewards for compliance may seem like positive reinforcement but can often backfire with children with PDA. These methods focus on external motivation and can feel like another form of control, which triggers the child's need to resist. Since the child with PDA is already struggling with a sense of control over their environment, rewarding them for completing tasks can increase their anxiety and worsen avoidance behaviours, rather than supporting them in a calm, regulated state.

## PDA Impacts on Siblings and the Family Dynamic

Living with a child who has PDA can significantly affect the entire family dynamic, and siblings, in particular, may experience a range of emotional responses and challenges. Ruptures in relationships can occur, particularly between siblings and between parents and children. The constant adjustments required to support the child with PDA can lead to moments where family members feel disconnected or frustrated with each other. This is often compounded by the emotional toll of trying to manage the child's needs while maintaining connections with other family members.

Younger siblings often do not have the developmental capacity to fully understand why their PDA sibling behaves the way they do, even though as adults, we can recognise that it's not the PDA child's fault. The demand avoidance behaviours and need for control can be particularly confusing for siblings, who might feel like they are on the receiving end of emotional and physical reactions that they don't understand. They might wonder why their sibling acts out, why they seem to get all the attention, or why they don't have the same flexibility in behaviour. This lack of understanding can create feelings of confusion, isolation, or frustration.

Demand avoidance and control can even play out in the sibling relationship. The sibling may find themselves trying to manage their own emotions or behaviour to avoid triggering the



PDA child, leading to an ongoing power struggle or imbalance in the relationship. This dynamic can make it feel like there's not enough room for everyone in the family to thrive. Family members' nervous systems often trigger each other, as the heightened anxiety of the child with PDA, the parent's stress, and the sibling's emotional response create a cycle of tension and dysregulation. This can leave family members feeling constantly on edge, unsure of how to break the cycle, and uncertain about how to create space for everyone's emotional needs.

It's essential to acknowledge the emotional strain on parents and caregivers who are juggling the needs of the child with PDA, their own emotional responses, and the needs of other siblings. It can be incredibly difficult to navigate the balance between offering appropriate support to the child with PDA while ensuring that siblings don't feel neglected or emotionally overlooked. Parents are often stretched thin, and it's normal to feel overwhelmed in these situations.

To support siblings, it's important to give them space to express their own feelings without judgment. This might involve having one-on-one time with each sibling, validating their emotions, and helping them understand that their feelings, whether it's frustration, jealousy, or confusion, are normal and valid. Offering reassurance that they are seen and appreciated for their own uniqueness, and not just as the sibling of the child with PDA, can help them feel more secure. Creating opportunities for siblings to bond in a way that's separate from the child with PDA, whether through family activities or individual time with parents, can also help maintain a sense of connection.

For co-parents, it's vital to ensure open communication about the challenges each parent faces, as well as their emotional needs. The emotional load of managing PDA often falls disproportionately on one parent, but both parents should be supported equally. Checking in with each other about how to manage difficult situations and sharing insights about what's working can help prevent feelings of isolation. Ensuring that both parents take turns in moments of high stress, and that they each have time to recharge, is essential for maintaining a functional family unit. This will also help model positive emotional regulation for the children, showing them that it's okay to take breaks and manage stress in healthy ways.

Lastly, parents and caregivers need to take care of themselves as well. The strain of managing a child's PDA behaviour, while supporting other family members, can be overwhelming. It's crucial to seek support through therapy, peer groups, or even just taking time for self-care. Recognising when you need a break, and allowing yourself the space to step back from the stress, is key to staying regulated and present for your child and family. Practicing empathy towards yourself is just as important as practicing it with your children. By acknowledging your own emotional needs, you can foster a healthier family dynamic and create a more balanced environment for everyone.

## ➤ Key Takeaways

- **Younger siblings may struggle to understand** why their PDA sibling behaves the way they do, leading to confusion and frustration. They may not have the developmental capacity to fully grasp that the behaviour is not intentional but a result of anxiety-driven demand avoidance.
- **Demand avoidance and control can impact sibling relationships**, with siblings mimicking PDA behaviours or feeling like there isn't enough emotional space for everyone.
- **Family members' nervous systems can trigger each other**, leading to a cycle of tension, dysregulation, and emotional strain within the household.
- **Parents are often stretched thin**, trying to balance the needs of the child with PDA while ensuring siblings feel supported and valued.

## ➤ Tips for Supporting the Whole Family

### For Siblings:

- **Validate their emotions:** Acknowledge their feelings of frustration, confusion, or jealousy. Let them know it's okay to feel upset and that their emotions are valid.
- **Offer one-on-one time:** Spend individual time with each sibling to ensure they feel seen and appreciated, separate from the child with PDA.
- **Create opportunities for connection:** Allow siblings to engage in activities that aren't centred around the PDA child, to help maintain their own sense of identity and bond as a family.
- **Provide emotional support:** Help siblings understand that their role in the family is important, and encourage them to express their feelings safely, whether through talking, drawing, or other creative outlets.

### For Co-parents:

- **Communicate openly:** Regularly check in with each other about how you're managing, sharing insights into what's working and what's challenging.
- **Divide responsibilities:** Ensure both parents are equally involved, and take turns in moments of high stress or difficulty, giving each other the opportunity to recharge.
- **Support each other emotionally:** Recognise when one parent is feeling overwhelmed and offer emotional support. It's important that both parents feel heard and supported.
- **Make time for self-care:** Prioritise your own emotional well-being by seeking support through therapy, peer groups, or personal time to unwind. By caring for yourselves, you'll be better equipped to care for your child and the family as a whole.

## For Parents (Self-Care):

- **Acknowledge your own needs:** It's essential to recognise when you need a break. Parenting a child with PDA can be emotionally draining, so allow yourself to take time to recharge.
- **Seek support:** Whether through professional help, peer groups, or trusted family members, make sure you're accessing the support you need.
- **Set realistic expectations:** Recognise that it's okay to have moments of frustration and that perfection is not the goal. What matters most is creating a loving, safe environment where everyone's emotional needs are met.
- **Create space for self-compassion:** Parenting a child with PDA comes with unique challenges. Be kind to yourself and recognise the effort you're putting in. It's okay to not have all the answers.

## PDA at School

### Overview

At school, children with PDA may appear to be constantly resisting or avoiding tasks, and this can be particularly challenging for teachers who are trying to guide the child through the curriculum. However, it's important to remember that these behaviours are not about being deliberately difficult; they are rooted in the anxiety the child experiences when faced with demands. This anxiety can result in behaviours that look like defiance, but at their core, are a child's attempt to manage overwhelming stress.

One of the key strategies for supporting a child with PDA at school is to create a flexible and supportive learning environment. This means reducing rigid expectations and offering choices wherever possible. For example, instead of saying, "You must finish this worksheet before recess," you might say, "You can work on the worksheet now, or we can take a break and finish it later. It's up to you." Offering options helps the child feel more in control of the situation, reducing their anxiety around completing the task.

Another helpful strategy is to use differentiated instruction that takes into account the child's unique learning needs. Children with PDA may struggle with traditional teaching methods or tasks that feel too demanding. Instead of expecting them to complete the same tasks in the same way as their peers, try adjusting the difficulty or format of assignments. For example, providing visual aids, breaking tasks into smaller, more manageable steps, or allowing extra time for tasks can make a huge difference in reducing the pressure on the child.

Affirming the child's confidence in what they can and can't do is another crucial step. Acknowledging the child's strengths, even in small moments, helps build their self-confidence and reduces the fear of failure. For example, "I see that you're really good at this part of the work – let's see how we can tackle the next part together." Helping the child see

their own abilities, rather than just focusing on the tasks they are avoiding, can be a powerful motivator.

Building trust and rapport with the child is also crucial. Establishing a safe and predictable relationship with the child helps them feel more secure, which can reduce anxiety. This might involve having regular check-ins with the child throughout the day to ensure they feel supported, offering praise for effort rather than specific outcomes, and ensuring that transitions between activities are as smooth as possible.

One of the most important things a teacher can do is to understand that demand avoidance is not a behavioural issue but a response to anxiety. As such, it's essential to avoid using punitive measures, like detentions or reprimands, to manage resistance. Instead, work with the child to reduce the pressure of the demands they face, and offer support through strategies that help them feel in control. For example, instead of confronting the child about a missed assignment, you might say, "I noticed you've been avoiding that task. Is there something I can do to make it easier for you to get started?"

Creating a classroom culture of flexibility, understanding, and support is key to helping children with PDA succeed. This means being patient, offering choices, and giving them opportunities to feel in control of their environment. By doing so, you not only reduce the child's anxiety but also build a foundation for them to engage with learning in their own way, at their own pace.

Listening to parents as advocates is also essential. Parents know their child best, and when they share insights or concerns, it's important to value their input and not dismiss them as pushy. Together, parents and teachers can collaborate to provide the best support for the child.

Allowing the child to approach tasks on their own timeline is another vital strategy. For instance, letting the child observe an activity before joining in can reduce pressure and give them time to feel comfortable. This is particularly important for children with PDA, as the need to feel in control of their actions can be overwhelming. Instead of forcing them to participate immediately, offering the option to watch first can give them the space to decide when they feel ready to engage.

Understanding body language is crucial when working with children with PDA. A child may not always be able to verbally express when they've reached their limit, but their body language can provide important cues. If they are withdrawing, becoming tense, or showing signs of distress, it may be time to reduce demands and allow them to take a break or switch to a different task. Recognising when they've hit their limit helps to prevent the situation from escalating and allows the child to maintain some control over their experience.

Masking is another important consideration. Many children with PDA mask their anxiety and resistance by appearing compliant, but this can be incredibly draining for them. Over time, masking can lead to exhaustion and emotional breakdowns. Teachers should be mindful of when a child might be masking, especially when they've been managing overwhelming



demands all day. Recognising signs of fatigue, frustration, or emotional withdrawal can help prevent burnout.

It's essential to appreciate how much it takes out of a child with PDA to be at school all day. The classroom environment can be overwhelming, with sensory overload – bright lights, loud sounds, people talking, and movement – alongside the internal pressure to focus, sit still, and meet academic and social expectations. For a child with PDA, these demands often conflict with their need for control, making school an incredibly taxing environment. Teachers can support the child by offering breaks, reducing unnecessary demands, and recognising when the child needs time to recharge. This understanding, paired with a flexible and supportive approach, can help the child navigate the challenges of the classroom more effectively.

## School Refusals and PDA

For children with PDA, attending school can be an incredibly stressful experience. Many children with PDA struggle with regular school attendance, and school refusal can become a significant issue. In fact, approximately 70% of children with a PDA profile are not in school or regularly struggle to attend. The overwhelming demands of school, such as sensory overload, social expectations, and academic pressures, combine to create an environment where even the simplest tasks can feel impossible to manage.

One of the most important considerations when managing school refusal is ensuring that the child has a positive experience of school. A negative experience early on can lead to trauma, making it even harder for the child to return to school or engage with the learning process. For children with PDA, negative experiences can quickly compound into feelings of helplessness and anxiety, leading to an entrenched pattern of school refusal that is difficult to reverse.

To avoid this, it's crucial to set up manageable goals and expectations for the child, even if it means reducing their school attendance initially. Fostering a positive association with school can be far more effective in the long run than pushing the child into full-time attendance too soon. This might involve starting with shorter school days, allowing the child to gradually acclimatise to the school environment without feeling overwhelmed. It is essential to work with the child, their family, and the school to identify small, achievable goals, such as attending for half a day, engaging in a specific activity, or simply spending time in a quiet space within the school.

By reducing pressure and giving the child time to build confidence in a school setting, the process of returning to school becomes less intimidating. The goal is to create a positive relationship with school, one that is not defined by resistance and anxiety. Over time, the child can feel safe enough to gradually increase their attendance and engagement.

It's also vital to maintain a collaborative approach with parents, teachers, and other professionals to create a plan that works for the child's needs. Parents, as the child's primary advocates, can offer crucial insights into the child's triggers, strengths, and coping



mechanisms. Their input is invaluable when planning an approach that prioritises the child's emotional well-being, while still gently reintroducing them to the school environment.

Ultimately, creating a positive, low-pressure school experience and setting manageable goals is far more beneficial in the long run than pushing a child too quickly. With time, patience, and the right support, children with PDA can re-establish a connection with school that feels safe and empowering.

### ➤ What Works with PDA at School

- **Flexible Learning Environment:** Reducing rigid expectations and offering choices wherever possible. For example, allowing the child to choose when to take breaks or what part of the task to tackle first.
- **Differentiated Instruction:** Adjusting tasks to the child's unique needs, such as providing visual aids, breaking tasks into smaller steps, or allowing extra time to complete assignments.
- **Affirming Confidence:** Acknowledging the child's strengths and encouraging them, even in small moments, helps to build self-confidence and reduce fear of failure.
- **Building Trust and Rapport:** Establishing a predictable relationship with regular check-ins and praise for effort, not just outcomes, can help reduce anxiety and make transitions smoother.
- **Collaborative Approach:** Working with parents and other professionals to create a plan that meets the child's needs and ensures a supportive and consistent approach across home and school.
- **Offering Choices and Control:** Giving the child options in their tasks and activities helps them feel in control, reducing the overwhelming anxiety that comes with demands.
- **Managing Sensory Overload:** Reducing unnecessary sensory stimuli and providing quiet spaces when needed to help the child stay regulated throughout the day.

### ➤ What Doesn't Work with PDA at School

- **Rigid Expectations:** Enforcing strict routines or demands that don't allow for flexibility can trigger anxiety and increase resistance.
- **Punitive Measures:** Using consequences like time-outs, detentions, or reprimands for resistance or avoidance behaviours can escalate anxiety and make the child feel more trapped.
- **Direct Commands:** Giving direct, imperative instructions like "Do this now" or "Finish it immediately" can overwhelm the child and trigger their safety response.
- **Inflexible Task Completion:** Expecting the child to complete tasks in the same way as their peers without considering their unique needs can lead to frustration and resistance.





- **Overloading the Child:** Pushing the child to participate in activities when they are showing signs of stress or have reached their limit can lead to burnout and increased refusal behaviours.
- **Ignoring Emotional Needs:** Dismissing or invalidating the child's feelings, such as saying "Just calm down" or "Stop being difficult," can make them feel misunderstood and increase distress.

## PDA and Play Therapy

### Overview

For children with PDA, play therapy provides one of the few spaces where their need for a low-demand environment is respected. Unlike traditional therapy approaches that might rely on direct questioning or structured tasks, play therapy offers a non-direct approach that aligns with the unique needs of these children. Here, they are not expected to perform or comply with demands, which helps reduce anxiety and makes the therapeutic space feel safe.

One of the key benefits of play therapy is that it allows children to express their regulation needs in a way that feels natural to them. Children with PDA often struggle to express their emotions verbally, especially when faced with the pressure of direct questioning. Instead, they can use play to communicate their needs, explore their feelings, and engage with their emotions in a way that feels comfortable. This approach respects their need for control, allowing them to express themselves without the fear of being overwhelmed by demands.

In play therapy, children also have the opportunity to use the therapist's nervous system for co-regulation. This is particularly important for children with PDA, who often feel anxious or dysregulated. The calm, steady presence of the therapist helps the child regulate their own emotions, providing them with the opportunity to experience safety and calm within the therapy space. This process of co-regulation supports the child in developing emotional resilience, which is essential for managing anxiety in other areas of life.

Boundaries in play therapy are set in a way that feels contained rather than confrontational. For children with PDA, boundaries are essential, but they need to be introduced in a way that doesn't escalate anxiety. The therapist uses language that makes the child feel held and supported, rather than pressured or challenged. This approach helps the child feel secure within the therapeutic process, allowing boundaries to be respected without adding to their stress.

Play therapy also offers children the freedom to set their own pace, a crucial element for children with PDA, who are often used to having demands placed on them. By allowing them to take the lead in how they engage with the therapist, they gain a sense of autonomy. They can choose what activities to engage in, when to take breaks, and how to interact with the therapist. This flexibility fosters trust and empowerment, rather than creating a sense of restriction or overwhelm.



In play therapy, children with PDA are also given the opportunity to make demands of the therapist. In many areas of their lives, children with PDA are often on the receiving end of demands, which can be overwhelming and frustrating. In therapy, however, they can assert control by choosing how to interact with the therapist and what they want to explore. This experience helps them process their feelings about being on the receiving end of demands in other settings, providing them with a safe space to express and work through these emotions.

Self-expression is another key benefit of play therapy for children with PDA. Many of these children find it difficult to express their emotions directly, which can lead to feelings of frustration and misunderstanding. Play therapy offers them the space to externalise their inner world. Whether it's through drawing, playing with figures, or engaging in imaginative play, children are given the opportunity to express their feelings, whether frustration, joy, sadness, or confusion, in ways that feel more manageable to them.

Processing trauma is also an essential aspect of play therapy. Many children with PDA experience significant stress or trauma, often related to their experiences of demand avoidance, misunderstanding, or being forced into situations that they could not manage. Play therapy allows them to process these experiences in a way that feels safe and empowering. Through symbolic play, role-playing, or other creative methods, children can work through difficult emotions or past experiences without having to directly confront them. This approach can help reduce the emotional load they carry and support them in healing from past trauma.

The autistic experience, combined with the PDA profile, can add complexity to the challenges a child faces. Children with PDA may behave in ways that don't align with their sense of self, which can be confusing and frustrating for them. This misalignment between behaviour and identity can contribute to shame cycles and low self-esteem. Play therapy helps children with PDA process these complex emotional experiences and rebuild their self-worth, offering a space where they can reconnect with their sense of self and feel understood.

Finally, play therapy provides a safe space where children can express aggression, chaos, regression, anger, or disempowerment—emotions that are often misunderstood or penalised in other settings. These behaviours, though challenging, are natural responses to emotional distress and anxiety for children with PDA. In the therapy room, these emotions can be safely expressed, contained, and processed with the support of the therapist. This gives the child a chance to work through difficult emotions without fear of judgment or punishment, helping them regain a sense of control over their emotional world.

Ultimately, everything a child brings into the therapy room – whether it's their behaviours, emotions, or actions – provides valuable insights. The therapist, trained in understanding these responses, uses this information to better understand the child's world and emotional needs. By observing how the child expresses themselves through play and interaction, the therapist is able to gain a deeper understanding of their inner experiences, including what triggers anxiety, how they regulate emotions, and how they respond to different demands.



This understanding doesn't stay confined to the therapy room; it becomes a bridge for communication between the therapist, the child's family, and their school. The insights gained in therapy allow the therapist to work collaboratively with the family and educators to ensure that the child's needs are met consistently, both at home and at school. This holistic, team-based approach helps create an environment where the child feels supported, understood, and empowered, allowing them to thrive in a way that respects their unique neurotype.

➤ How can play therapy help?

- **Provide a low-demand space** where the child feels in control, reducing anxiety and allowing them to engage at their own pace.
- **Foster self-expression** by offering the child an outlet to communicate emotions through play, without the pressure of verbalising feelings directly.
- **Promote co-regulation** by allowing the child to benefit from the therapist's calm, steady presence, which helps them develop emotional resilience and self-regulation.
- **Set boundaries in a contained way** that feels supportive rather than confrontational, helping the child understand and respect boundaries without escalating anxiety.
- **Empower the child to assert control** by allowing them to lead the session, choose activities, and express their needs, which builds their confidence and sense of autonomy.
- **Process difficult emotions and experiences** in a non-threatening environment, using play to work through complex feelings and trauma without direct confrontation.

➤ What does play therapy help with?

- **Emotional regulation:** Helping the child understand and manage their emotions, especially in moments of distress or overwhelm.
- **Self-expression:** Giving the child a safe, non-judgmental space to express their feelings, frustrations, and joys through play.
- **Social understanding:** Supporting the child in navigating their interpersonal world by processing emotions related to social interactions in a manageable way.
- **Trauma processing:** Offering the child a space to process past experiences, such as stress or demand avoidance, through symbolic play or storytelling.
- **Building self-esteem:** Helping the child reconnect with their sense of self by navigating and processing emotional challenges in a safe, contained way.
- **Navigating control and power dynamics:** Allowing the child to experience autonomy and control in a safe setting, helping them process their feelings about having demands placed on them.
- **Sensory regulation:** Addressing sensory overload and helping the child develop strategies for managing sensory needs in a controlled and supportive environment.

## Strengths of a Child with PDA

Children with PDA may face significant challenges, but they also have many strengths that make them unique and capable individuals. When we focus on their strengths, we can better understand their resilience, creativity, and the incredible potential they possess. These strengths offer a deeper appreciation of their inner world and how they navigate the world around them. By recognising and nurturing these qualities, we help empower children with PDA to thrive.

- **Problem-Solving Abilities**  
Children with PDA can be highly creative in their approaches to problem-solving, thinking outside the box, and finding new ways of doing things. Their need for control can drive them to develop independent and resourceful methods for navigating challenges.
- **Strong Sense of Justice and Fairness**  
Children with PDA often have a well-developed sense of right and wrong, and they can be deeply passionate about causes that matter to them. Their strong moral compass makes them highly empathetic and advocates for others.
- **Exceptional Focus on Interests**  
When children with PDA are interested in something, they demonstrate extraordinary focus and determination. This intense interest allows them to become highly skilled in areas they are passionate about.
- **High Levels of Emotional Intelligence**  
While emotional expression can be challenging, children with PDA often possess a strong emotional intelligence. They are sensitive to the emotions of others, picking up on subtle social cues that others might miss, and this empathy makes them insightful in relationships.
- **Strong Desire for Control**  
Children with PDA's need for control is often misunderstood, but it reveals their high level of self-awareness and independence. With the right support, this desire for control can translate into leadership qualities and greater self-confidence.
- **Perseverance and Resilience**  
Despite the overwhelming anxiety they face, children with PDA show incredible perseverance and resilience. Their ability to adapt and push through challenges, even in the face of adversity, is a testament to their strength.
- **Strong Sense of Identity**  
Children with PDA often have a very strong sense of who they are. Their need for control, combined with their critical thinking and creativity, helps them form a resilient and authentic sense of self.
- **Ability to Push Boundaries in Positive Ways**  
Children with PDA have a natural inclination to question norms, which can lead to

greater creativity and innovation. Their willingness to challenge the status quo can bring fresh ideas and perspectives, especially in problem-solving or creative pursuits.

- **Insight into Their World**

Children with PDA offer us a unique window into their vibrant inner world. Their experiences of anxiety and demand avoidance provide incredible insights into how they navigate a world that feels overwhelming, often revealing creativity, imagination, and depth in their thinking.

- **Capacity to Overcome and Communicate**

When faced with barriers to traditional communication, children with PDA develop alternative ways to express themselves, whether through play, gestures, art, or other creative outlets. This adaptability highlights their resourcefulness and resilience in overcoming challenges.

- **Love for Safe People and Trust**

Children with PDA form deep connections with their safe people. Gaining their trust is an incredibly special experience, and it speaks to the strength and resilience of these children. Their trust is earned through patience, understanding, and a non-judgmental approach to their needs.

- **A Unique Sense of Humour**

Children with PDA often have a quirky, creative sense of humour that brings joy and laughter to those around them. Their ability to find humour in life, even during difficult moments, reflects their resilience and creativity, making them a joy to be around.

The strengths of children with PDA are often overlooked in the face of their challenges. However, these children possess incredible abilities, such as problem-solving, resilience, emotional intelligence, and creativity, which make them truly remarkable. By focusing on these strengths, we can better understand and support children with PDA, helping them navigate the world in ways that allow them to thrive. Their uniqueness is a gift, and with the right support, they can reach their full potential and show us just how much they have to offer.

## Conclusion

Supporting children with PDA requires a deep understanding of their unique neurotype, which presents specific challenges that can often be misunderstood. These children experience an overwhelming need for control and a heightened sense of anxiety, particularly when faced with demands, whether at home, in school, or in other environments. However, beyond these challenges, it is essential to recognise the incredible strengths that these children possess, from their creativity and problem-solving abilities to their unique sense of humour and emotional resilience. Focusing on their strengths helps to



build trust and confidence, creating a more empowering environment for both the child and their caregivers.

At home, a low-demand approach is essential. Parents and caregivers are often the first to notice when a child with PDA is becoming overwhelmed. By reducing rigid expectations and offering choices, parents can help ease anxiety and create a more supportive, less stressful environment. Setting boundaries in a way that focuses on the child's needs, rather than on compliance, is crucial for creating a sense of safety and trust. Repairing after conflict, rather than focusing on being perfect in the moment, is equally important, as it models healthy relationships and teaches the child that love and connection remain even when conflict arises.

At school, a flexible, supportive learning environment is equally vital. Children with PDA often struggle with the demands of the classroom, such as sitting still, focusing, or completing tasks. Teachers can help by offering choices, adjusting tasks to meet the child's unique needs, and providing a calm, predictable environment. Understanding that demand avoidance is a response to anxiety, not defiance, allows educators to approach the child with empathy, offering support rather than punishment. It is also important for teachers to affirm the child's confidence in their strengths, helping them build resilience in the face of challenges.

When it comes to play therapy, it offers an invaluable space for children with PDA to engage in non-demanding, child-directed activities where they can process emotions and experiences without the pressure of traditional therapeutic expectations. Through play, these children can communicate their feelings, explore difficult emotions, and work through trauma in a way that feels safe and manageable. Play therapy also offers children a rare opportunity to assert control over their environment, giving them a sense of autonomy and empowerment that is often missing in other areas of their life.

All of these approaches – at home, in school, and in therapy, share one critical foundation: understanding and respect for the child's emotional and regulatory needs. Children with PDA need (and deserve) to feel seen, heard, and safe. By embracing a collaborative approach between parents, teachers, and therapists, we can create a consistent, supportive network that prioritises the child's well-being while helping them navigate the challenges they face.

At its core, supporting a child with PDA is about meeting them where they are, offering them the tools they need to feel in control, and helping them to build the emotional resilience required to navigate the world in a way that feels authentic and empowering. With patience, empathy, and understanding, we can help these children flourish, reducing the anxiety and frustration that often hold them back, and providing them with the space to express their true selves.

### ➤ Key Takeaways

- **PDA is a unique profile** within the autism spectrum, characterised by anxiety-driven demand avoidance, a need for control, and heightened emotional responses.



- **Low-demand approaches**, at home and at school, are crucial for reducing anxiety and helping children with PDA feel safe and in control. Offering choices, flexibility, and understanding rather than rigid expectations is key.
- In therapy, children with PDA benefit from **non-direct approaches**, such as play therapy, which respects their autonomy and allows them to express themselves without pressure.
- **Boundaries should be set** in a way that feels supportive and non-confrontational. Language should be used to help the child feel contained and understood, not challenged or pressured.
- **Play therapy offers a safe space** for children with PDA to process emotions, explore their feelings, and work through trauma at their own pace, while also giving them the opportunity to assert control.
- **Collaboration with parents and educators** is essential for creating a consistent, supportive environment across home, school, and therapy settings.
- **Building trust and empathy** is vital in helping children with PDA feel safe enough to engage, whether with their family, teachers, or therapist.
- **Self-expression through play** can help children with PDA communicate and process difficult emotions, providing an outlet for frustration, sadness, joy, or confusion.
- **Trauma processing** is an essential part of therapy, as many children with PDA have experienced trauma related to their demand avoidance, misunderstanding, or being forced into overwhelming situations.
- **Emotional regulation** is supported through co-regulation with the therapist and opportunities to practice coping strategies in a safe space, helping the child develop emotional resilience.
- **Strengths of children with PDA** include creativity, resilience, emotional intelligence, a strong sense of justice, and a unique sense of humour. Focusing on these strengths fosters their confidence and supports positive growth.
- Recognising the **impact of PDA on the family dynamic**, including sibling relationships and the emotional toll on parents, is essential for providing holistic support for everyone involved.