

Understanding: Pathological Demand Avoidance & Oppositional Defiant Disorder

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION



Julia Kelly
Independent Milestones
Paediatric Occupational Therapy



Table of Contents

What is Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) & Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD)	3
PDA vs. ODD	4
11 Strategies for Supporting Children with PDA & ODD	5

WWW.INDEPENDENTMILESTONES.COM.AU

What is Pathological Demand Avoidance?

Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is characterised by an extreme avoidance of everyday demands and an anxiety-driven need to be in control.

Children may seem highly social and even charming, yet struggle with deeper social understanding or flexibility.

Common signs:

- Intense resistance to ordinary demands
- Using humour, distraction, or negotiation to avoid tasks
- Sudden mood shifts or loss of control under pressure
- Socially focused interests or “best-friend fixations”

PDA behaviours arise primarily from anxiety and loss of control, not from deliberate disobedience.



What is Oppositional Defiant Disorder?

Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) is defined as a persistent pattern of angry, irritable, argumentative, and defiant behaviour toward authority figures that goes beyond typical childhood behaviour.

Common signs:

- Frequent arguing or refusal to follow rules
- Deliberately annoying others or blaming others for mistakes
- Easily annoyed and often angry or resentful
- Difficulty accepting “no” or limits

Unlike PDA, it is believed that ODD is not driven by anxiety but by boundary-testing and reactions to perceived unfairness or authority.

PDA vs. ODD

Feature	PDA	ODD
Cause	Anxiety-driven need for control	Boundary-testing or reactive defiance
Motivation	Reduce internal stress and demands	Assert independence or challenge authority
Behavioural style	Negotiation, humour, avoidance, withdrawal	Arguing, refusal, anger toward limits
Response to pressure	Heightened anxiety, shutdown or meltdown	Increased argument or hostility
Effective supports	Reduce demands, collaborate, build trust	Clear boundaries, consistent structure

11 Key Strategies for Supporting Children with PDA & ODD

1. Choose your battles

As soon as you find yourself in conflict, ask "Is conflict going to resolve or escalate the situation?"

2. Use Distractions

Distract the child to something else in a calm manner

3. Catch the child doing great things

Praise positive behaviour – small wins like "great sitting!" reinforce success and build confidence.

4. Let them be your special helper

Give special jobs or responsibilities to build confidence, connection, and engagement.

5. Never take what they say personally

Stay calm and don't react – in the heat of a moment words are often not meant.

6. Strategies will wear out quickly!

Be flexible – when a strategy stops working, switch to something new.

7. Look at strategies to manage anxiety

Changes can cause anxiety – plan ahead and support transitions gently.

8. Offer clear choices with set boundaries

Give choices within limits to help them feel safe and in control.

9. Break tasks into small achievable steps

Keep tasks short and simple to prevent overwhelm and build success.

10. Find ways to connect and build a relationship

Connect through their interests – relationships make cooperation easier.

11. Use physical prompts rather than directly asking

Point or gesture instead of telling – it feels less demanding.