

A guide to PDA

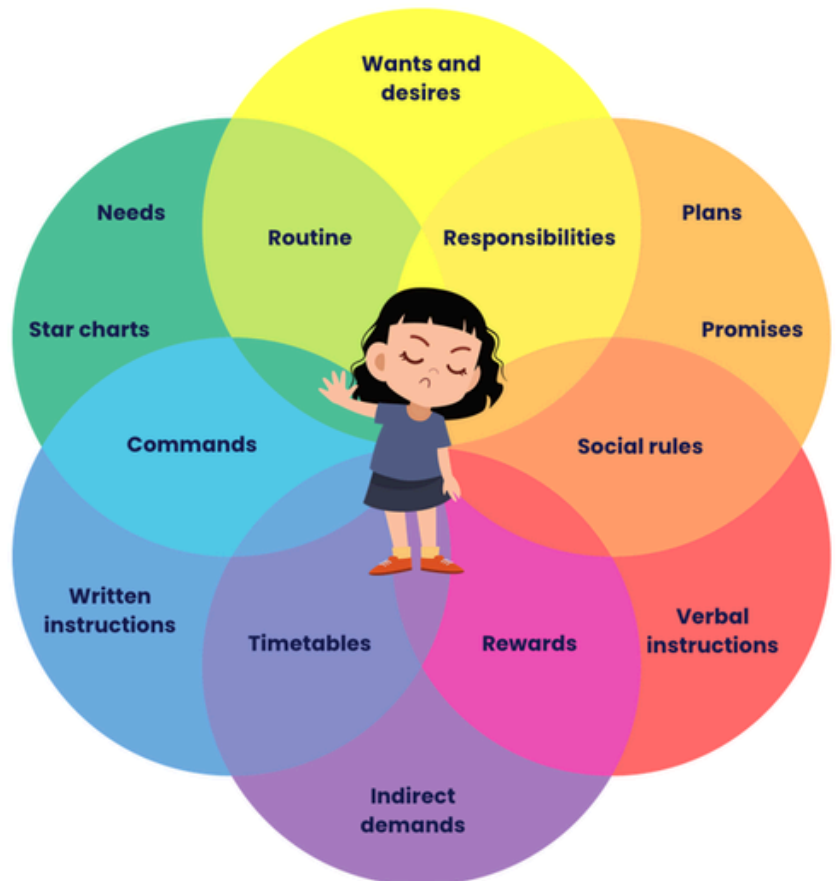
Pathological demand avoidance

PDA is a profile on the autism spectrum that is becoming increasingly recognised. In addition to autistic characteristics, those with a PDA profile may also:

- Resist the demands of everyday life through social manipulation and control, which is driven by anxiety
- Appear social, but lack some understanding (camouflaging/masking)
- Experience intense emotional swings and panic attacks
- Prefer fantasy and role play, and use acting skills
- Do not respond to conventional approaches with support, parenting and teaching

Demands are everywhere and cover everything in life. In PDA these demands are cumulative and can lead overwhelm. Some examples of demands are:

- Direct requests or questions ('get dressed', 'wait a minute')
- Indirect demands (praise can cause anxiety about future expectations)
- 'I ought to' demands of life (getting up, washing, dressing)
- Decision making (should I have strawberry or chocolate ice cream)
- Internal demands (needing a drink or the toilet)
- Things we want to do (hobbies, seeing friends)



Demand avoidance is not being able to do things at certain times. It is something we all do to a degree and for different reasons, but in people with PDA, the demand avoidance is significant and has some unique aspects:

- Many everyday demands are avoided simply because they are demands. The expectation leads to feeling out of control, which triggers anxiety and panic
- There can be a dramatic response to a tiny request
- The avoidance can vary depending on the person's capacity at that time

People with PDA may withdraw, shutdown, escape, or simply refuse to do things. Initially more social approaches are tried first. They may try to distract from the demand by changing the subject, procrastinate, find an excuse ('my legs won't work'), or withdraw into role play. If these approaches do not work, they may rapidly descend into anxiety and panic. Meltdowns in PDA are best described like panic attacks.

PDA isn't a choice, and it is lifelong. With the right understanding, help and support, it can become more manageable



How can PDA feel?

Wanting to do something, and not being able to, or needing to mask, is extremely tiring for people with PDA. Here are some quotes from people with PDA:

- "It can make the smallest task feel like a mountain"
- "It's like forcing 2 same pole magnets together, no matter how hard I push, I cannot overcome the resistance"
- "I want to do it, but something just stops me"
- "I can't cope with uncertainty; I need control of my own environment"

Panic attacks

Panic attacks, or meltdowns can happen when a PDA brain becomes overloaded and can't cope any more. Think of it like shaking up a bottle of fizzy drink and opening the lid. Not everyone reacts in the same way. Some people may shout, scream or hit, some may run away, or cry. Others may start arguing and demanding things they don't even want. Not having time and space to recover, can lead to burnout, which can take a very long time to recover from.



The positive PDA

People with PDA may find some things a struggle, but there are so many positives to having a PDA brain:

- Problem solvers – when you are always trying to find a way out of things, your brain becomes very quick at problem solving
- Understanding of others – knowing that what they show on the outside is different to how they feel, the person with PDA understands not to judge others on just what they see
- Won't give in easily to peer pressure – they know what they want and don't want to do, so won't be led by the crowd
- Creativity – they like to do things their own way, and are quick to come up with new ideas
- Attention to detail – they don't miss a thing! And will point out any mistakes/holes they see
- Protecting others – they have a great empathy towards others, and will protect those who need it

How to support in your unit

Conventional approaches are often ineffective for people with PDA and can even make things worse. The most important thing to remember is that behaviour is underpinned by anxiety.

You can also

- Identify areas of difficulty by using an [adjustment plan](#), and [wellbeing plan](#).
- Incorporating [visual aids](#) to reduce anxiety
- Encouraging the use aids like earbuds and fidget toys
- Allow for uniform adjustments
- Access [further support](#) if needed.

Remember you can get help with the costs for inclusive materials and resources. This may be available in your country and region, or with the [accessible guiding grant](#) from HQ.

The PDA society has developed a wonderful mnemonic to help remember strategies for support. Just remember the PDA PANDA!

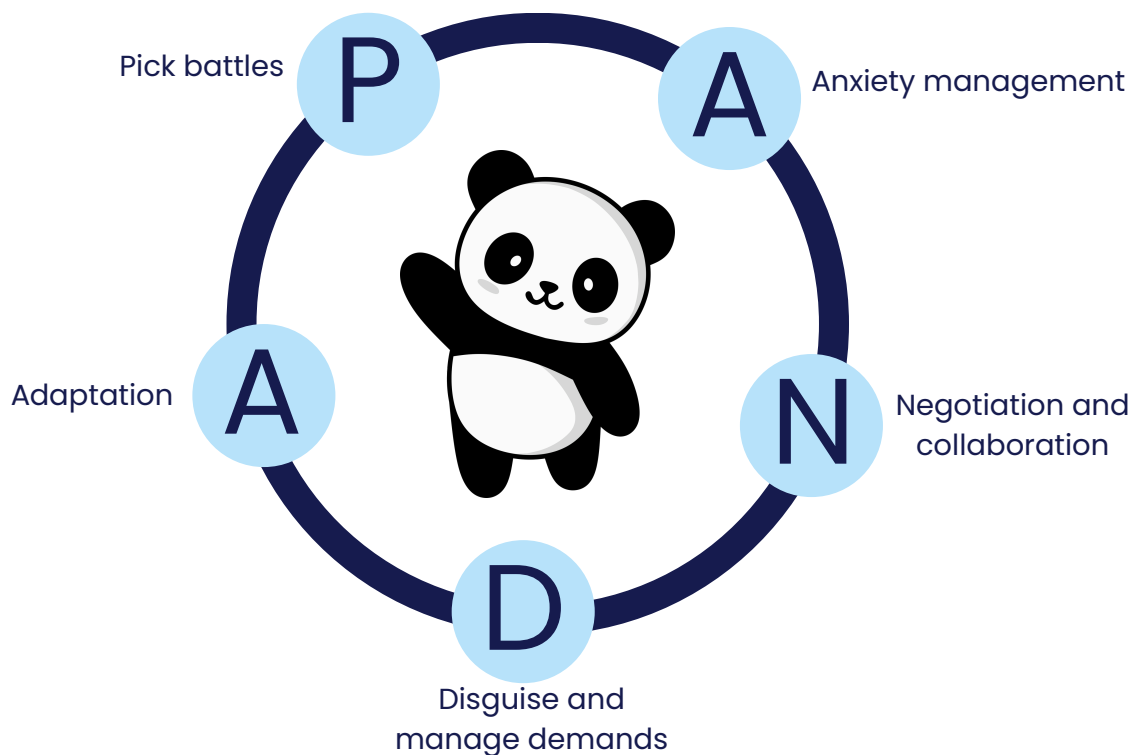
Pick battles – Minimise rules, enable some choice and control, accept that some things can't be done

Anxiety management – Try humour, distraction or role play, be flexible, allow time, have a plan B

Negotiate – Keep calm, negotiate to solve challenges, fairness and trust are important

Disguise – Phrase requests indirectly, monitor for tolerance and adjust demands accordingly

Adaptation – Reduce uncertainty, recognise anxiety, think ahead, treat distressed behaviour as a panic attack (support throughout and move on)



Useful contacts

<https://www.pdasociety.org.uk>

