



Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) – PARENTS GUIDE

WHAT IS PDA?

Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is when there is a persistent and noticeable resistance to demand. This can impact basic needs such as eating and sleeping as well as expectations such as going to school. People with PDA may be resistant to:

- A direct demand/instruction such as brush your teeth, put on your coat etc
- An internal demand such as hunger or needing the toilet
- An indirect or implied demand such as a question that needs an answer, having food placed in front of you that you are expected to eat, being given a piece of work to complete.

PDA is often associated with Autism (ASD) and is often not recognised on its own – rather being seen as a result of ASD and is therefore not often diagnosed as a stand alone condition or clinically recognised.

WHAT DOES PDA LOOK LIKE?

Avoidance can present in different ways. This might include:

- Giving excuses (some of which may be fanciful such as “I can’t do that because I am a tractor and tractors don’t have hands”)
- Using distraction or diversion. This might be changing the subject, distraction by giving affection or compliments, creating a diversion situation that requires immediate attention i.e. knocking something over.
- Point blank refusal and saying no. This may also involve physical resistance
- Passivity or withdrawal. This may involve the child becoming floppy, curling into a ball, running away and withdrawing into fantasy.
- Aggression. This is usually a last resort when other forms of resistance have failed. Aggression is also a panic response to an overwhelming anxiety.
- Controlling behaviour in social situations – trying to get others to do what they want.

WHY DOES PDA HAPPEN?

Evidence suggests that persistent and marked demand avoidance is linked to an intense need to gain control. There is also some evidence to suggest that PDA is linked to anxiety and an intolerance of uncertainty and needing to know what is going to happen in order to feel calm,

IMPACT OF PDA?

There are a range of ways that PDA impacts the lives of those affected. These can include:

- Difficulty getting to sleep, staying asleep and getting up
- Short term and long term effects from anxiety
- Difficulty with self care, personal hygiene, eating
- Experiencing panic attacks, intense emotional distress and difficulty regulating emotions
- Difficulties in relationships and social relationships
- Inability to attend school or work due to distress/and or burnout, which may result in exclusion or losing a job.

WAYS TO SUPPORT

It is important for those with PDA that they are recognised and supported. Some ways to support include:

- Using indirect requests (I wonder if you could.....)
- Remove direct demand language where possible. Don’t say “need, must, have to” and instead use language such as “may, could, would you like, how about or I’m not sure how to do this, could you help me?”
- Offering choices where possible so that some control is given over what will happen
- Maintain a predictable routine and talk through changes/timetables ahead of time. Minimise surprises where possible
- Use visual timetables to reinforce and illustrate routine/expectations
- Teach calming techniques and having a safe space to go to when feeling overwhelmed
- Be flexible –be prepared to adapt own expectations to accommodate suggestions of those with PDA
- Use social stories to help see situations from different perspectives and different outcomes
- Validate the feelings and show empathy
- Avoid potential stressors such as eye contact, touch and confrontational body language

OTHER RESOURCES

<https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/about-pda/what-is-demand-avoidance/>

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<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/demand-avoidance>