

Understanding PDA

A simple guide for parents and carers

The key idea

A child with a PDA profile may experience everyday demands as threatening or overwhelming, especially when the child feels a loss of control. The goal is not to “win” the demand. The goal is to reduce pressure, build safety and work together.

What is PDA?

PDA is commonly used to describe a profile of persistent demand avoidance. It is often discussed in relation to autism, although terminology and clinical recognition vary. A PDA profile is not simply “being naughty” or deliberately refusing. Demand avoidance can increase when a child feels anxious, pressured, uncertain or out of control.

What might parents notice?

- Strong resistance to everyday requests, even things the child usually enjoys.
- A big need for choice, control or doing things in a particular way.
- Rapid escalation when requests feel too direct or pressured.
- Negotiating, delaying, distracting, changing the subject or avoiding.
- Doing better when expectations are flexible and the relationship feels safe.

What usually helps?

Helpful approach	What this can look like
Reduce pressure	Pause, slow down and consider whether the demand is necessary right now.
Use collaborative language	Try “I wonder if...”, “How could we do this?” or “Would you like A or B?”
Offer real choices	Give two manageable options, including choice about order, timing or how a task is done.
Keep communication calm	Use fewer words, a neutral tone and extra processing time.
Prioritise connection	Regulate first. Problem-solving works better when the child feels safe and understood.
Plan ahead	Use predictable routines, gentle warnings and visual supports when these are accepted by the child.
Be flexible	Look for the goal behind the demand. Sometimes there is more than one acceptable way to get there.

When your child is escalating

- Lower demands and reduce talking.
- Give physical and emotional space where it is safe to do so.
- Avoid arguing, lecturing, repeated instructions or trying to prove a point.
- Use short reassurance such as “You’re safe. We can work this out later.”
- Focus on safety and calming first. Return to problem-solving after the child has recovered.

Remember

Behaviour is communication. Instead of asking only “How do I stop this behaviour?”, also ask “What is making this situation feel hard, unsafe or unmanageable?”

Simple language swaps

Instead of...	Try...
“You need to get dressed now.”	“What feels easiest first, shirt or pants?”
“Stop arguing and do it.”	“This feels hard. Let’s work out a way through it.”
“Because I said so.”	“I can explain why this matters, then we can choose how to do it.”
“If you don’t do this, then...”	“What would make this more manageable?”

A quick check before making a demand

- Does this need to happen now?
- Can I offer genuine choice or flexibility?
- Is the child regulated enough to manage this request?
- Can I use fewer words or make the request less direct?
- Am I prioritising the relationship as well as the task?

When to seek extra support

Consider professional support when demand avoidance is significantly affecting everyday life, family relationships, school participation, safety or wellbeing. A good assessment should look at the individual child, including communication, sensory needs, anxiety, environment, skills, relationships and the function of behaviour rather than assuming every difficulty is caused by PDA.

For parents

You do not need to remove every expectation. The aim is to make important expectations more achievable through safety, flexibility, predictability, collaboration and skill-building.