

# Understanding PDA

*What it is, how it affects learning, and how extra tutoring can help*

Pathological demand avoidance, a profile of autism · for parents and carers of primary aged children

PDA is a profile of autism in which a child has an **extreme, anxiety driven need to avoid everyday demands** and expectations, even things they want to do. Many families prefer to describe it as a **pervasive drive for autonomy**. It is not listed as a separate diagnosis in the main diagnostic manuals and professionals differ on how they describe it, but it is widely recognised by families, schools and the National Autistic Society. Children with a PDA profile are **not being naughty or manipulative**: they are anxious, and control is how they feel safe.

## What it can look like

### Avoiding ordinary demands

Resisting requests, even small or enjoyable ones, because a demand means losing control. Expectations they set for themselves can trigger it too.

### Clever ways to avoid

Distracting, negotiating, making excuses or saying “my legs don’t work”. These are signs of rising anxiety, not cheek.

### Seeming sociable

Often chatty and socially confident on the surface, but finding the deeper rules of friendship hard.

### Rapid changes of mood

Moods can switch quickly, often when a child feels controlled or cornered.

### At home in pretend play

Many love role play and fantasy, and sometimes become very absorbed in it.

## Why usual approaches backfire

Firm boundaries, consequences and reward charts work for many children, but for a child with a PDA profile they usually **raise anxiety** and so increase avoidance. Even praise can feel like pressure to repeat a success. This is why parents are often wrongly told to be stricter.

### Meltdowns and shutdowns

When anxiety overflows a child may shout, lash out, run or go silent. These are panic responses. Calm, few words and time to recover help far more than consequences.

### Strengths worth noticing

Imagination, humour, creativity, curiosity, a strong sense of fairness and real determination when something matters to them.

### Often found alongside

Other autistic traits, ADHD (see our ADHD sheets), anxiety, sensory differences and school avoidance.

### A note on the name

Some families find the word “pathological” unhelpful. Nicola will use whichever term you and your child prefer.

## How it can show at school

- Refusing to start work, or spoiling it once finished.
- Managing well with one adult, then struggling as demands rise.
- Masking at school, then meltdowns at home.
- Reward charts and sanctions making things worse.
- Growing difficulty getting to school (see our sheet on school avoidance).

*“Every child learns, some just need a different path.”*

Nicola, Mossgrove Tutoring

## Why one to one makes a difference

Classrooms run on demands: sit here, start now, finish this. One to one sessions at home, with a flexible adult, can adapt minute by minute to how your child is feeling, which a teacher with thirty children cannot.

## What sessions look like

- **Low demand, high interest:** learning wrapped in games, challenges and your child's passions.
- **Indirect language:** "I wonder how we could..." rather than "do this now".
- **Real choices:** what to start with, where to sit, pencil or keyboard.
- **Collaboration, not compliance:** sometimes your child gets to be the teacher.
- **Novelty and humour,** which lower anxiety and keep demands in the background.
- **Flexible plans:** on high anxiety days, less work and more connection.

## Trust comes first

For a child with a PDA profile the relationship is everything. Early sessions may look a lot like play. That is deliberate: once your child feels safe and in control, learning follows.

## Working together

You know your child best. Before starting, Nicola will ask what has happened so far, what helps and what makes things worse. A short update follows each session, and with your permission she can link with your child's teacher or SENCo so that everyone is working to the same plan.

### Being realistic

Tutoring does not change PDA and should not try to make your child more compliant. Progress is often uneven, with good weeks and hard ones. It is not a substitute for the support your child is entitled to at school.

## Small things that help at home

- **Pick your battles:** keep a few essential rules and let the rest go.
- **Anxiety first:** lower it before asking anything; demands can wait.
- **Negotiate** and share control wherever you can.
- **Disguise demands:** "I bet you can't...", or doing it together.
- **Adapt:** what worked yesterday may not work today, and that is normal.

These ideas follow the PDA Society's PANDA approach.

## If you are looking for a diagnosis

Talk to your GP or your child's school SENCo. In the UK PDA is usually identified, if at all, during an autism assessment, and reports may say "autism with a demand avoidant profile". **Your child does not need a diagnosis to receive SEN support at school.**

## Where to find out more

**PDA Society:** [pdasociety.org.uk](http://pdasociety.org.uk)

**National Autistic Society:** [autism.org.uk](http://autism.org.uk)

**SENDIASS:** free, impartial advice on SEN support in school. Search "SENDIASS" with Gloucestershire or Herefordshire.

### About Nicola

Nicola has worked in primary schools since 2003 and has been a Higher Level Teaching Assistant since 2008, specialising in special educational needs, including running nurture groups. She uses Makaton and PECS and has completed autism awareness training.