

# ABOUT AUTISM AND PATHOLOGICAL DEMAND AVOIDANCE (PDA) PROFILE



Pathological demand avoidance (PDA) is best understood as an anxiety driven need to be in control and avoid other people's demands and expectations (Fidler, 2019). PDA is still in an early stage of being recognised and understood. It's not separate to autism but sits within autism as a behavioural profile. It's not recognised in the DSM-5 as a diagnosis, but you may see a report that mentions 'autism with a PDA profile'.

Each learner with autism and a PDA profile is a unique individual and adjustments to their educational program and learning environment should be tailored to their needs. When you understand the impact of autism and PDA on the individual learner, you'll be better able to adjust to their needs.

## Key differences between autism and autism with a PDA profile

The key differences between learners with autism and learners with autism and a PDA profile are they:

- resist and avoid the ordinary demands of life
- use social strategies as part of the avoidance, like distraction, giving excuses, delaying, withdrawing into fantasy or drowning out the request with noise
- appear sociable but demonstrate some gaps in social understanding
- experience excessive mood swings and impulsivity
- appear comfortable in role play and pretence
- display fascinations, which can be either positive or negative, and can focus intently on other people.

## Teaching strategies

Conventional teaching and parenting strategies tend to be less effective for learners with autism and a PDA profile. It's important to not only understand why this is, but also to develop alternative approaches that will suit learners with a PDA profile.

## Impacts of autism and PDA profile on learning

In a learning environment, a learner with autism and a PDA profile can experience:

- a desire to be equal or superior to others
- very poor emotional regulation that presents as extreme or sudden 'mood swings'
- conflicting feelings about success that may see a learner destroy their work on completion when praised directly
- meltdowns, shutdowns, behaviour that challenges or masking behaviour while at school.

## Strengths of learners with autism and a PDA profile

The strengths of learners with autism and a PDA profile can be:

- attention to detail and observational skills
- concentration that is free from distraction
- an extraordinary memory
- unique thought processes that support innovative solutions
- speaking out honestly and directly which can open helpful discussion.



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# AUTISM AND PDA PROFILE ADJUSTMENTS



## EXAMPLES OF ADJUSTMENTS



### Indirect language

Use indirect language to avoid demands such as:

- physical prompts – tapping a chair instead of saying ‘you need to sit down’
- visual prompts – in the order that things are done rather than a ‘first this, then that’ approach
- telling another learner what to do – ‘Please remember the rules about not running in this area’
- using role play – communicate through a favourite toy or by adopting the persona of a favourite character.



### Rewards and praise

Understand that rewards and praise are not as effective for learners with a PDA profile as they can create additional demands or magnify when something isn’t achieved. Rewards and praise that may work are surprise rewards that are given immediately, rewards that are tangible (rather than stickers) and rewards that matter to the learner (linked to their special interests or free time to pursue an activity of their choice).



### Boundaries and control

- Limit the number of boundaries and allow the learner to feel in control wherever possible.
- Allow the learner a sense of control and be prepared to negotiate (start high and allow the learner to feel that they have won).
- Pose open problem-solving questions to the learner and work on a collaborative solution together.



### Talking to the learner

- Focus on results rather than the learner. For example: ‘what an informative piece of work’ rather than ‘well done for working so hard’.
- Use humour, distraction or novelty to create a change in direction that feels like a bonus or benefit for the learner.
- Provide choices, such as ‘would you like to use the whiteboard or the sand for your spelling?’ but ensure both choices are positive.
- Praise indirectly or to a third party in your learner’s earshot.