

Pathological Demand Avoidance is usually understood to be a refusal to complete a task or activity. However, this is often caused by the person's interpretation of the question or instruction. High anxiety levels and feeling that they are not in control leads people with PDA to avoid and refuse any requests that are made too assertively. This can mean that they avoid tasks and activities that they would otherwise enjoy. This can sometimes be upsetting for the person with PDA because they want to take part or complete the action. Additionally, if it involves pleasing others, the specific instruction removes the ability to do so by choice. This can give the impression that they are being deliberately inconsistent, and this can be frustrating to those trying to support them. Below are some suggestions for adapting communication to better support people with PDA.

Allow the option of saying no

Using non-negotiable words gives the sense that you have made a decision and there is no other option so you should avoid this where possible.

Avoid using 'demand' words such as:

- Need
- Must/Must Not
- Will/Won't
- Can't
- Now
- By (a time/date)

It is important to the person with PDA that they have some control, and this can be done by making requests instead of demands.

Try opening requests with phrases such as:

- Is it OK with you if...
- How do you feel about...
- Do you mind (doing/going etc.)...
- Would/could you...
- If you're happy to...
- When you have finished with..., could you then...

Allow initiative

A lot of the time, people with PDA have a high level of social desire. They often enjoy making others happy or surprising them by doing things that they know they would like.

However, by asking for something or reminding the person that they need to do it, we take away their ability to demonstrate kindness and consideration for others. This can be very upsetting, particularly for people who experience social difficulty and will prevent them from completing the action.

If there is a way to give a hint or a vague outline instead of detailed instructions, then try this first. Try to avoid showing there is an expectation.

Example

Instead of 'Get your dad a present for his birthday next week', say 'I'm really looking forward to seeing what you've bought for Dad's birthday next week!'

Share the responsibility

In addition to pleasing others, feeling part of a team is important. If there are several aspects to a task, working together or sharing the responsibility can help to make the person feel useful and needed.

Try using words such as:

- Us
- We
- Let's
- Together

Showing appreciation and saying thank you, especially if you know that the task is difficult for them, will help make it feel like less of a chore next time.

Example

'I'm so glad you could come shopping with me, it was really nice to be able to go together.'
'Thank you for taking the time to help your brother with his homework today.'

Acknowledge the aspects that they can control

Many people with PDA do not enjoy receiving praise or compliments, and yet crave positive attention and recognition when they have done something well.

This may be because they prefer to be praised for things they have chosen to do, rather than something they can't control. Instead of commenting on a natural talent or feature, try finding something that they have opted to do.

Example:

Instead of 'You are so popular', say 'You are a very good friend for buying such a thoughtful birthday present for Sarah'
Instead of 'You are so clever', say 'Thank you for explaining that to your grandma, it has really helped her to understand'

You should also try to share these comments as your own opinion on the situation, instead of stating it as fact, which the person with PDA may see as untrue or even dishonest.

Example:

'I think you've tried very hard today. Thank you for doing that.'
'I really liked it when you helped me find my shoes.'

Create Choice

There are occasions when things do need to be done. In these situations, think about what the person with PDA can control, and introduce that.

The majority of the time, the activity that you want them to do is not an issue. The issue arises when they feel they are being given no choice, which makes them want to say no.

Example:

Instead of 'I want you to do some writing' say 'Which colour pen would you like to use?'
Instead of 'We're going out at 10.00' say 'How much time do you need to get ready?'

Show Reasoning

While direct, simple instructions are usually recommended for people on the autism spectrum, often this lack of explanation can make people with PDA feel as though irrational demands are being made.

Explaining both positive and negative consequences will give accountability and control of a situation. Where possible, use positive reinforcement rather than criticising the person or focusing on the negative.

Example:

Instead of 'It makes me feel cross when you hit me' use 'It makes me happy when you're gentle'.

Pick Your Battles

Decide on whether you **need** something or **want** it. Respect that everyone has different ideas of what is important.

If something is important, decide on whether this is because it is practical or emotional. If it is emotional, be prepared that this may not be seen as a good enough reason for the person with PDA to change their actions.

Explain that there will be occasions when you have to make a demand, but also that you will try not to make demands when you don't need to. This will mean that when there is urgency or a definite outcome needed, making a demand and not a request should have more impact as the person will know that you would not demand anything that wasn't extremely important. Be sure to explain why the demand is being made and why it is necessary.

Example:

'Your sister is having a party. I **want** you to come out with me this afternoon so she can have time to prepare without us in the way'

'There is a fire alarm, we **need** to leave now so we don't get hurt'

Useful Resources:

www.thepdaresource.com

www.pdasociety.org.uk

<http://www.autism.org.uk/about-autism/related-conditions/pda-pathological-demand-avoidance-syndrome.aspx>