

What is PDA?

A guide for those raising a child who simply cannot be parented in the way the world expects.

"It's like you're gaming and you have the main controller, and then sometimes someone yanks that controller away from you and you lose control and feel panicky."

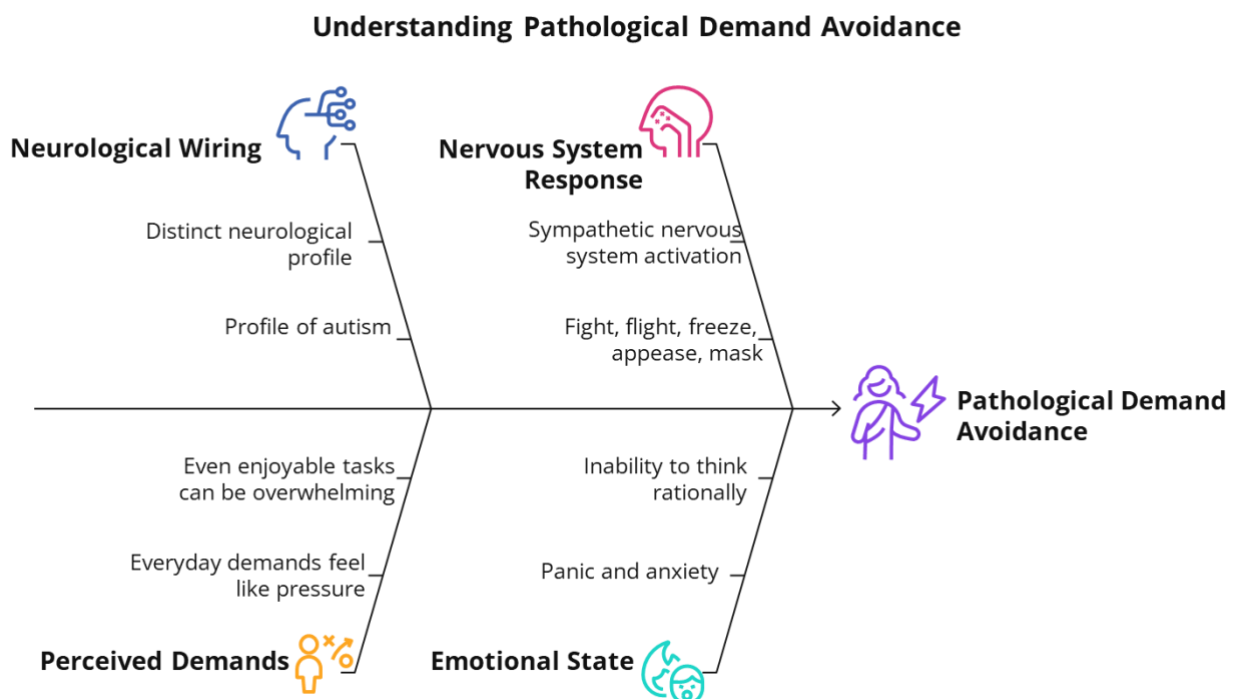
Things are feeling hard – maybe impossibly hard.

Everything that is supposed to work, everything that the professionals have said will work – just doesn't.

Maybe your child is swearing, hitting, melting down, refusing to go to school – refusing to leave the house? Or maybe they're quiet and shut away, unreachable behind their bedroom door.

You have tried sticker charts, having firmer boundaries, having no boundaries, giving them an iPad, taking away their iPad, trying to be less anxious, trying, trying trying...but there's still conflict. Still frustration. Still exhaustion.

Pathological Demand Avoidance, or 'PDA' is a *distinct neurological wiring*, a profile within the autism spectrum and it can turn everything we have been led to believe about how children experience the world completely on its head.



PDA is not about defiance or manipulation.

PDA is about survival.

For a PDAer, everyday demands, even things they enjoy, even things they asked for, can feel like pressure, like a trap, like danger. And when the world feels unsafe, their brain does what any overwhelmed nervous system does: it protects them. It activates the sympathetic part of the nervous system, the part that defends the body when threatened. It looks like fighting, or running away, or shut down or excessive fawning – it can look like masking.

“It’s like a great big whoosh of ‘NO!!!!’”

This is not “bad behaviour”: this is a distress signal. This is your child unable to think rationally because they are panicked, anxious and fearful. This is your child’s nervous system defending them from the sabre tooth tiger called ‘demands’.

Understanding PDA doesn’t mean giving up boundaries, or letting go of your role as a parent. It means learning how to lean back enough to really see your child. It means replacing the urge to *fix* with the power to *listen*. It means recognising that compliance isn’t the goal - connection is.

It’s also the beginning of something extraordinary: a relationship built on trust, respect and deep emotional safety - for both of you.

Let’s explore what PDA really is — not through fear or labels, but with honesty, compassion and the hope that comes from finally being seen.

What can PDA look like?

Let’s start here: you are *not* imagining it, you’re *not* making excuses for your child *and* – you are *not* a weak parent. You are living with a child whose brain simply doesn’t do compliance or respond to a fictitious hierarchy. For your child, automatic compliance is a threat. Hierarchy is completely made up – why should you have ‘power over’ me, simply because you have been on the planet for longer than me?

PDA doesn’t show up neatly, follow a checklist or fit into neat little diagnostic boxes (where an element of how your brain naturally functions and experiences the world is pathologised...!).

It can feel as though the world only ‘sees’ PDA when there’s a problem, a problem in the form of aggressive behaviour, or ‘refusal’ to do something, or – here’s that ‘d’ word

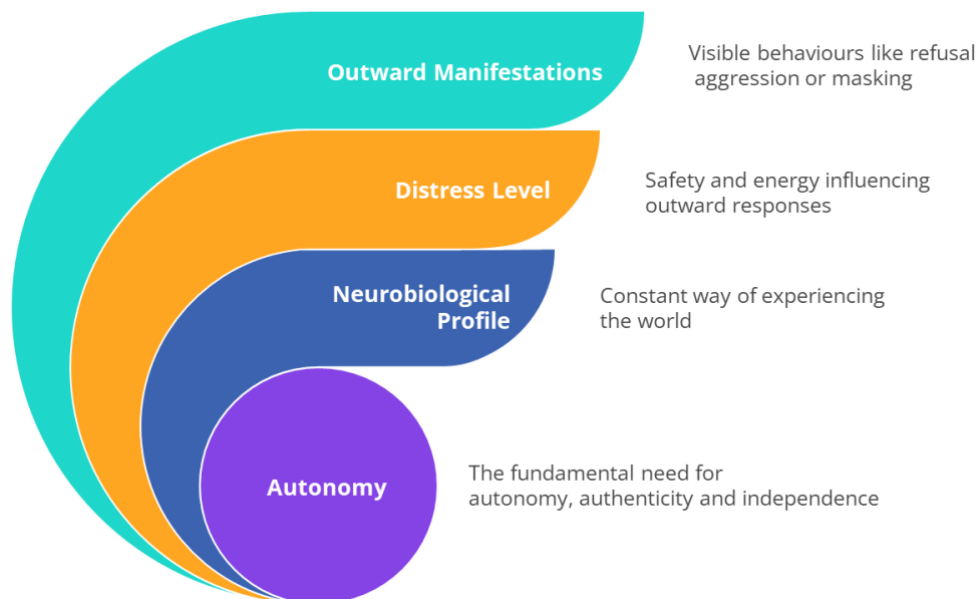
- *defiance*...as though your child is in control, as though there is a wilfulness to it. As though they are being manipulative.

But PDA isn't something that "shows up" situationally, like a behaviour that comes and goes, a switch that gets flicked on and off at will. It's not a mask that slips or traits that flicker in and out. It's a **pervasive neurobiological profile**: a constant way of experiencing the world, shaped by a deep-rooted nervous system need for autonomy.

What shifts – and so can cause confusion and misunderstanding of this neurotype - is how visible or activated the outward responses become, depending on the child's level of felt safety, stress, masking or demand load. It's there in how they process requests, how they relate to others, how they play, learn, eat, speak, withdraw, explode, demand, or disappear. It's always there: whether the world sees it or not.

Sometimes you will see the panic: the refusal, the meltdown, the rage.

Sometimes you will see the masking: the smile, the people-pleasing, the holding-it-all-together-being-the-*goodest-child-in-the-room*.



But PDA is always running in the background, constantly scanning for control, pressure, incomprehensible authority, loss of autonomy, even when *the demand is invisible to everyone else*.

What changes is not the presence of PDA, but the *level of distress*; the perceived sense of safety that your child experiences, as well as how much energy your child has left to hold it all in.

Regulated, your PDAer shows tenacity, charm, a strong sense of justice, extreme empathy, creativity, care, talkative, a sense of humour that can seem beyond their years, a self-taught, hyper-focused powerhouse.

Unregulated and the challenges may arise: their strong aversion to daily tasks, the use of social strategies and humour to evade situations, extreme volatility and emotional dysregulation, extreme anxiety, meltdowns, shut downs and an unhealthy desire to please another person – at their own expense.

Parents tell us *“They seem to go from zero to 100% in a matter of seconds”* – but are they *actually* continually operating at about 80% for the whole time and trying their absolute best to hold it all together?

So when they collapse in tears because their toast was cut the wrong way... when they scream at you after begging to go to a party... when they freeze in silence over brushing their teeth...it's not them suddenly “being PDA.”

It's them *no longer able to carry the weight of pretending they're fine.*

“It's like my body has two control centres, one is my heart and one is my brain. My heart wants to do something, but my brain says no and no matter how hard I try my brain just won't let me do it.”

This is not about oppositional behaviour. It's not about manipulation or control for the sake of it. It's not “bad parenting” or a child “acting out.”

It's a child trying to survive a world that constantly makes demands on a nervous system that is already working overtime. It's ‘can't’ not ‘won't’: no amount of rewards, threats or logic can override a nervous system in survival mode. Underneath the chaos, the control, the refusal, the resistance, the masking, the shutting down, there is a child trying to hold onto a sense of self in a world that keeps demanding they let it go.

Living with PDA doesn't feel like parenting. Not in the traditional sense. It feels like surviving. It feels like firefighting. It feels like everything is too much — and still somehow never enough.

“Parenting my PDA kid means I've become a full-time hostage negotiator, improv actor, and emotional detective — all before breakfast.”

When you stop seeing the behaviour, and start seeing the fear...when you stop interpreting control as defiance and start recognising it as a desperate attempt to feel safe: *that's* when things begin to shift.

Why conventional parenting strategies simply don't work

Let's just say it as it is: you have tried everything and nothing works. Other people – family, friends, professionals – have all explained that you just need to be 'firmer', give your child 'stronger boundaries', maybe 'stop being anxious' because your anxieties are making them anxious, maybe 'stop being too soft/enmeshed/inconsistent...'

You simply need to use sticker charts, sand timers, time out steps, use a firmer voice, have more discipline, have more conviction, use more intense punishments - maybe take their iPad away for a month, that should do it – and you should *definitely* go on a parenting course that will help you do all these things.

But.

They just don't work for long – if at all - so your thought becomes: it must be me. I am the parent who can't parent. I am the one getting it wrong when everyone else is getting it right...

You see, the vast majority of parenting advice, even the so-called progressive stuff, is rooted in a single idea:

If you set the right conditions, the child will *choose* to do what's asked of them.

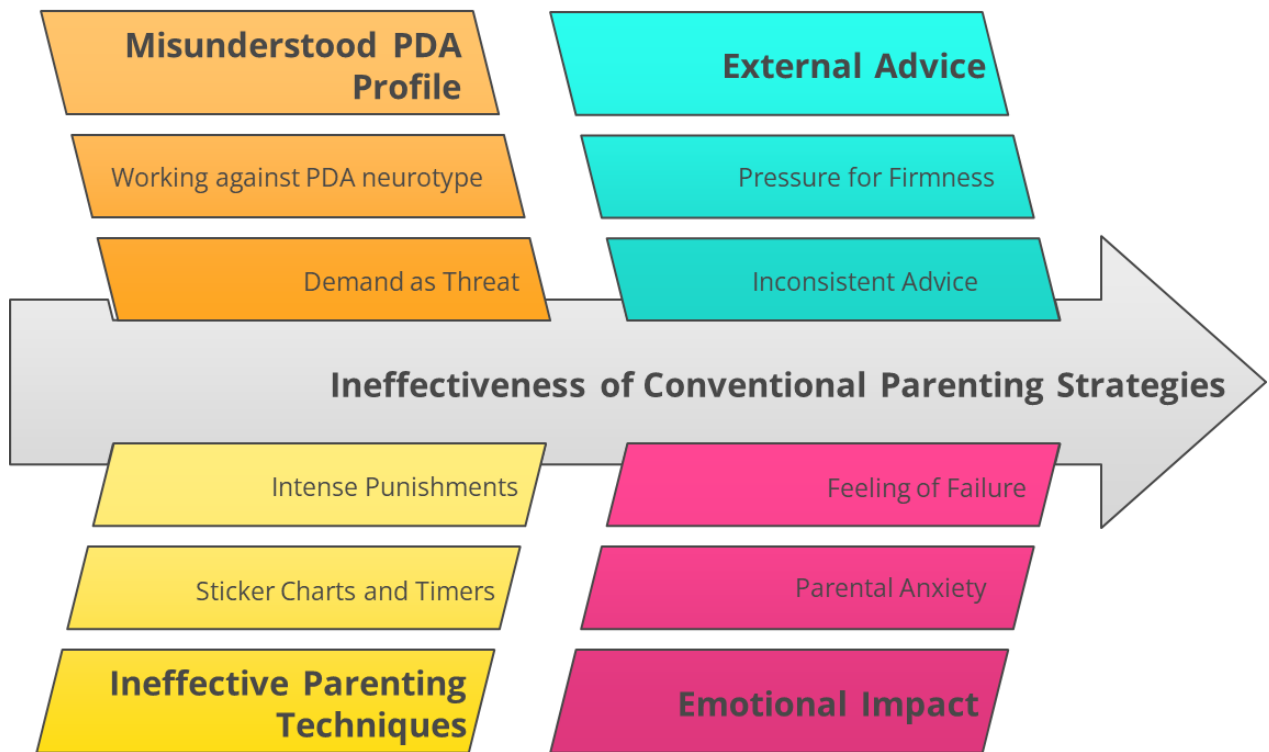
That may well be true for some children – but it's not true for your PDAer, because their brain is wired to protect them from **exactly this** kind of thing.

For a child with a PDA profile, a **demand doesn't feel like a choice. It feels like a threat**. Even those request that *seem* small, almost insignificant, common sensical - like brush your teeth, say thank you, get in the car - can send your PDAer into a full-body panic.

Let's be clear: this is *not* because they don't want to do it (although they may not...!). But it is fundamentally because the **expectation robs them of their sense of autonomy, agency** – and therefore **safety**: the very things they are biologically wired to protect.

Even praise, even encouragement, even the soft warmth in your voice when they *finally* manage to do the thing — can feel like pressure: not relief, not connection.

Challenges in Parenting PDA Children



Just more eyes on them. More evidence that they're being watched, measured, managed.

Even your joy can feel like a demand.

This is why everything the world tells you to do starts to backfire: rewards become weapons, praise becomes a demand – I now have to do the thing to that level *all the time* – and the more you push, the harder they push back – or they shut down completely.

They are **desperately trying to survive a world that keeps asking them to betray themselves** in order to be accepted.

You're not failing. You're meeting your child's survival instinct. You're parenting a nervous system on fire.

And every time you push forward with the tools you've been given — the “you just need to be consistent”s, the “natural consequences” and “firm boundaries” — it burns.

It burns the trust. It burns the connection.
And sometimes, it burns you out too.

So no, you haven't failed.
You've just been handed the wrong manual for your child.

The truth is, PDAers don't need stronger discipline or gentler phrasing or better routines.

They need **safety, autonomy, co-regulation**.

They need the adults around them to lean back enough to let their nervous system exhale.

Because once they feel safe — *truly* safe — the need to resist begins to melt.

So – how do I do this?

“Parenting a child with PDA often feels like navigating a world where conventional rules don't apply...it's a constant balancing act: staying calm, creative and flexible, while decoding hidden stressors and reshaping daily life around safety, trust, and connection rather than compliance”.

What Actually Helps...?

The answer is both simpler and harder than you've been led to believe.

You stop trying to *fix*.
You stop trying to *shape*.

You let go of the 'shoulds' so that you can start trying to *see*.

Lean back

You begin to gently step out of the power struggle, and into the relationship, so that you can **meet them where they already are**. This may be on the edge of their window of tolerance, terrified of being misunderstood again.

What helps isn't a strategy. It's a shift in the lens that you are parenting through:
From *control* to *connection*.

From *compliance* to *co-regulation*.

From *parenting as performance* to *parenting as presence*.

From how things *look* to how things *feel*.

It looks like...

- **Taking the pressure off.** Saying – and outwardly doing – less. Backing off when everything in you wants to lean in.
Not because you're giving in, but because you're giving space.
- **Using language that invites, not demands.** "When you're ready." "How can I help?" "What would feel okay?"
Sometimes even no words at all, just sitting nearby, steady and calm – co-regulation in practice – until their nervous system finds its way back to safety.
- **Creating rhythms instead of routines.** Flexible flows that honour your child's need for predictability, *without* rigid control.
Mornings that start slow. Transitions that are negotiated. Plans that are held lightly.
- **Letting trust lead the way.** Understanding that a child who trusts you will *follow you* more than they will ever *obey* you. And that trust is not built through outcomes — it's built through consistency, honesty, and a felt sense of safety.
- **Being the safest place, not the strongest authority.** Your child doesn't need a firmer hand. They need a softer landing. They need to know that when the world becomes too much you will be there. Not fixing. Not judging. Just holding space for the storm to pass.
- **Taking care of yourself — not as an afterthought, but as a necessity.**
Because co-regulation only works when you are resourced enough to stay grounded. Because sometimes you have to be their external nervous system, when theirs feels out of reach.

What helps isn't about having all the answers. It's about staying in the room when the answers don't come.

It's about listening deeply, not to *what* your child is doing — but to *why*.

It's about remembering that **you're not raising a problem to solve — you're raising a person to understand.**

And slowly — quietly, without fireworks or applause — they begin to feel it:

That you're not waiting for them to change in order to love them.

That love is already here.

Your one job is to love your child....