Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA)

Understanding the need for control, not compliance.

PDA is a profile of autism where everyday demands and expectations can create high levels of anxiety. It's not oppositional behaviour — it's a difference in how someone experiences and responds to pressure and demands.

The goal is not to remove all demands, but to remove the pressure around them and increase the young person's sense of control.

PHRASES TO USE

The way we phrase things can reduce anxiety, build trust and keep connection.

What to Say Instead
(Supportive & Collaborative)

"Would you like to...?"
Gives choice and control.

"We could... or we could..."
Offer genuine options.

"When would be a good time for you?"
Empowers decision-making.

"I wonder if you might...?"
Less direct, less pressure.

"Let's have a look at this together."
Positions you as a partner, not an authority.

"That's okay, take your time."
Reduces urgency and anxiety.

"Thank you for telling me."
Acknowledges their voice and builds trust.

What to Avoid
(Can Trigger Anxiety or Resistance)

"You must..." / "You have to..."
Feels controlling and increases anxiety.

"Stop that." / "Don't..."
Direct and negative demands.

"Do it now." / "Hurry up."
Creates pressure and urgency.

"Why won't you...?"
Can feel like blame or judgment.

"You're being difficult."
Shaming increases shutdown or meltdown.

"You have 5 minutes to..."
Time pressure heightens anxiety.

"Calm down."
Dismisses feelings and can escalate distress.

THE CONTROL ELEMENT

PDA is driven by a need for control, not defiance.
When young people feel in control, they feel safer and more able to engage.

Control reduces anxiety
Demands feel like threats. Choice feels safe.

Offer choice where possible
Real choices, not false choices.
Even small choices help.

Collaboration over compliance
Work together. Find solutions, not obedience.

Flexibility is key
Plans may change. That's okay.
Adapt together.

Build trust first
Connection comes before learning or tasks.

WHY A CHILD WITH PDA MAY HAVE CONTROLLING BEHAVIOURS

Control reduces anxiety
If they can control situations, people and outcomes, they feel safer and less threatened.

To avoid demands and expectations
By controlling, they may try to prevent or escape demands they find overwhelming.

Fear of criticism or getting it wrong
Controlling behaviours can be a way to avoid shame, embarrassment or perceived failure.

Past experiences
If they've felt misunderstood or forced before, control helps protect them.

To manage uncertainty
Predictability and being in control reduces the unpredictable, which can feel very distressing.

REMEMBER

- ✓ It's not about avoiding demands — it's about how we make them.
- ✓ Reduce pressure. Increase control. Build connection.
- ✓ When we work with PDA, not against it, young people can thrive.