



PDA in Schools — Quick Reference

What every teacher needs to know

Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is a profile of autism. This quick-reference guide gives you the essential information to support a PDA student in your classroom. Share it with colleagues, leadership, and school support staff.

What Is PDA?

PDA is characterised by extreme anxiety-driven avoidance of everyday demands and expectations. Unlike straightforward non-compliance, PDA avoidance is driven by underlying anxiety and a neurological need for control. The child is not being wilfully defiant — their nervous system is overwhelmed.

How PDA Looks at School

- Avoids or resists direct instructions, even reasonable ones
- Negotiates, argues, or diverts rather than simply refusing
- May appear engaged and capable, then suddenly refuse completely
- Highly sensitive to perceived criticism or unfairness
- May appear "fine" while masking significant internal distress
- Difficulties with transitions between activities or classes

5 Key Teacher Actions

1. Rephrase instructions as choices: "Would you like to start with the writing or the maths?" instead of "Open your book."
2. Reduce and remove unnecessary demands — every unnecessary instruction is an anxiety trigger.
3. Give advance notice of changes — even small schedule changes can cause significant distress.
4. Avoid public correction — always address concerns privately and quietly.
5. Believe parents. If they report significant behaviour at home, it is happening — even if you don't see it at school.

What NOT to do

Do not use reward charts, sticker systems, or consequence-based approaches. These do not work in PDA and often escalate things significantly. Do not attempt to reason during a meltdown. Do not involve other adults as "authority figures" during a crisis.



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The key message PDA children are not choosing to be difficult. They are anxious children whose nervous systems are working overtime. A flexible, low-demand classroom approach — with genuine warmth and no power struggles — is what helps.

For more detailed classroom strategies, see FD02. For support planning, see FD03. Visit pdaaustralia.com.au for further resources.