



PDA Meltdown Response Guide

What to do — stage by stage

This guide is for parents, carers, and school staff supporting a child with Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA). Meltdowns in PDA are not tantrums or wilful behaviour — they are the nervous system's response to overwhelming anxiety and perceived threat. Your response in the moment matters enormously.

Before you read on A PDA meltdown is a neurological event, not a choice. The child is not in control. Your role is to reduce threat, not to manage behaviour.

Stage 1 — Early Warning Signs (the Rumble Phase)

Before a full meltdown, there is almost always a build-up phase. This is your window of opportunity. The child may not be able to tell you something is wrong — watch for physical and behavioural signals.

- Increased negotiating, questioning, or refusals
- Rigid or controlling language ("you HAVE to", "no, never")
- Physical tension — jaw clenching, fists, stiff posture
- Voice changes — louder, higher-pitched, or unusually quiet
- Increased movement — pacing, bouncing, or sudden stillness
- Flushed face, wide eyes, or glazed expression

What to do in Stage 1

- Reduce demands immediately — drop what you were asking
- Lower your voice and slow your movements
- Offer a brief, genuine choice: "Would you like some water, or shall we go somewhere quieter?"
- Avoid eye contact if it increases pressure
- Do not attempt to problem-solve or reason yet

Stage 2 — Escalation (the Crisis Phase)

The nervous system is now in full threat response. The child may be shouting, crying, throwing objects, running, or becoming physically aggressive. Reasoning is not possible at this point — the thinking brain is offline. Your priority is safety and reducing stimulation.

- Stay as calm as possible — your regulation is their regulation
- Keep your voice low, slow, and neutral
- Remove other people from the space if possible
- Do not issue instructions, warnings, or consequences



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- Do not attempt to hold or restrain unless there is immediate danger
- Create physical distance — this reduces perceived threat
- Stay nearby but give space — say very little

Avoid these — they will escalate things further

Raising your voice. Repeated instructions. Asking "why are you doing this?" Reminding them of consequences. Bringing in other adults as authority figures. Removing rewards or making threats. Blocking their exit from the space.

Stage 3 — Peak (the Explosion Phase)

This is the most intense part. It will pass. Your job right now is to wait it out safely while reducing all external demands and stimulation to zero.

- Ensure physical safety — move objects that could cause harm
- Use minimal language: "I'm here. You're safe." — then stay quiet
- Match their energy level downward with your own calm presence
- Do not try to comfort physically unless you know they welcome touch
- Siblings should be moved to another space

Stage 4 — Recovery (the Reintegration Phase)

After the peak, the child will gradually return to their regulated state. This can take 30 minutes to several hours. Do not rush this phase — pushing for connection or discussion too soon can trigger a second wave.

- Offer something sensory and low-demand: water, a snack, a blanket
- Sit near them without making demands or eye contact
- Let them lead — follow their cues for reconnection
- When they are calm, brief and warm is best: "I'm glad you're okay."
- Do not debrief, discuss, or address the meltdown immediately
- Resume normal routine gently — avoid making the day feel punitive

About repair conversations

If you want to discuss what happened, wait at least several hours — ideally the next day. Keep it brief, curious, and non-blaming: "I noticed this morning was really hard. Is there anything that would help next time?"

After a Meltdown — For You



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Supporting a child through a meltdown is physically and emotionally exhausting. You need recovery time too. Where possible, take a few minutes to decompress before continuing.

Remember

- Meltdowns do not mean you are failing
- Your calm presence is the most powerful tool you have
- Each meltdown you navigate well builds trust over time
- Seeking support for yourself is not weakness — it is essential

This guide is a general resource and does not replace individual professional advice. If meltdowns are frequent, severe, or involve significant risk, speak with your child's support team or GP. For crisis support, contact Lifeline on 13 11 14.