



What to Use Instead

PDA-friendly alternatives to conventional behaviour management

Standard behaviour management approaches — reward charts, sticker boards, loss of privileges, time-outs — are typically ineffective for PDA children and often make things worse. This guide offers evidence-informed alternatives that work with the PDA nervous system, not against it.

Why conventional approaches don't work in PDA

Reward and consequence systems rely on the child's motivation to comply with external demands. In PDA, the anxiety triggered by the demand itself overwhelms any motivation to earn a reward or avoid a consequence. The more the system is applied, the more the child's autonomy feels under threat — and the more they resist.

Instead of Reward Charts

Sticker charts and reward boards feel highly controlling to PDA children — the chart itself is a visible reminder of what is expected. They also link behaviour to external validation rather than internal motivation.

Try instead

- Natural, spontaneous acknowledgement: "That was really kind of you."
- Noticing effort rather than outcome: "I saw how hard you tried with that."
- Shared activities as connection — not as rewards for compliance
- Celebrating what the child values, not what the adult wants to reinforce

Instead of Consequences

Consequences work on the assumption that the child could have behaved differently if they'd chosen to. In PDA, the behaviour is driven by anxiety that the child cannot override. Consequences add punishment to an already dysregulated nervous system.

Try instead

- Natural consequences where safe — let situations teach when possible
- Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS): address the lagging skill, not the behaviour
- Repair conversations after calm — focus on connection and understanding
- Environmental change: if a situation consistently triggers meltdowns, change the situation

Instead of Time-Outs



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Time-outs in PDA are often experienced as abandonment — the adult withdrawing in response to the child's most dysregulated state. This reinforces shame and damages trust.

Try instead

- Time-in: stay near the child while both of you decompress
- Calm corner: a voluntary, child-directed space for self-regulation
- Co-regulation: your calm presence regulates their nervous system
- Exit planning: teach the child to identify when they need space — before the crisis

Instead of Praise

Effusive praise ("Amazing! You're so brilliant!") can actually increase anxiety in PDA children — it raises the expectation for next time and feels like performance pressure.

Try instead

- Descriptive acknowledgement: "You finished the whole thing."
- Curiosity and interest: "How did you figure that out?"
- Quiet, low-key recognition: a nod, a smile, a brief comment
- Shared pleasure: "I really enjoyed doing that together."

Instead of Rules

Posted rules and rigid expectations feel like a wall of demands. PDA children often respond to rules with immediate counter-arguments — not because they are bad, but because rules trigger their anxiety-driven need for autonomy.

Try instead

- Explain the reason: "I'm wondering if we could eat at the table — the cat keeps stealing food."
- Involve them in making agreements: "What do you think would work for both of us?"
- Frame as shared interest: "We both want the morning to feel calm — what helps that happen?"
- Be flexible about the how — negotiate the non-negotiables gently



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The underlying principle

PDA children need to feel that they have agency and that adults are working with them, not over them. When they feel safe and heard, compliance tends to increase naturally — not because they've been managed, but because the relationship feels trustworthy.