



Friendship is often central to how PDA girls experience school and social life — yet the PDA nervous system makes friendship genuinely difficult. Understanding why helps parents and schools offer real support.

## Why Friendship Is Hard for PDA Girls

### The Demand of Social Rules

Friendship involves an enormous number of unspoken demands — reciprocity, compromise, sharing, waiting, following someone else's lead. For a PDA nervous system, all of these are triggers, even with people the child loves.

### The Desire vs Capacity Gap

Many PDA girls desperately want close friendships. The desire is there. The capacity — regulated enough, flexible enough, able to tolerate the demands of social interaction — is often not. This gap is painful and confusing for the child herself.

### Controlling to Manage Anxiety

When a PDA girl takes over games, directs play, or insists on specific rules — this is typically anxiety management, not selfishness. Control reduces demand. But it can drive friends away, which increases distress.

## What This Looks Like at Different Ages

### Primary School

- Intense one-to-one friendships that feel overwhelming for the other child
- Preferring younger children — lower demand, easier to be in charge
- Collecting 'best friends' but friendships breaking down quickly
- Appearing bossy or controlling in play
- Extreme distress when friendships end

### Secondary School

- Withdrawing from social groups due to the overwhelm
- Online friendships becoming primary social connection
- Friendships with older people who share niche interests
- Intense friendships followed by sudden breaks
- Social exhaustion being mistaken for disinterest

## What Doesn't Help

- Forcing group play or social situations — increases demand, reduces capacity



- Teaching social rules via direct instruction ('you should take turns') — this adds demand and shame
- Punishing controlling behaviour — it's a symptom of anxiety, not wilful selfishness
- Comparing her to other children's social success
- Setting up playdates without her input or consent

## What Does Help

### For Parents

- Allow her to choose who she spends time with — even if it's just one or two people
- Structure playdates around her interests and in environments she controls
- Keep playdates short to protect regulation — success matters more than duration
- Validate the grief when friendships end without rushing to fix or reframe
- Normalise online friendships as legitimate connection

### For Schools

- Avoid forcing group participation — offer genuine alternatives
- Provide structured social spaces (library, interest clubs) as regulation-first social opportunities
- Don't use peer feedback or group accountability — these are catastrophic for PDA girls
- Speak to her privately about social situations, never in front of peers
- Understand that apparent social confidence often masks enormous effort

### Low-Demand Conversations About Friendships

When something goes wrong socially, approach the conversation when she is regulated and in a low-demand context. Avoid interrogation. Sit alongside, not facing. Keep it brief. Reflect without analysing.

**She doesn't need to be**    She doesn't need to be fixed. She needs to feel understood. Start there.

## Key Takeaways

1. PDA girls often deeply want friendship but find it genuinely difficult
2. Controlling behaviour in social situations is usually anxiety management, not selfishness
3. Low-demand, interest-based, short social opportunities work better than structured group inclusion
4. Online and one-to-one friendships are valid and often more sustainable
5. The most important thing is to protect her sense of social worth — not force neurotypical friendship patterns



# Supporting PDA Girls' Friendships — A Guide for Parents and

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