

Autism and the PDA profile are 'dimensional' – meaning they vary a lot from one person to another and at different times or with different people – so parents/carers need a 'toolkit' of helpful approaches, tailored to each child, applied flexibly and reviewed regularly. For more detailed information please see:

<https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/life-with-pda-menu/family-life-intro/helpful-approaches-children/>



## The PANDA

Conventional approaches based on firm boundaries, routine & structure and the use of rewards, consequences & praise are often ineffective, and even counter-productive, for a PDA profile.

Low arousal approaches, which keep anxiety to a minimum and provide a sense of control, are good starting points when thinking about what works for PDA. A partnership based on trust, flexibility, collaboration, careful use of language and balancing of demands works best.

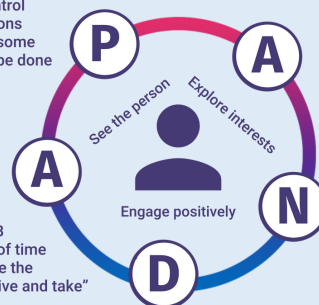
Our PDA Panda ambassador symbolises these approaches and the P A N D A mnemonic provides a useful summary.

### Pick battles

- Minimise rules
- Enable some choice & control
- Explain reasons
- Accept that some things can't be done

### Adaptation

- Try humour, distraction, novelty & roleplay
- Be flexible
- Have a Plan B
- Allow plenty of time
- Try to balance the amount of "give and take"



### Anxiety management

- Use low arousal approach
- Reduce uncertainty
- Recognise underlying anxiety & social/sensory challenges
- Think ahead
- Treat distressed behaviours as panic attacks: support throughout & move on

### Negotiation & collaboration

- Keep calm
- Proactively collaborate & negotiate to solve challenges
- Fairness & trust are central

### Disguise & manage demands

- Phrase any requests indirectly
- Constantly monitor tolerance for demands & match demands accordingly
- Doing things together helps

## Adjusting your mindset

PDA turns 'parenting norms' upside down, so your own mindset and mood are key factors.

- **Look beyond surface behaviours:** outward behaviours are just the tip of the iceberg with many contributory factors lying below the surface. The most important starting point is to understand and accept that a PDA child's behaviours are underpinned by **anxiety** and a **need to feel in control**. In addition, any or all of the following may also be underlying and require support ...
- **Re-balance your relationship:** aiming for a more equal relationship between child and adult, based on collaboration and respect, builds trust.
- **Keep calm:** try not to take things personally; accept that some things can't be done; treat every day as a fresh start.
- **Focus on the long term objective** of building a child's ability to cope rather than short term compliance.
- **Be flexible:** helpful approaches require creativity and adaptability.
- **See the positives:** focus on a child's strengths and positive qualities and engage with their interests.
- **Support and self-care for you:** being in touch with others who are having similar experiences can be enormously helpful.

Difficulties in processing language  
 Difficulties with social interaction  
 Confusion about emotions  
 Intolerance of uncertainty  
 Sensory overload

## Support tips for additional underlying difficulties

Give enough processing time so a child can make sense of what's said and respond in their own time.

Books, films, TV, role play & gaming can help a child learn about emotions, social dynamics & relationships, and develop understanding & skills, in an indirect way.

Collaborate & plan together to minimise uncertainty.

Sensory perception and sensitivity can vary depending on levels of anxiety, illness and environment.

A child may be hyper-sensitive (seeking to avoid a sense) or hypo-sensitive (seeking out more of a sense).

An OT trained in sensory integration can assess a child's sensory needs and suggest a 'sensory diet'.





## Support tips for anxiety & distressed behaviours

- Be vigilant in spotting signs that anxiety is escalating - act and adapt quickly to de-escalate.
- Anxiety can be expressed in many different ways - e.g. avoidance, anger, shouting, crying, laughing, not talking, boredom, tics, 'obsessing', skin picking, withdrawing, masking and lashing out.
- Work together with the child collaboratively & proactively to find solutions.

- Distressed behaviours arise when our capacity to cope has been exceeded and we feel overwhelmed, like a panic attack.
- These may include meltdowns, shutdowns, taking flight, physical/verbal aggression & self-injury.
- Keep calm at all times, reduce stimuli, give space & be aware of hazards.
- Afterwards, provide reassurance and recovery time with the child's preferred regulating activity.

## Optimising the environment

Just like giant pandas, PDA children can thrive in the right environment. Top tips include:

-  **Balancing tolerance and demands:** a child's ability to cope with demands will vary from day to day and from hour to hour, so make sure to adjust the 'input' of demands accordingly (remembering that demands are many and varied) and build in plenty of 'downtime' to give space for anxiety to lessen and tolerance levels to replenish. Timing is crucial!
-  **Agreeing non-negotiable boundaries:** these will vary from household to household and from child to child. For some, the barest minimum of non-negotiable boundaries may be needed when anxiety is very high, but they may be increased over time. Sharing clear reasons for these boundaries, and agreeing on them together, can help.
-  **Providing plenty of time:** time is an additional demand, so it's helpful to build in plenty of time. Always try to plan ahead, anticipate potential challenges and allow some flexibility to accommodate fluctuating anxiety levels.
-  **Agreeing an exit strategy:** knowing how to remove themselves from a situation, and having a safe space to retreat to, can help reduce a child's anxiety.

## Reducing the perception of demands

Re-framing demands to make them feel less 'demandy' is key. There are lots of ways to do this:

**Phraseology and tone:** subtle adaptations to our language and tone can benefit PDA children greatly...

Use **declarative language** (statements, comments or observations) or **rephrase** things to talk about an object or yourself/other people rather than the child:

"**The clothes are on the bed, I'm happy to help**" and then walk away, or phrases such as "**I wonder whether ...**" and "**Let's see if ...**" and including words that suggest an element of **choice**, such as "**Maybe we could ...**"

**Talk to yourself/to no one in particular** and '**plant seeds**':





"**It's a lovely day outside, a good day for going to the park...**"

It's helpful to **avoid** trigger words like "**no**", "**don't**", "**can't**", "**must**" or "**have to**" – you can convey the same message using different terminology:

"**It's not possible right now because ..., but we can try this afternoon and in the meantime would you like to ... or ...?**"

## Being cautious with rewards/praise/sanctions

It can be helpful to understand why these approaches don't tend to be effective in PDA households.

-  **Reward incentives** create an additional demand on top of the demand itself; they magnify the problem if something isn't achieved because not only is the 'thing' not achieved the reward isn't earned either; and they don't address the underlying difficulties which may have prevented achievement.
-  **Praise** may be perceived as a demand to repeat or improve on previous performance; and encouragement can feel like a demand as it increases the sense of expectation.
-  **Sanctions** feel unjust when behaviours are a question of "can't" not "won't", and may appear controlling and arbitrary when not directly related to the behaviours in question. They tend to lead to confrontation/escalation.
-  **Helpful alternatives & adaptations**
  - Spontaneous, tangible rewards.
  - Indirect praise (praising results rather than the child or praising a child to a third party so they hear it indirectly). Providing choices and an exit strategy when offering encouragement.
  - Learning from natural consequences.

**Indirect communication:** includes **physical & visual prompts** (with elements of choice and control), holding up a choice of items, post-it notes or instant messenger apps can work well; **leaving things 'lying around'** for a child to pick up out of natural curiosity; **using role play or a third party** (adopt the persona of a favourite character or toy).

**Offer choices:** and be willing to negotiate and accept a different choice that still achieves the aim.

**De-personalising:** explain that the requirement is made by some other higher authority (e.g. the law).

**Distracting/turning things into a game:** focus on something else other than the demand.

**Using humour/novelty:** humour helps everyone feel more relaxed. With novelty, ensure the change in direction feels like a bonus/benefit for the child.

**Model behaviours or apply demands to yourself** (with no expectation that the child will follow suit).

Whilst it may initially feel like a very steep learning curve to develop a tailored, flexible toolkit of approaches, eventually it's likely to become second nature as you become more in tune with a child's strengths and needs. Over time, as a child's self confidence, emotional maturity and trust in the world develops, and as they gain more understanding of themselves, they can start to develop self-help tools and coping strategies of their own.



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