

Demand-Avoidant Profile (PDA): Fact Sheet for Studying at Home

For a person with a demand-avoidant profile who studies at home: completing assignments, sitting online assessments, and working without a teacher in the room. Also for the family member or support person helping them.

A note on status: PDA (pathological demand avoidance) is described as a profile within autism. It is not a standalone diagnosis in the main diagnostic manuals, and research on it is at an early stage (Kildahl et al., 2021; PDA Society, 2026a). The approaches below come from specialist guidance and are worth trying when a person identifies with the profile.

What is going on

A person with a PDA profile avoids everyday demands, including things they need or want to do. The driver is anxiety, not defiance or laziness. When a demand feels overwhelming, the response is closer to panic than to a choice (PDA Society, 2026b).

Study is full of demands:

- **Direct demands:** "Submit by Friday", "Answer all questions", "Log in at 9 am".
- **Internal demands:** "I should be able to do this", "I need to get a good mark".
- **Social demands:** discussion boards, group work, video calls, emails to teachers.
- **Routine demands:** even a study routine the person chose turns into a demand once it is expected (PDA Society, 2026b).

In study, this shows up as:

- Avoiding an assignment the person cares about.
- Changing the subject, joking, distracting or bargaining when study is raised.
- Freezing, or sudden anger, when pressure rises.
- Capacity which changes from day to day. A task done easily on Monday feels impossible on Wednesday.
- A strong need for control over how and when work happens.
- Heavy masking, so the anxiety is hidden behind a relaxed or sociable surface (PDA Society, 2026a).

Schools and courses run on compliance: deadlines, rules, rewards and penalties. For a PDA learner, compliance feels like losing control, which raises anxiety. Reward and penalty systems are likely to make avoidance worse, not better (Haire et al., 2024).

Strengths to build on

- Sociable and imaginative, often skilled in role play and storytelling.
- Intense interests, often in people, characters or stories.
- Creativity and originality.
- Strong drive when a task feels self-chosen.

Use them: offer topic choice, use role play or story framing for study, and let the person own decisions about how the work gets done.

Setting up to study at home

The aim is a low-pressure environment where study feels like a choice.

- **Flexible outline, not a fixed timetable.** Keep a loose list of what needs doing this week, without set times (PDA Society, 2026b).
- **Choice built in.** Let the person choose when, where and in what order to work.
- **Novelty.** Change study location, method or format often. A routine becomes a demand once expected (PDA Society, 2026b).
- **Low arousal.** Calm voice, slow pace, no confrontation.
- **Side-by-side support.** A support person nearby, working on their own task, offers partnership instead of supervision.
- **Few non-negotiables.** Decide in advance which deadlines truly matter. Treat the rest as flexible.

Doing an assignment, step by step

Present each step as information or an option, not an instruction.

1. **Share the task as information.** “The course has an essay due on the 20th. Here is the question.” Leave it there. Avoid “You need to start this.”
2. **Offer meaningful choices.** Topic, format, starting point, order of sections. Choice reduces the sense of demand (PDA Society, 2026b).
3. **Explain the reason.** Say why the task exists and what it leads to. A reason feels less like an order.
4. **Plan together.** Ask, “How would you like to approach this?” Write the plan in the person’s own words.
5. **Start anywhere.** The conclusion, a diagram, a single quote. Any start counts.
6. **Use novelty and play.** Turn research into a quest, write as a character, record ideas as a podcast. Novelty, humour and variety help engagement (Haire et al., 2024).
7. **Keep deadlines soft and private.** Set an internal target well before the real deadline, but do not enforce it.
8. **Keep a Plan B and Plan C.** If the essay stalls, a recorded answer or a different format might work. Flexibility is not failure (PDA Society, 2026b).
9. **Arrange adjustments early.** Ask the provider about flexible deadlines before stress builds.

Doing an assessment or exam at home

Timed assessments are some of the hardest demands, because time, format and rules are fixed.

Before

- Negotiate adjustments well in advance: extra time, flexible start times, alternative formats.
- Treat practice tests as optional and low stakes.
- Frame the assessment as “showing what you know” instead of “being tested”.
- Let the person set up the room and choose the conditions.

During

- Leave the person alone unless they ask for help.
- Avoid checking in with questions such as “How far along are you?”

After

- Expect exhaustion. Reduce other demands for the rest of the day.

When the person is stuck

What you notice	What to try	Why it helps
Says no, or avoids the topic	Respect the no. Step back and try again later, in a different way (PDA Society, 2026b).	Pushing raises anxiety and deepens avoidance.
Changes the subject or jokes when study comes up	Recognise this as anxiety management, not rudeness. Lower the demand: share information without asking for action.	These are social strategies to stay in control (Haire et al., 2024).
Was fine with the task yesterday, refuses today	Accept capacity changes daily. Offer a smaller part, or nothing today.	Matching demand to today’s capacity prevents shutdown.
Frozen in front of the work	Use a statement, not a question: “I wonder what the first paragraph might say.” Or write a note instead of speaking.	Declarative language and written notes feel less intrusive (PDA Society, 2026b).
Anger or panic	Stop all demands. Calm tone, slow pace. Treat it as overwhelm, not misbehaviour.	Panic responses ease with low arousal, not correction.
Deadline close, no work done	Contact the provider about an extension, without involving the person in the pressure. Offer a lower-demand format.	Removing the pressure source helps more than adding urgency.
Several tasks due at once	Choose one. Hide the rest. Avoid stacking demands (PDA Society, 2026b).	Stacked demands overload capacity.
Signs of burnout: exhaustion, withdrawal, loss of interest	Step back from study entirely for a period. Rest first.	Recovery comes before productivity.

Language which helps

Instead of	Try
“You need to finish this today.”	“This one is due on Friday.”
“Start the essay now.”	“I wonder how the essay might begin.”
“Do the reading first.”	“Some people start with the reading. Others start with the question.”
“Why haven’t you done it?”	“Want to look at it together, or leave it for now?”
“If you finish, you get a reward.”	No reward or penalty. Leave the task as information.

Adjustments to ask your course provider for

In Australia, the Disability Standards for Education 2005 apply to schools, TAFE, universities and training providers. Providers must consult with the student and make reasonable adjustments (Department of Education, n.d.). Adjustments worth discussing for a PDA profile:

- Flexible deadlines agreed at the start of the course.
- Choice of assessment format where learning outcomes allow it.
- Written communication instead of phone or video calls.
- Reduced or optional participation in discussion boards and group work.
- Extra time and flexible start times for timed assessments.
- A single contact person who understands the profile.

Staff flexibility matters more to success than specialist placement (Haire et al., 2024).

How a support person at home helps

The PDA Society (2026b) offers the PANDA approach as a guide:

- **P, prioritise and compromise.** Keep only a few non-negotiables. Let the rest bend.
- **A, anxiety management.** Calm, slow, no confrontation. Allow extra thinking time.
- **N, negotiation and collaboration.** Plan together. Respect a genuine no. Keep promises and stay predictable.
- **D, disguise and manage demands.** Use statements, wondering aloud and written notes instead of instructions.
- **A, adaptation.** Keep a Plan B. Use novelty and humour. Step back when the person is depleted.

Avoid

- Commands such as “you must” or “you need to”.
- Rewards, sticker charts, penalties or consequences for study.
- Several requests in one conversation.
- Rigid timetables.
- Treating avoidance as manipulation or laziness.
- Blaming the family. Parents of PDA learners are often wrongly blamed (Haire et al., 2024).

Sources

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