

PDA & Trauma Overlap

A Guide for Carers and Practitioners

Children with Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) and children with trauma histories can show very similar behaviours — avoidance, control, emotional outbursts, and difficulty with everyday demands. However, the reasons underneath these behaviours are different, and understanding this difference helps carers respond effectively.

What drives the behaviour?

Trauma Background

Behaviours are rooted in **fear, safety, and attachment**. The child avoids or controls because they don't feel secure with adults or situations.

PDA Profile

Behaviours are rooted in **autonomy and demand-related anxiety**. The child avoids or controls because demands feel overwhelming or threatening.

How they look similar

Both profiles can display:

- Refusal or avoidance of instructions
- Meltdowns or shutdowns
- Controlling play or routines
- Appearing “fine” with strangers but struggling at home
- School refusal
- High anxiety and emotional dysregulation

TRAUMA CORE
“I don’t feel safe.”

PDA CORE
“I don’t feel in control.”

How to tell them apart

Key investigative questions to consider:

Focus of Avoidance:

Is the child avoiding people (trauma) or demands (PDA)?

Response to Pressure:

Does the child relax when pressure is reduced (PDA) or when trust increases (trauma)?

Core Trigger:

Does loss of autonomy trigger panic (PDA) or does relational threat trigger fear (trauma)?

Where they overlap

Many foster children may have both trauma and PDA traits. This can make behaviour highly complex and easily misunderstood.

What helps in both cases

- Relational safety first
- Low-pressure, low-demand interactions
- Predictability offered gently
- Choices and collaboration
- Curiosity instead of confrontation
- Co-regulation before correction

Best combined approach

Therapeutic Parenting + Low-Demand Parenting

Therapeutic parenting builds emotional safety, while **low-demand parenting** protects autonomy and reduces anxiety. Together, they create an environment where children feel safe, understood, and not controlled.