Supporting Pathological Demand Avoidance at Christmas:

Tips & Advice
from Laura Kerbey
PDA expert and author

A Practical Guide from SEND Tutoring

Understanding PDA

What Does Pathological Demand Avoidance Really Mean?



PDA is a profile on the autism spectrum where individuals experience extreme anxiety when faced with everyday demands.

It often involves using social strategies and creative avoidance tactics to avoid demands, such as distraction, negotiation, or withdrawal.

It means that requests or expectations can feel overwhelming, leading to avoidance behaviours that are often misunderstood as defiance.

PDA is rooted in anxiety and a need for control and autonomy, not in deliberate opposition or misbehaviour.

Understanding PDA means recognising the importance of flexibility, choice, and reducing pressure, so the individual feels safe and supported.

Ask The Expert



We sat down with Laura Kerbey, education consultant and author, to find out what makes Christmas an especially challenging time of year for those with PDA, and how we can better support PDA family members during this time.

About Laura Kerbey

With over 21 years of experience working with young people with autism & PDA,, Laura is the perfect person to ask when it comes to supporting those with PDA.

Having worked in schools and colleges, she understands the barriers to learning that a lack knowledge about of autism creates and the frustration and anxiety that this causes to students, their parents and staff alike. That's why Kerbey offers autism training, PDA training, as well as bespoke training for all environments, to ensure that more families and staff are better equipped to support children and young people with SEND.

Books by Laura Kerbey

- The Parents' and Professionals' Simple Guide to PDA (2025)
- The (Slightly Distracted) Woman's Guide to Living with an Adult ADHD Diagnosis (2025)
- The Teen's Guide to PDA (2024)
- The Educator's Experience of Pathological Demand Avoidance (2023)

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What makes Christmas particularly challenging for children with PDA compared to other times of year?

Laura: "Christmas and other celebrations are hugely demanding and filled with expectations, for example, the demand of having to socialise with extended family members, having to eat with family, even having to be "grateful" for presents.

On top of this, Christmas is a time of change when everything is different, routines go out the window, food is different, the house is decorated and this can also be difficult from a sensory point of view t oo."

Find FREE (until Dec 22nd) downloadable Christmas resources & activity packs for children with PDA and other sensory needs on Twinkl.co.uk

How can parents reduce the pressure of gift-giving and expectations while still making it special?

Laura: "Don't wrap presents if this is challenging, tell your children what they are getting, don't make them wait if it is too challenging and then maybe have some very small extra surprises spread throughout the day. It may also help to let them know what siblings are receiving so that they don't get anxious about that too."

How can families balance festive traditions with the need for flexibility when supporting a child with PDA?

Laura: "Prioritise what your child needs over what other people think you "should" be doing. Prepare other family members with phrases like, "X is autistic with a PDA profile, they may not be able to come and join in with lunch." "X is not eating the same as us at lunchtime, please don't mention this to them." "X may not be able to open their presents in front of you" etc, etc. Involve your child in the planning too so they feel that they have some autonomy over the day. Also it is really important to pick your battles, if they don't want to come out of their room, get dressed, eat at the table etc then don't force it.

Remember, high anxiety = low demand tolerance so if your child is feeling anxious and overwhelmed with Christmas then their tolerance to demands will be even lower than usual - this can set up a viscous cycle and develop into a much stressful event for everyone. Forget about what everyone else is doing and focus on what is best for you and your family. If you are at home or another house always make sure your child feels that they have an exit strategy to a safe place. You can also use a coding system of "1 - I am fine, 2 - it's getting tricky, 3 - I need to leave" so that your child can easily signal to you how they are feeling. Practice doing this beforehand too."

What are some subtle signs of overwhelm parents should look out for during the holidays?

Laura "Each child is different, but some indicators would be increased sensory needs, increased demand avoidance and then behaviour changes such as being more tearful, quiet, "angry" and perhaps isolating themselves."





What strategies work best for managing sensory overload at Christmas (lights, music, crowds, etc.)?

Laura "Involve your child in decorating your home, use the scaling system when out and about so your child feels that they can escape if it all gets too much. Some children may need ear defenders, also find out if places you are visiting have a more sensory friendly time, for example some supermarkets offer this."

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If you could give one golden tip to parents navigating PDA at Christmas, what would it be?

Laura *"If you start to feel stressed out yourself take a breather, your emotional regulation will really impact your PDAer, you can also use this as an ideal time to role model, for example, "it is really noisy in here and it is making me feel stressed so I am going out to get some fresh air if you would like to join me." Remember there is no such thing as a "normal" family and also that "comparison is the thief of joy." Do things that work for you and your family not what you think you should be doing because that is what you have seen on social media or TV programmes."*

Key Takeaways:

- **Flexibility over tradition.**
- **Plan & prepare expectations.**
- **Calm & steady presence.**
- **Autonomy & choice matter.**
- **Connection, not comparison.**
- **Choose your battles.**
- **Routine anchors comfort.**
- **Safe exit strategies & sensory-friendly spaces.**

How can extended family members be educated about PDA to avoid misunderstandings at gatherings?

Laura: *"If you know that certain family members are going to make your anxiety about Christmas worse as a parent then don't be scared to just do it alone!"*

Or better yet! Share this downloadable resource with your family and friends so they can understand Christmas from a PDA lens.

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🎄 Thank You for Joining Us! 🎄

We hope you enjoyed this advice session with **Laura Kerbey** and discovered practical tips to make Christmas calmer and more joyful.

Remember: **PDA profiles thrive when the pressure is off** , so let this festive season be truly **pressure-free**.

📚 For more resources and news:

- Visit our website for regular blog updates.
- Sign up to our monthly newsletter for ongoing support and SEND news.

Together, let's make Christmas about comfort, connection, and calm.



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