

5 Characteristics

of "PDA" in Children

By Casey Ehrlich, Ph.D., At Peace Parents



Survival Drive for Autonomy

The child's need for autonomy is a survival need and drives outward behavior. This survival need can override other needs like hunger, toileting, sleep, movement, and safety. Remember, the cause/effect isn't always immediate. Overriding the threat response over and over builds to a level of anxiety where the child can have "regressions," become incapacitated or have constant meltdowns. It is a cumulative effect which makes the outward expression of behavior confusing at times.



Equalizing Behavior

"Equalizing" behavior results when boundaries, rules, or expectations are set and when the PDA brain perceives a loss of autonomy or lack of equality with a situation, people, or person. This is the outward expression of an internal nervous system response that is automatic and autonomic. The equalizing behavior results from the child's brain and body trying to get back into a place of perceived equality, however they may "overshoot." The child can "mask" this behavior, but there is always a cost. Equalizing behavior can also be turned inward, which may manifest as self-harm, eating disorder, or OCD-like behaviors in more introverted or "freeze/fawn" expressions.



"High Masking" Autistic*

PDA children often have two different "versions" of themselves depending on context. For example, "fine" at school and "explosive" or "shut down" at home. PDA children are "high masking" Autistic - they fluently imitate neurotypical social norms and override their threat response at school or with grandparents. When they come home or to their safe space, they may show completely different behavior and appear like a different child.

* "High Masking" Autistic is a term coined by Rachel Dorsey, Autistic SLP.

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Constant Need for Autonomic Nervous System Coregulation and Undivided Attention

PDA children need constant co-regulation and undivided attention or they will become dysregulated and experience an internal nervous system response, even if it isn't outwardly obvious (remember, "High Masking"). The PDA child needs to consistently receive signals of safety so that their nervous system doesn't go into fight, flight, or freeze throughout the day. Co-regulation can be provided by a safe person who is regulated and can signal safety with tone, facial expression, body movement, and physical proximity. This may present differently for introverted expressions of PDA.



Unpredictable Nature of Dysregulation and Meltdowns

Dysregulation and meltdowns for the PDA child often "appear out of nowhere." It is important to realize that the final particular stimuli is often the "straw that breaks the camel's back" and the response can appear "disproportionate." Dysregulation, equalizing behavior, shutdown, and meltdowns are often in response to an accumulation of stress from the PDA child spending a significant amount of time (days, weeks, months) overriding their threat response by masking consistently in an environment outside of the home (at school, with grandparents. etc.).