

A Parent's Guide to Setting Boundaries With PDA Children

Gentle, Neurodiversity-Affirming Strategies That Reduce Power Struggles

If your child resists everyday demands—getting dressed, brushing teeth, leaving the house—you may feel stuck between pushing too hard and giving in. For children with a Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) profile, demands can trigger a threat response. What looks like defiance is often anxiety and a need for autonomy.

This guide offers practical ways to hold boundaries while reducing nervous system escalation.

Key Shift: It's not about "won't"—it's about "can't."

You are not just managing behavior. You are supporting a nervous system that feels overwhelmed by demands.

1. Use Collaborative Language

- "I wonder how we're going to get out the door today..."
- "Should we hop or tiptoe to the car?"
- Softening demands reduces resistance while keeping the boundary.

2. Offer Autonomy Within Structure

- "Before or after pajamas?"
- "Blue toothbrush or green?"
- The boundary stays, but the child has control within it.

3. Communicate Indirectly

- Start tasks yourself instead of directing
- Use visual cues instead of verbal demands
- Invite participation rather than impose it

4. Regulate First

- Pause demands during escalation

- Focus on tone, presence, and calmness
- Return to the boundary once regulated

5. Keep Boundaries Predictable (Not Rigid)

- Use routines and rhythms
- Give advance notice
- Avoid sudden demands

6. Soften “No”

- “That’s tricky...”
- “Let’s find another way...”
- Reduces defensiveness while maintaining limits

7. Choose Boundaries Carefully

- Focus on safety and well-being
- Let go of unnecessary control battles

8. Stay Regulated Yourself

- Your tone and body language matter
- Calm presence reduces escalation

9. Repair When Needed

- “That felt hard for both of us.”
- “Let’s try again.”
- Repair strengthens trust more than perfection

A Different Way to Think About Boundaries

With PDA children, boundaries are not about control—they are about co-created safety. Balancing structure and autonomy helps your child feel secure without triggering resistance.

This guide is educational and not a substitute for therapy. For individualized support, consider working with a neurodiversity-affirming therapist.