

Understanding the PDA Profile of Autism

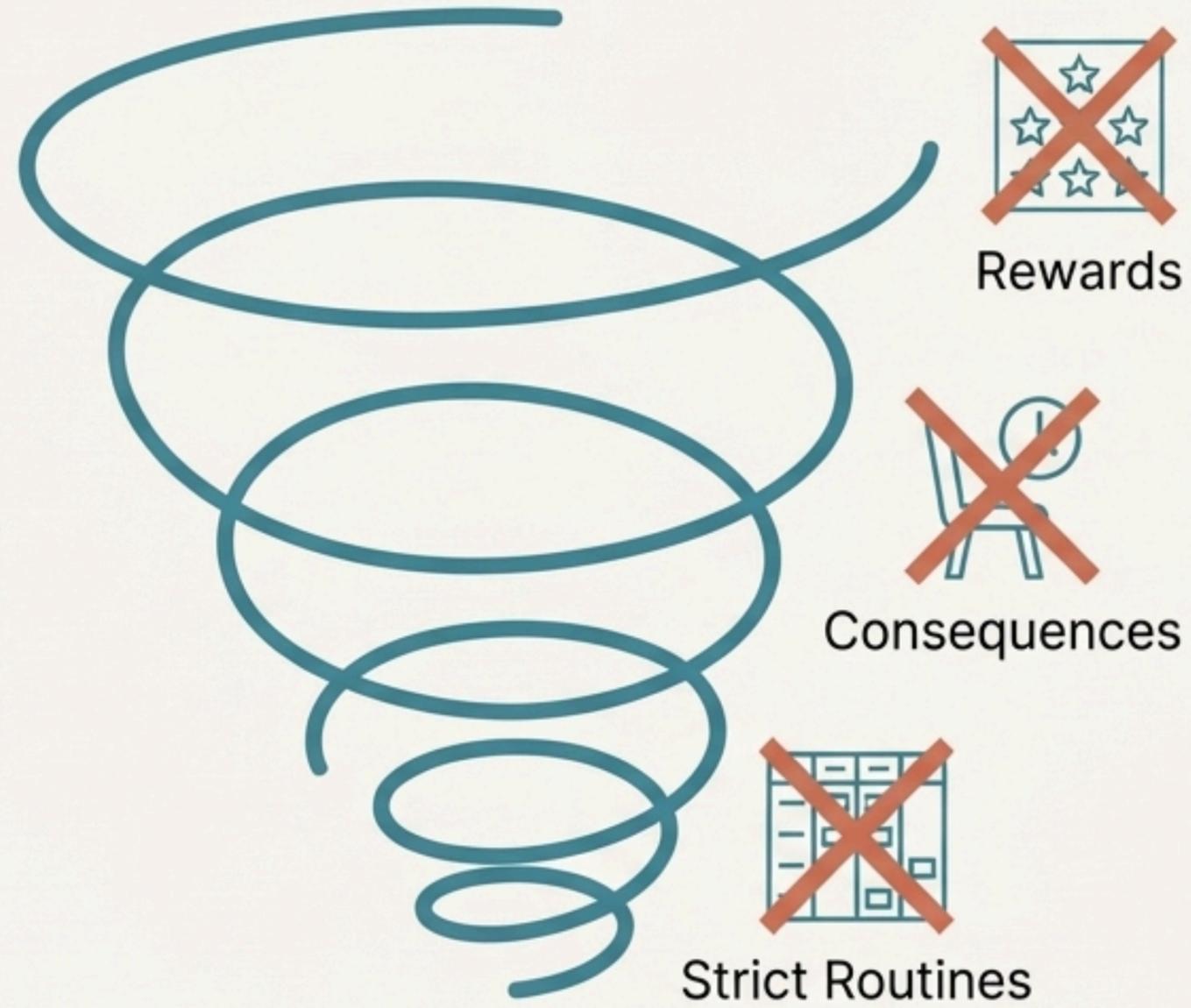
From a Battle of Wills to a Partnership of Trust

“It feels like a constant battle.”

Physical Meltdown Negotiation
Physical Meltdown Bargaining
Role-Play “Why do simple requests Freezing
Freezing lead to a total meltdown? Role-Play
Bargaining Procrastination Procrastination Freezing
Procrastination Bargaining Lying
Procrastination “Why do they resist things Negotiation Bargaining
Freezing they actually enjoy? Lying
Re-negotiation Bargaining Forgetfulness Bargaining Lying
Lying Re-negotiation Fight or Flight Lying
Lying Forgetfulness Fight or Flight Distraction
Distraction “Are they being defiant? Lying
Freezing Manipulative? Naughty? Role-Play
Role-Play Forgetfulness Bargaining
Forgetfulness Distraction

WON'T OR CAN'T?

The harder we push, the worse it gets.



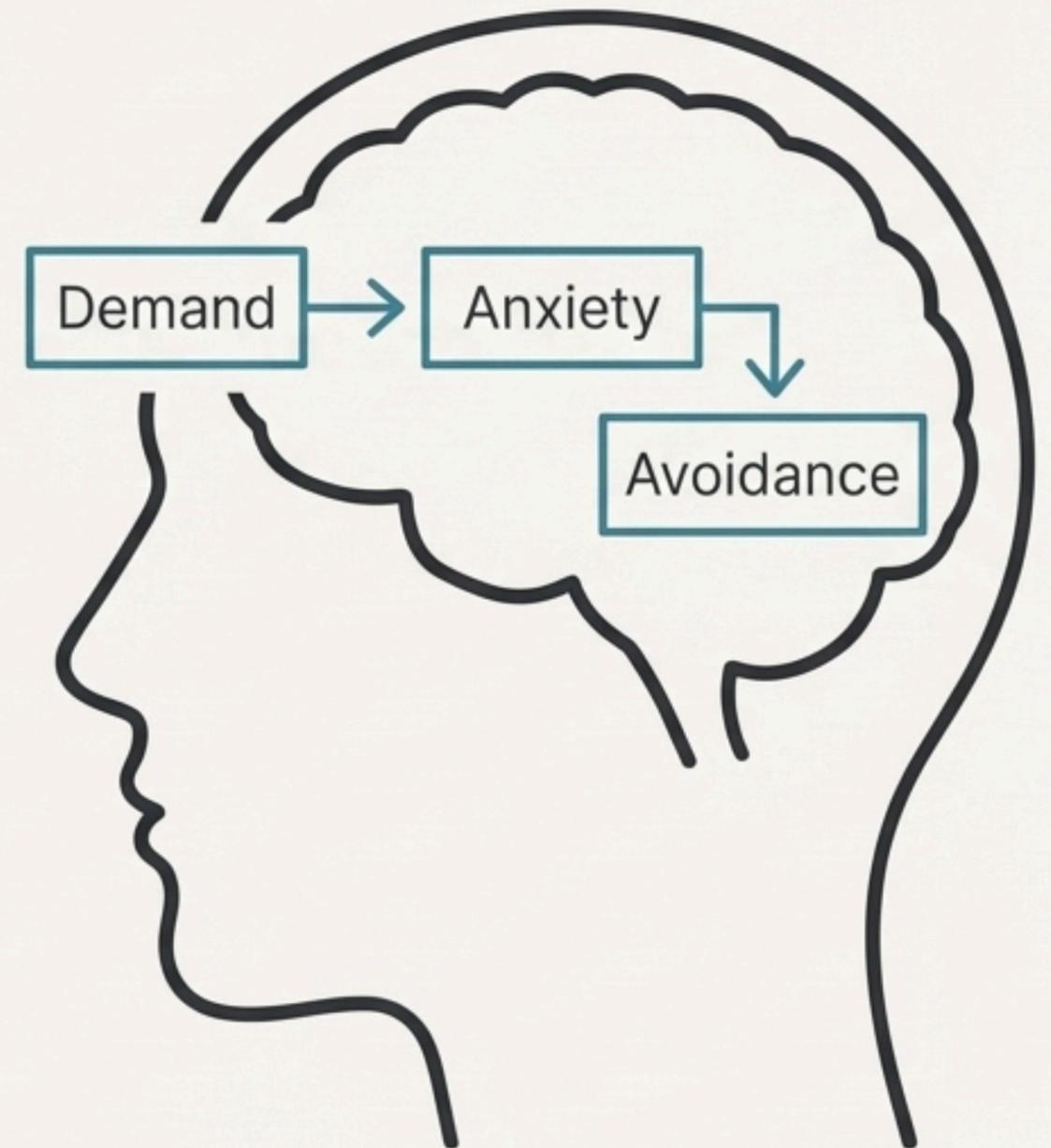
These approaches often increase anxiety and the need for control, unintentionally making the behavior worse. They magnify the problem if something isn't achieved and don't address the underlying difficulties.

It's Not Defiance. It's a Pervasive Drive for Autonomy.

A profile of autism characterized by an anxiety-driven need to be in control and avoid the demands of everyday life.

Core Driver: **ANXIETY**. The response is a matter of “**can't**,” not “**won't**.”

“For the person concerned a request (demand) is likely to produce a level of anxiety that is beyond anything the rest of us can even begin to imagine.”



Demand avoidance is driven by cumulative anxiety.



Anxiety is like a bucket of water. If we keep adding stressors, over time it fills up, until one day, it overflows.

A person's capacity for demands fluctuates. What's manageable one day may not be the next.

Demands are everywhere.



Direct

- Instructions
- Rules
- Questions
- Commands



Indirect

- Expectations
- Praise
- Timetables
- Social Rules



Internal

- Hunger
- Tiredness
- Desires
- Self-imposed demands

Different Drivers, Different Approaches.

PDA Profile



Driver: Anxiety, Need for Control

Goal: Avoid panic, preserve autonomy

Behavior: Uses social strategies (e.g., excuses, distraction), shows remorse and regret when calm

Motto: **I can't.**

ODD



Driver: Anger, Defiance toward authority

Goal: Challenge rules, assert dominance

Behavior: Argumentative, deliberately annoys others, blames others for mistakes

Motto: **I won't.**

Our goal is co-regulation, not compliance.

Change the approach, not the child.



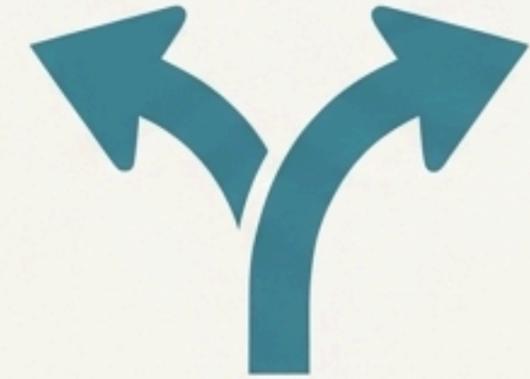
Reduce Demands

Pick your battles. Ask yourself what really matters.



Build Trust

Safety + Trust = Calm.
Demonstrate empathy first.



Share Control

Offer choices, collaborate, and be flexible. Guide rather than tell.

Disguise and Depersonalize the Demand



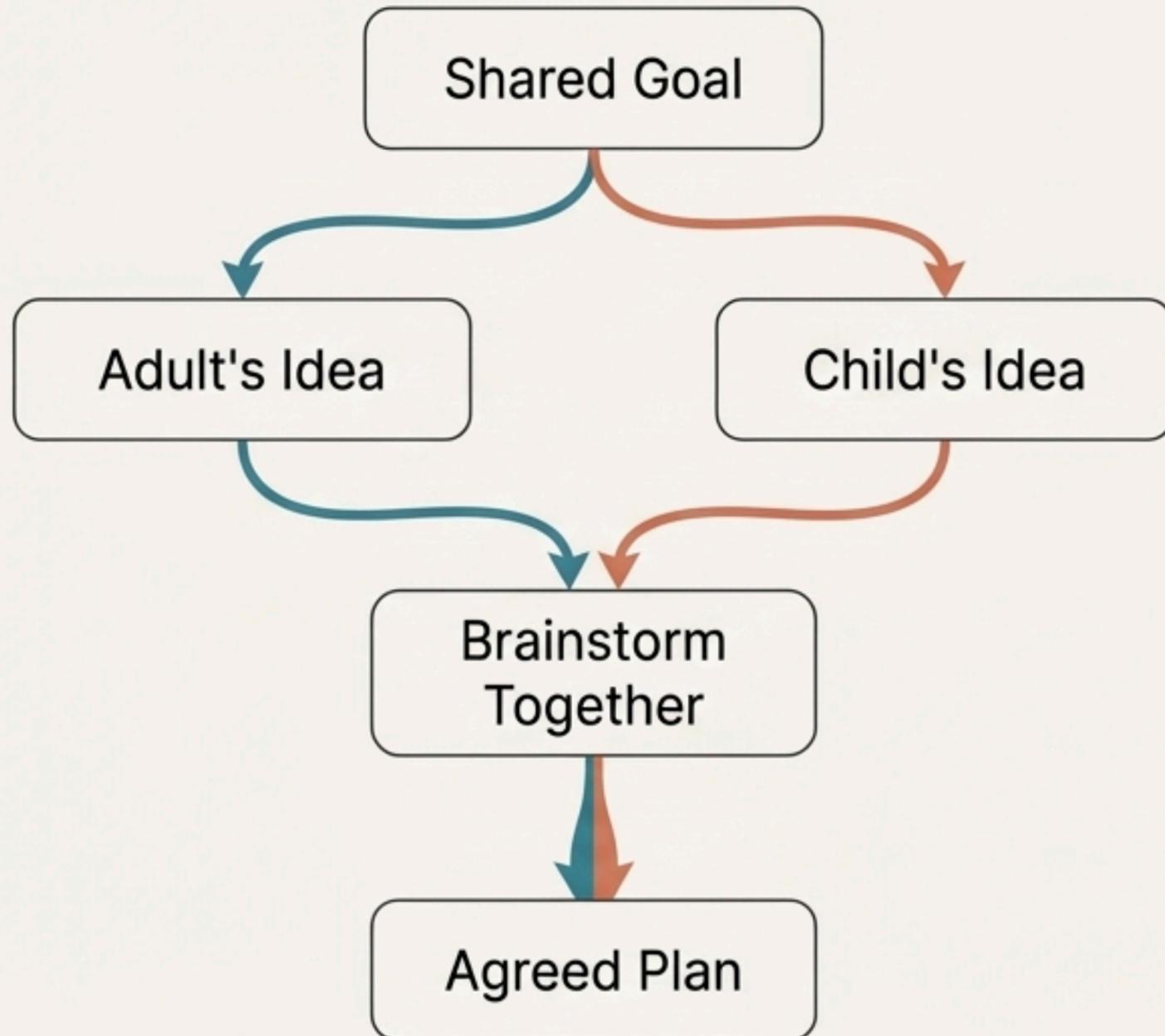
Instead of Direct Demands like:

“You need to put your coat on now.”

Try Indirect Approaches:

- **Humor/Challenge:** “Bet I can get my coat on before you!”
- **Role-Play/Depersonalize:** “Teddy has asked if we can go to the shops.”
- **Declarative Language:** “I notice it’s getting cold outside.”
- **Collaboration:** “It would be really helpful if you could...”

Empower through Autonomy.



Offer Limited Choices:

- Do you want a bath or shower tonight?
- Would you like your bath at 6pm or 7pm?

Collaborative Problem-Solving:

- I've noticed X is tough. What's up? Let's brainstorm some ideas together.

Plan Ahead (Together):

- Let individuals plan their own routine. Have exit strategies or code words for difficult situations.

Meltdowns are a panic attack, not a tantrum.

BEFORE (Prevent)



Notice triggers (restlessness, repeating questions). Offer distraction or give space.

DURING (Ensure Safety)



Stay calm. Be reassuring. Lower sensory input (turn down lights, reduce noise). Don't escalate.

AFTER (Recover & Reflect)



Allow time to recover without shame. When both are calm, talk about what could help next time. Focus on problem-solving, not punishment.

‘It’s like a great big whoosh of NO!’

‘Although I’m acting angry what I’m feeling is terror, and afterwards I don’t remember what I’ve done.’

‘It’s like you’re gaming and you have the main controller, and then sometimes someone yanks that controller away from you and you lose control and feel panicky.’

‘It’s the most frustrating thing to have the functional capacity to understand what’s happening but the functional ability just isn’t there. It’s the worst form of self-sabotage.’

– Individuals with a PDA Profile

The Goal is a Thriving Life, Not Just a Compliant One.

From Authority → Ally

From Consequences → Connection

From Rigidity → Flexibility

From **'WON'T'** → **'CAN'T'**.



Learn More & Find Support.



PDA Society

www.pdasociety.org.uk



National Autistic Society

www.autism.org.uk



Local Support
(East Sussex)

Child Development Team,
CLASS+, Educational
Psychology Service (EPS)

Thank You.

Questions?

Understanding the PDA Profile of Autism

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