



**Episode #191:**

**A Conversation with Author and  
PDA Emmissary Harry Thompson**

January 14, 2019

Debbie: Hello Harry, welcome to the podcast.

Harry: Hello Debbie. Thanks for having me.

Debbie: I'm thrilled to have you on the show. And as you probably know, PDA is a pretty new topic for at least my show. Most of my audiences in the US and a few months ago I had Dr. Melissa Neff on the show who connected you and I and I did an episode with her and I have gotten so much feedback and I'm just noticing there's just so much interest in this topic and so many parents are seeing PDA traits in their children and here in the U S there's just so little support and information and actually you're coming to the U S in March, correct? For a conference?

Harry: Yeah, that's right. So myself, Laura Kirby, the founder of Positive Autism Support and training along with Diane Gould who is a social worker based in Illinois. We'll be coming to Chicago. I think it's on March the fifth and March the sixth.

Debbie: Yeah, that sounds right. I am going to be in Chicago the week right before that and I'm trying to figure out how to stay for the event. But listeners, I'll make sure there is a link to that event in the show notes page because I have a feeling it's going to be of interest to many of you. But I think probably the best way to start this conversation. I would love if you could tell us a little bit about your work in the world. You know, you've written an incredible book, *The PDA Paradox*, and you identify or call yourself an Emissary for PDA. Can you just tell us a little bit about the work that you do and why you do it?

Harry: Of course. I use the word Emissary because I am, after all on a mission PDA has gained a lot of traction recently. The UK are spearheading the movement, but it appears in recent months especially, it's been gaining recognition elsewhere. So I was late diagnosed actually. I was diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum when I was 14. My diagnosis was updated to PDA just before I thought I was going to give music college a go. However, due to my being a teenager, I wasn't particularly interested in my diagnoses. At the time I wasn't anti- them, but I wasn't particularly interested. As I said it wasn't really until things started to deteriorate quite badly in my twenties when I, when it suddenly dawned on me, I've got to find out more about what this is and why I'm the way I am.

So I was actually in the U S when I started my YouTube channel a couple of years ago. I decided to talk about PDA for no for no particular reason and I just started making videos because it was a way to deal with the boredom. I was hitchhiking around the US. I explain in the book and I just went for a little walk in New York State. The precise location eludes my memory because I was on the road quite a lot, but I was in this particular place for about three days. I got picked up after a quite a laborious seven mile hike in the middle of winter. And the person who picked me up said, you can stay at mine but you're going to have to wait three days before I can drive you anywhere else because she had work. So I thought, what am I going to do for three days?

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So I decided to make YouTube videos and I decided to talk about PDA and I had no intention of that particular video taking off but take off it did. And then I suppose as my following grew, I decided to make more videos for a start, but it was kind of therapeutic for me to reflect on my life and analyze each individual component of my life. And then suddenly one day I felt this tremendous need to return to the UK because I had, I had this book in my system, that had to get out. So I returned to the UK and around November 2017 and locked myself away and I wrote The PDA Paradox in about six weeks. I think.

Debbie: That's incredible. I mean, how quickly you wrote that and, and you talk about that. I think in the intro, just the paradox of writing a book you know, the, the, the demand avoidance that you were experiencing and even the process of writing, right?

Harry: Yeah. I actually dedicate an entire chapter to how one day I just didn't feel like writing. I kind of veered out of the current because I was writing a good 11 hours a day. I did nothing else. I got myself a little job at the time that I found extremely difficult to do. Because all of my focus was poured into getting this book done. And I found myself in hyper-focus mode in a flow state, a flow state whereby I was, I became one with the activity. There was no separation between myself and writing the book. But then one day, I think I received a question, a harmless question from one of my followers saying, when is the book out? When is the book going to be ready? I forgot to mention, I tried to write the book two years before just before I decided to move to the States. And it was kind of, it was, it was that version, that draft was just my way of, I don't know, expressing all of these memories that I had repressed for a long time. It was like a giant journal project, but nothing really came of it. And it wasn't until I started connecting with other people in the PDA community that I realized I wanted to abandon my original project because my understanding of PDA had evolved at that point. So I wanted it to represent my current thoughts. So people would often, I told people in my first video, I'm working on a book. So naturally people were curious, but I can remember someone asked, when is the book going to be ready? And that made me stop immediately. And the silver lining there was that I could utilize that moment of demand avoidance and dedicate a chapter to that.

Debbie: Yeah, makes total sense. And also just as a fellow writer, sometimes we need to write those initial drafts. You know, the book might be something else and then that was part of the process and we couldn't have created what we ultimately produced without having gone through that first experience.

Harry: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Debbie: I'm curious to know who you have found resonates most with your work. Like who is really following your YouTube channel, which again listeners, I'll have a link on the show notes page. Harry has a lot of great videos on there but do you find it's peers, is it parents looking for information? Who do you hear from the most?

- Harry: Oh parents. There's no question parents by far that isn't to say there aren't other demographics but mainly parents because I suppose they're crying out for help in what is a rather bleak situation.
- Debbie: Yes. I mean and that's certainly, that's the feedback that I receive. Again, having done that episode with Dr Neff and then I also did an episode with Kristy Forbes who really talked with us about her experience with PDA and I just keep hearing more, more from parents and really there is a sense of desperation there and just not knowing what to do. So as part of this, you and I had talked about, you know, let's see what kind of questions might community has. And so I had so many questions I tried to consolidate and I've sent them off to you yesterday. Like here's some about school, here's some about it, personal life, your, some about home life. And we, you and I have gone back and forth that many times via email since I sent those. And let's just be transparent with listeners about that process.
- Harry: There's no better way to be, let's be transparent. Yes, certain questions are likely to trigger something within me due to, Hmm. I guess I feel this tremendous sense of where the question is coming from and you know, demand avoidance doesn't discriminate. It could be a perfectly reasonable question, but I could detect a scintilla or a tiny demanding element and then it could make answering it very difficult... Answering it seriously. Sometimes I'd want to turn it into a joke. I'll try not to do that out of respect.
- Debbie: Well, would you mind, after I got your email back saying some of these questions were quite jarring and I was like, yeah, I get that. And I went back and I reread the questions and I was like, yeah. Could you say more about certain questions maybe or topics that sparked that response in you?
- Harry: Well, I often state publicly that I'm not a huge fan of strategies. I think it is more important that we increase our understanding as much, as much as possible because then in that case, the strategies just fall into place. So the child, the PDA child is extremely shrewd at detecting any faults in their interlocutor, any kind of chinks in the armor. And if you randomly implement a strategy one day, the child will immediately notice it and think to themselves, what is going on? Why is that strategy there? What's different? What is changing? What are you trying to get me to do? The child is yearning for someone to be on their level. The child is yearning for someone to find the key required for the person to unlock the child's world. Even though the child may appear as though they're trying to reject everyone all the time. It's just, you know, if we can increase our understanding then what we do with these children becomes second nature. So in order for me to answer your question, I'd say that I can feel in some of these questions that the person asking once the child to change and they want perhaps a quick way out of their unpleasant situation, which I understand, but I still cannot quell the innerlokey as I like to call it, who resides within me.
- Debbie: I think you nailed it. I mean I, I hear that as well and I hear that again, I'm going to use the word desperation and I think that's because so many parents do feel desperate, especially if their child is being explosive and they don't really, they

just don't know what to do. And there there is a desire, and not just when we're talking about PDA, but a lot of topics I cover is that parents are hungry for tools and answers that are going to change a painful circumstance right now.

Harry: I totally get that. And they have my full sympathy. So I do understand and it's, and it's important that I still experience the emotions that I do when reading these questions because that in itself becomes educational.

Debbie: Absolutely. Absolutely. And I would love to hear a little more about this, you know, you said you're not a huge fan of strategies. You're more about really helping parents understand better understand who their child is so we can kind of unlock their, you know, who they are in their passion and, and get to a place where they can really be themselves and thrive. I talk about this is becoming really fluent in our children's language, you know, and I'm using air quotes for the word language, but just really getting to know who they are. I'm just wondering from your perspective and because you hear from so many parents, what are parents not doing that enables that deeper understanding?

Harry: Well, when it comes to PDA, it is a paradox, you know, and so many of the things that we ought to be doing with PDA kids totally contradict what we know about parenting. So in that sense, things can be anxiety inducing. These kids require trust and freedom to honor the space of the PDA child is perhaps one of the best things we can do for these children. But most of the time they are behaving in a manner that makes it seem like trust and freedom are the last things that they could need right now. You know, so it can baffle people, it can cause parents to question what it means to parent because they find that so many of the decisions that they have to make and accommodations they have to make. When it comes to raising their child goes against everything they know and sometimes everything that they feel to be the right thing. So I understand the frustration, but honoring the child's path is what they have to do and that perhaps that path will, you know, it's, it's a scenic route towards and it will perhaps totally bypass the kind of conventional conveyor belt towards success or used to this whole to be the only way.

Debbie: I love that metaphor of it being a scenic route. And what I'm also hearing is a need for parents to really detach themselves from the outcome because I think there is just so much of a desire to, a lot of the questions had to do with school, right? So there's such a desire to make it work for...

Harry: Universal. School questions are by far the questions I get asked the most. And my answer is often quite tricky. I mean, first and foremost we can create as good as environment as possible within the home. And that requires the understanding on the part of ideally everyone within the home, parents, siblings, et cetera. Yeah, let's say we can get to a place where things are relatively good at home that, you know, the child may still venture out into the world. And then we'll cross cross paths with people who have to stop that process from scratch, adjusting their teaching methods if it's at school and striving to understand this child in a way that is very new to the person. So PDA by definition just defies the norm at every turn.

Debbie: So first of all, I'm just going to say this now, we're not going to go through these questions because it doesn't feel like a useful way to spend this time with you. So I'm going to just apologize to my listeners who are like, I had a question they desperately wanted answered, but we're going to be talking about what I think are more important than those granular, very situational questions. But in terms of education, are there environments that that you kind of steer parents towards or do you find that maybe homeschooling is a good option for, for some kids who who have PDA? I'm just wondering, where do you kind of steer parents who come to you looking for support?

Harry: I'd say unschooling because the child requires a bespoke curriculum and anything being imposed upon the child from the outside is likely going to be met with rejection. But very often these kids are autodidactic, which means self-taught, that the PDA kids I know who are doing the best are in settings whereby I'm not going to say allowed to do whatever they want, but it's interest led. So the idea is you tap into the child's interest and you just go from there because special interests are no stranger to the autistic person. And the beauty of a special interest is that it can be a driving force in the child's life. It's half the reason I'm so functional these days because everything I do is in alignment with my path, with my interests. Therefore, as I'm expending energy on being rewarded in return, and as a result, I get to stay in control and retain my sense of freedom.

So any school or educational setting that can structure around those principles, valuing the child's freedom and interests over anything else, will find that their PDA child is more likely to thrive. So I, I suppose I go by the clients I've had and the stories that they've told me. Because school is an incredibly traumatic and hostile environment for these kids. It was for myself. Certainly I can, I'm still in school in a sense. That doesn't mean I attend an institution. It means I learn new things every day. Half my career is based on trying to know as much PDA as I possibly can. There's no demand in it because I retain absolute control over that process. And I can think back to moments where I suddenly could learn. I describe many PDA kids as having an inbuilt curriculum that's often out of sync with the school curriculum which is basically the being overcome or totally immersed within one particular interest.

And then perhaps the novelty wears off and you move on to a new thing if that's a beautiful process, if it's allowed to chart its own course. But often it's not because there's a mismatch between what school are trying to teach you and what you're currently interested in. And the child is not often receptive to being force fed information that isn't in alignment with their interests. So any school that can understand this or any, any learning environment that can understand that one particular aspect of this way of being stands themselves in good stead. So the unfortunate thing is these places are few and far between. They're not omnipresent. So it's a matter of luck. Unfortunately, we need more places like this though. It'd be fantastic if there were more of them.

Debbie: Absolutely. I mean, I, first of all, I love the term in built curriculum—that makes total sense. And certainly what I see, what has helped my son Asher, who's 15, really thrive is by going from that place. And I agree with you. I mean I think so many children would benefit from being able to learn about the things they want to learn and be itself driven in that way because that's, that's what our lives as adults will be like anyway. If we're going to be self actualized.

Harry: Yes, exactly. And a lot of PDA kids, they have a sense of agelessness, you know, they, they're not, they think they are adults. But there's no sense of pigeonholing people into these age brackets, you know. So in one sentence, the PDA child is fourth dimensional. As in the, in the fourth dimension, there is no separation between one moment and another. It's one articulated blob. The PDA child does not recognize a pecking order. It's not a matter of rejecting authority, it's not recognizing it, it's being unable to grasp hierarchies and not just in terms of authority, but in terms of age as well. So people often describe the PDA child as being not quite knowing, not knowing their role in a social context. So often getting on better with people who are much older than them or people who are much younger than them.

And in one sense we have this vision of what our ultimate role is, but we're unfortunately bound by real life experience. So on one hand, as a child, I kind of knew that I'd be doing this kind of work one day that I'm doing as an adult. But as a child I could see with my own eyes that my intuition did not reflect the reality of my situation. So it becomes extremely difficult to carry out everyday tasks. It becomes extremely difficult to deviate away from the destination at the end of this route that I have to take in order to get there. So any other hurdle or stumbling block that falls in my way, it has to be immediately discarded. And these things could be minor, you know, small requests around the house or they could be major big decisions. Either way, there's a certain capacity to detect whether something is good to take on and incorporate it as part of the path towards this ultimate goal or whether it's this pathogen that has to be detoxified from the system immediately. So that's, that's the case with many PDA kids who are kind of overflowing with confidence and self assurance within a particular, well, you know, in themselves. But at the same time there's another paradox. So you know, PDAs full of paradoxes, but it's like I describe it as it's like fourth dimensional living. You know, you kind of have a sense of what your role is. Well what it will eventually be. But when you're young you're not there yet by definition because you have to go through this process called time and that requires patients, which is inconceivable to minds like mine.

Debbie: That's so interesting. I mean I just think this is just so helpful for parents to, he, you know, to just get a better sense of what their child is experiencing and it makes total sense that not kind of seeing or recognizing the hierarchy. I mean I just love the way you express that and again, resonates for me. And so one of the questions is, this isn't a specific question, but it's kind of a theme and I'm sure this comes up a lot from the parents that you work with. Two parents are really struggling to know, know when to push. Like what are things that are important

to quote unquote push for and what isn't. And the, and so they, they're very cognizant of not wanting to place a demand on their child or a trigger, a fight, flight, freeze or fawn response. And they're constantly trying to weigh, is this something that I should be pushing for or should I let this go? Do you have any guidelines or thoughts or how you would advise parents to weigh those considerations?

Harry: Well, the parents have to ask themselves a few questions. First, they have to monitor or observe or detect the demands that may lie within them and they have to ask themselves, is this important? How important is this? Is it important to me or is it also important to my child? Because very often there's, there's a mismatch there as well. What the parent might believe to be important may not be important in real life. But in the same breath, there's a, there's a challenge that it will not be important in the slightest to their child. So they have to monitor their agenda because everyone has an agenda before approaching anyone. Even if it's just, Oh, I just wanted to say hi and check to see if you were okay. Okay. Harmless, harmless intentions. But to someone like myself, it may not be because even, you know, I, one of my, one of my fears is being asked if I'm okay or how are you which, which seem like perfectly innocuous questions, but are you okay is demanding because I get a sense that, Oh gosh, this person wants me to be okay and therefore now I'm not.

So it's important to know that's just, you know, that's just an example of myself and how demand avoidance manifests within my own life. But parents have to be as shrewd as their children are when it comes to detecting the slightest things in their environment. So they have to become very analytical. But when it comes to pushing or whether pushing is permitted or whether encouragement is important you know, there, there are, there's a reason why "I'll race you to the door" is more effective than "put your shoes on. It's time to leave the house." it's not just that the phrasing changes, it's that the entire dynamic changes because put your shoes on time to leave implies that there is separation between the mother and the child and then the child feels anxious and alone and a huge demand is there and the child is not in control and therefore they have to avoid the demand at all costs because the demand is designed to not the child out of, but I'll race you to the door.

The parent presents an activity that benefits both parent and child, in which case there was no separation. So it all depends because encouragement and praise can have a negative effect on a PDA child because it could imply that let's say they, they're on a roll and they're in a flow state like I've spoken about before. All it took from me was all it took for me to cease writing was one measly comment from a person. When is your book done? Or when is your book going to be finished? That person wasn't necessarily encouraging me, but I could detect the urgency in their tone, which immediately unveiled the demand. You know, innocently that person wished for my book to be finished because they wanted to read it and because they wanted to read it, it made me recoil. So the same could be applied to a child in an everyday situation. The child could be doing something and the parent might not be able to help themselves. Well done. Or you're nearly there. I know you can do it. And then that could, ah, that could spell disaster. So

when the child is open to praise, if the child is receptive to praise, if they ask for it, it might be okay. If they ask for encouragement, it's okay because they're opening the door and inviting the parent in. But if it, if the parent just praises, it's like the parents have committed breaking and entering.

Debbie: Wow. Makes absolute sense. And I've done episodes before about just even praise and reward systems and behavioral plans. And you know, I am not a fan. My listeners know that. I, I'm not a fan of using those with kids, but as you're describing this, I mean my hunch is that most of these kids, if they are in a traditional school setting, that it is indeed those behavioral plans and support systems and star charts and all those things are being implemented to modify behavior. And what I'm hearing you say is that is the absolute worst possible thing we could be doing.

Harry: The school system is, is friendly to the PDA child as a pot of salt is to a slug. Yeah.

Debbie: So much food for thought here. And I, I think your point about praise and encouragement too, that is just one of those things I think many parents wouldn't dial in on, right? Because I think we're, we're taught to, to notice and support and I think it's just really good to be aware of.

Harry: It's a case of conditioning and it's no fault of the parents. It's no fault of anyone's really. But the parent has to be prepared to, in a sense, break down these long held convictions that they've harbored for the entirety of their lives. And that, you know, that's a, that's a kind of radical change for the parents to undergo, which can be very difficult. But it's important to know that it's not just the child. Who is about to embark upon a journey. The whole family have to evolve as a unit in order to get this right.

Debbie: Yeah. I just recorded a podcast episode with my friend Seth Perler about education. He's an executive functioning coach and that was one of our points is that parents have to be willing to do the deep inner work on themselves in order for these kids to thrive.

Harry: Couldn't agree more. I couldn't agree more. Absolutely.

Debbie: Well, I'm just, let me just ask one more question that I think will be helpful to my community...

Harry: Definitely. Now, but I can sense that we're wrapping things up. I'm more open to answering some of these questions.

Debbie: Okay, cool.

Harry: Really inconvenient. I know.

Debbie: No worries. No worries. I heard from a lot of parents about even just the, the diagnostic process is tricky here because a lot of people are not tuned into it and they're struggling to get that information. And I'm wondering what your

thoughts are on the importance of having that identification, you know, to really understand that this is actually what's happening with the child rather than this being ADHD or autism spectrum without the PDA component.

Harry: Yeah, I mean, the diagnostic process is difficult enough in my country, so I can't even begin to imagine what it's like over in the States, you know, because you know, PDA does not currently feature in either of the main diagnostic manuals. We use the international classification of diseases here in Europe and in the States. It's the diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders. You will not find pathological demand avoidance in either of those. And therefore PDA is a dirty word. However, you can describe PDA behaviors without alluding to the name. Permanent demand anxiety. You know, demand avoidance is seen right across the spectrum to varying degrees and in various forms. So if we can describe it without courting controversy, it's probably ideal because this is not a case of odd ADHD or OCD. And I'm, I'm, I'm kind of responding to one of the questions, hence why I mentioned those three conditions.

PDA is, "I can't," as opposed to, "I won't," that's a, that's a distinguishing characteristic from, from odd, it's like I can't. I am literally unable, couldn't do it if I tried. It's not a matter of I refuse to do this on the basis that you've asked me. It's being overcome, paralyzed and incapacitated by a malignant force within who fails to distinguish minor request from serious threat. So in a sense there is this, there is a degree of rationality there in the sense that we are avoiding danger. So it's, it's extremely important for at least the, the profile of behavior or the nature of the child's difficulties to be described in exquisite detail. I don't think having the diagnosis is the most important thing, although it can certainly help in certain areas in my country. But so long as the child's needs are outlined and their difficulties are accurately described, I think that probably takes precedence at this point.

Debbie: Well, and I do feel, you know, you said you've noticed kind of in the past couple of months there being just more awareness. I do feel that it's starting to happen. I hope Tilt is being a part of that. I know your work is a part of that. Dr Melissa Neff's work and I'm excited about this event that's happening in Chicago. Again, I'm looking at the flyer right now, so I'm just going to share. It's for parents and professionals. It's a workshop on supporting individuals with a demand avoidance profile of the autism spectrum and it's March 5th and 6th in Chicago. And I will have information on the show notes if you want to check that out and Harry will be there. And I just think this work is so important and I want to thank you for sharing your experience and, and for writing your book and just the work that you do. I'm so happy that you have found this space and that you kind of always knew you were going to be doing this work and it's so impactful. So I'm just really grateful to be able to have shared your perspective with our community today.

Harry: My pleasure. Thank you for having me.

**RESOURCES MENTIONED:**

- Harry Thompson's website
- Harry's YouTube Channel
- *The PDA Paradox: the Highs and Lows of My Life on a Little-Known Part of the Autism Spectrum* by Harry Thompson
- Chicago PDA Workshop
- Diane Gould
- Laura Kerbey
- A Conversation with Dr. Melissa Neff about PDA (podcast episode)
- A Conversation with Autism and Neurodiversity Specialist Kristy Forbes (podcast episode)
- A Conversation Between Debbie Reber and Seth Perler For Teachers and School Administrators (podcast episode)