

Supporting and Understanding Demand Avoidant Behaviour

Helen Mastrilli and Clair Colton | Specialist Advisory Teacher Service



Aim:

To foster an empathetic understanding of how and why children and young people exhibit demand avoidant behaviors within a school environment.

Objectives:

- Explore the concept of demand avoidance, including Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA).
- Develop effective provisions and strategies to support demand avoidant children in school.

Demands

What are DEMANDS?
Julia Daunt

Laws Verbal instructions Desires
Social rules Choices Pecking order Expectations
Wants Rotas Commands Visual instructions
Needs Agendas Recipes Promises Rules
Self-imposed demands Menus
Signs Responsibilities
Written instructions Indirect demands
Star charts Orders
Creating this image! Requests Timetables
Implied demands Direct demands Prompts
Questions Relationships

www.mernyselfandpda.com



Be aware of demands

Demand Avoidant Behaviour: An overwhelming need to avoid everyday demands.

DIRECT DEMANDS



- "Start your work now."
- "This is what you are doing today."

SUBTLE DEMANDS



- "It's time for you to start your work now."
- "Let's have a look at this work."
- "You need to complete this work before the end of the lesson."

SILENT DEMANDS AND EXPECTATIONS



- Visual Timetables
- Tapping your watch
- Placing work in front of a student
- Timers, Manners, Rules etc.



SELF IMPOSED OR INTERNAL DEMANDS



- Perfectionism, time keeping, expectations, sleep, personal hygiene, deadlines etc.



What is PDA?

Pathological Demand Avoidance

A profile of autism characterised by high anxiety and a need to avoid demands and remain in control.

In autism research and clinical practice, a 'profile' refers to a pattern of characteristics that shape how an individual experiences and responds to the world. PDA - Surface sociability, masks deeper social understanding challenges and heightened anxiety. Rapid mood changes and impulsivity, with swings from compliance to intense avoidance and distressed behaviours. Need for control as a way of reducing anxiety. **Persistent Drive for Autonomy.**

What isn't PDA?

Pathological Demand Avoidance

A distinct neurological condition.

A formal diagnosis.

Not ODD. Early PDA research 1980s - 1990s. Broader awareness 2000s.

2010 onwards - Mainstream discussion but not in the DSM-5

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) does not provide separate guidelines for PDA. This means identification is dependent on clinicians and local pathways (Christie et al., 2022).

Why it is important to understand demand avoidance

Neurodiversity Type/Profile	Status of Demand Avoidance	Underlying Reason for Avoidance
Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA)	Defining and Overwhelming Characteristic	Anxiety-driven need for autonomy and control . Any demand (even desired ones) is perceived as a threat, triggering a "fight, flight, or freeze" response.
Autism	Common Feature/Co-occurs	Avoidance is often linked to anxiety, sensory overload , difficulty with transitions , or disruption of rigid routines .
Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)	Common Feature/Co-occurs (Milder form)	Avoidance stems from deficits in executive function (e.g., difficulty initiating tasks, low tolerance for frustration, or being overwhelmed by the steps needed).

A School Day Full of Demands

From morning till evening, a continuous stream of expectations.



How are demands avoided?



Children and Young People will use a wide range of avoidance strategies:

- Manipulating social situations to remain in control.
- Refusal: “I can’t”, “I won’t”
- Making excuses: “My legs don’t work!”
- Distraction – “Oh look outside – a squirrel!”
- Arguing
- Delaying
- Shock tactics
- Suggesting alternatives
- Withdrawing into fantasy

How does it feel ?

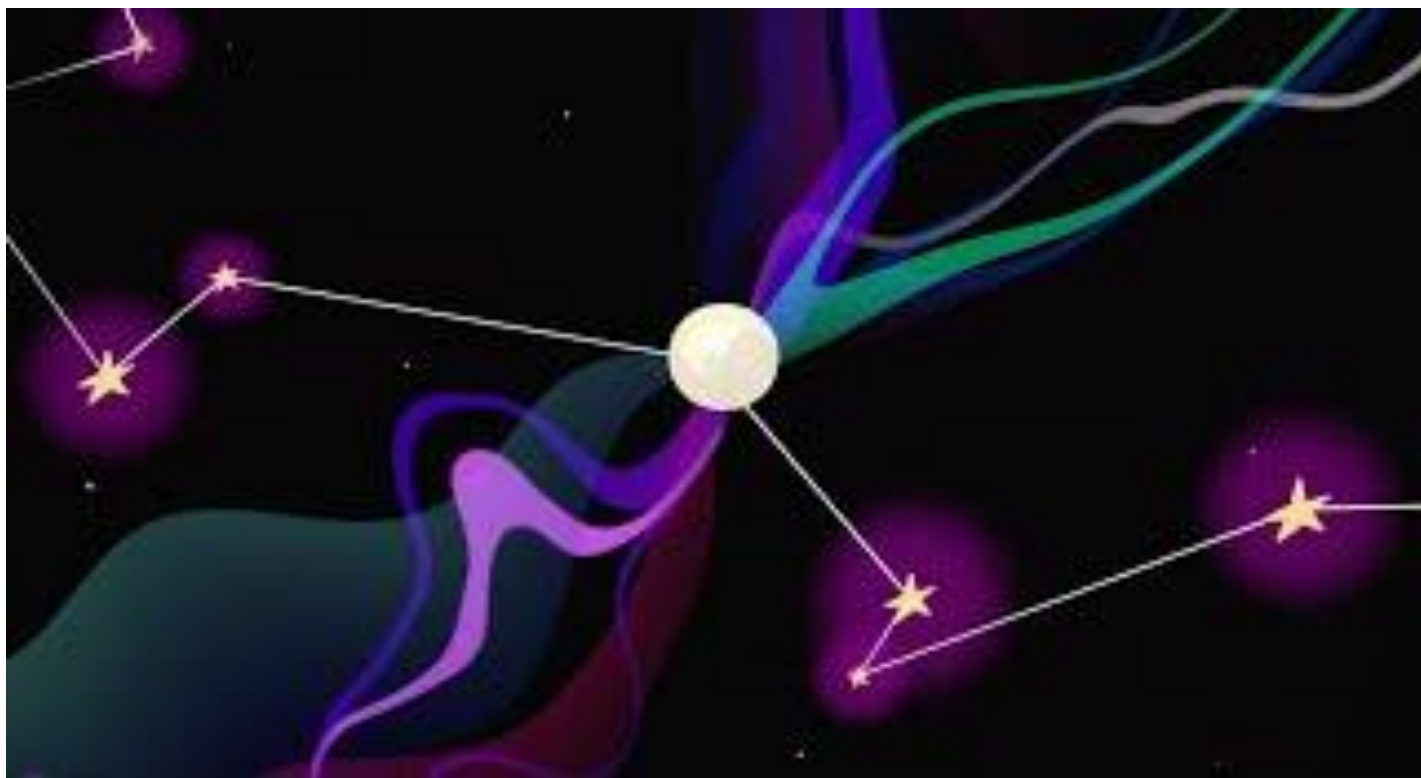
“Pushing me to comply can result in such panic that I may lash out or have a meltdown.”

“Not being able to do so many things that I would like to do is as frustrating for me as it is for you!”

“I even find it difficult to engage in things I enjoy if it has been suggested by someone else”

“My anxiety stops me from doing the things I want to do as well as the things I don't want to do.”

- Source: Jane Sherwin (2014) www.thepdaresource.com



Recognising demand avoidance leads to different approaches

Typical Strategies to manage behaviour	Strategies recognising demand avoidance
Structure is important - Clear rules and boundaries	Structure is important - flexibility, negotiation and collaboration around boundaries
Rewards and sanctions	Highlight learning from natural consequences. Keep things simple - reduce perceived demands.
Emphasis on rules and compliance	Emphasis on safety and as much autonomy as possible.

By staying calm and offering a safe space for recovery you can help a young person get back to a more regulated state. Once they've had time to regulate, try supporting them to reflect and problem solve.

- **Show empathy and build trust:** “I find this hard too, It helps me to...”
- **Share the demand:** work alongside, creating an equality in the relationship and an unspoken expectation of "work time/task completion"
- **Think about language** - use words that emphasise possibilities "I wonder" approach
- **Use challenges and humour,** ‘I will race you’
- **Incidental Learning:** enable the student to "discover" rather than directly instructing
- **Offer choice and explain reasons:** Let them lead where possible.
- **Reduce pressures and monitor tolerance:** Allow extra time, don't always worry about finishing, pick your battles, have a plan B.
- **Praise indirectly:** ‘I really like how...’ ‘I really enjoyed working on this..’ talk about how YOU feel.
- **Provide opportunities** to help in the classroom or demonstrate what they are good at.

Effective Provision

There are basically 5 things that motivate the developing brain.

Just remember:

What motivates young people ?

PINCH



P Play (Humour/creativity)



I Interest



N Novelty



C Competition



H Hurry Up
(Urgency or fear)

When demands prove too much!

Running Away!

Physical or
verbal
Aggression!

Swearing!

Throwing

Hiding

Self
Harming!

Shutting down

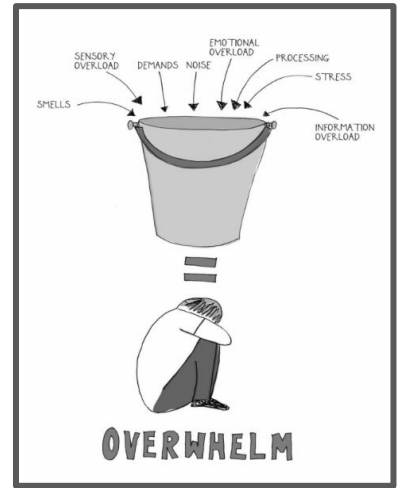
Damaging
Property!

Shouting



Think of it as a PANIC ATTACK!!

Recognise that outward behaviours are underpinned by the threat to autonomy.
Consider emotional, social and sensory overload.



- Empathy
- Validation
- Time
- Space
- Understanding

Dealing with a crisis or panic attack.

Don't personalise

Do not threaten or sanction

Don't shout

Use Distraction

Be flexible

Stay Calm

Do not negotiate during meltdown

Use Empathy

Use Humour

Stay safe

Preventative Strategies

These strategies are for when the cyp is already showing signs of

Aim: To identify signs of escalation and divert a child or young person before crisis point is reached.

De-escalation



De-escalation

- Avoid a power struggle.
- Use a calm, low tone of voice and simple, direct language.
- Avoid asking too many questions.
- Offer simple choices or a direct instruction to a calm space.

Model and Practice Calming Strategies



Model and Practice Calming Strategies

- Teach specific techniques for the moment (e.g., deep breathing, counting backward).
- Practice when calm to use when upset.

Low Arousal Approach (Classroom Environment)



Low Arousal Approach

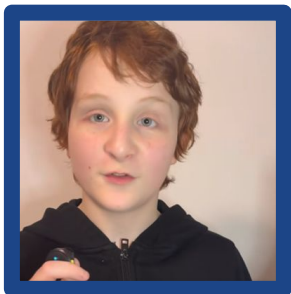
- Maintain a calm, predictable classroom environment.
- Reduce sensory overload (noise, visual clutter).
- Use a calm, soft voice and slow movements.
- Provide clear, simple choices and allow personal space.
- Avoid confrontations and demanding language.

Declarative Language Examples	
Imperative	Declarative
● Can you do this?	● This looks tricky
● Stop yelling!	● Wow, that's loud!
● Clean your room.	● There's not much space on the floor right now.
● Put on your shoes.	● Your shoes are by the door
● Get your homework done.	● I've been thinking about how homework fits into today.
● Don't spill that!	● Oops, that might spill over.
● Help me with these bags	● These bags are heavy
● Brush your teeth.	● My teeth feel great after I brush them.
● Pack up your toys.	● There are a lot of toys on the floor.

comfa
www.comfa.co.uk

The broad term **declarative language** describes intentional communication used to “direct another person’s attention, comment, share information, or share interest” (Harbison, McDaniel, Yoder, 2016). ‘Declarative language,’ the strategy, is a way of giving a verbal cue so that the young person is prompted to think of a solution, not prompted with the solution.

<https://www.atpeaceparents.com/>



Declarative Language



<https://www.facebook.com/comfaclothing>

ASCT Getting Started Guide to: Declarative Language



DECLARATIVE LANGUAGE HANDBOOK

Using a Thoughtful Language Style to Help Kids with Social Learning Challenges Feel Competent, Connected, and Understood

Linda K. Murphy MS, CCC-SLP

DECLARATIVE LANGUAGE NUTS & BOLTS CHEAT SHEET

These are *options*. Pick & choose what is developmentally right for your learner!

<p>A SIMPLE COMMENT THAT OBSERVES</p> <p>The dog looks hungry. Those flowers are really colorful!</p>	<p>1ST PERSON PRONOUNS THAT MODEL AN IDEA OR CREATE PARTNERSHIP</p> <p><i>I, me, my, mine We, let's, us, ours</i></p> <p>Let's go get our bags. We had fun yesterday! The teacher is waiting for us. I wonder if your friend likes pretzels.</p>
<p>WORDS THAT EMPHASIZE UNCERTAINTY, POSSIBILITY & ALTERNATIVES</p> <p>Maybe your friend wants to play too. We might go outside later. I'm not sure.</p>	<p>COGNITIVE VERBS</p> <p><i>maybe, might perhaps, possibly sometimes, not sure, almost</i></p> <p><i>think, hope, remember, forget, decide, wish, wonder, know, don't know, imagine</i></p>
<p>OBSERVATIONAL WORDS OR WORDS RELATED TO OUR SENSES</p> <p><i>notice, see, hear, smell, feel</i></p> <p>I notice everyone is ready for our story. I heard your friend ask you something. I can tell your friend feels happy!</p>	<p>MINDFUL PACING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It's really important to give everyone time to think. Pause so your learner can respond in their own unique way. Don't be afraid of silence!

declarativelanguage.com

MOVING FROM "GET" TO "GIVE"

GUIDING PRINCIPLES WHEN USING DECLARATIVE LANGUAGE & CO-REGULATION

- 1. ENTER EACH ENGAGEMENT WITH A POSITIVE INTENTION.**

This should NEVER be about compliance. Often, when we offer autonomy (choice around how or if the individual joins), a competent role, & processing time*, the individual joins on their own. If they don't, refer to #3, 4 & 5.

Your intention and mindset matter because the individual you are with will feel it, and respond in kind. When you assume a "giving" over "getting" mindset, they become more likely to open themselves up to vulnerability & learning.
- 2. INVITE BUT DON'T DEMAND.**

Make sure you match your declarative statements with a tone of voice & rate of speech that is inviting. This might be curious, empathic, playful, or even neutral. When we use an impatient or sharp tone, or speak with a fast rate that does not allow for processing time, it will come off as a demand, and undermine the process you are trying to create.
- 3. USE A TONE OF VOICE THAT IS OPEN & INVITING AND A SLOWER RATE OF SPEECH.**

Similar to #3, ensure your gestures, body position, & facial expressions are soft, warm, and inviting. Tense muscles communicate stress & the individual will feel it. Take a deep breath, or use a tool that works for you, so you communicate presence, openness, & support.
- 4. USE NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION THAT IS OPEN, UNDERSTANDING, & CONNECTING.**

Meet the individual where they are developmentally, but also in each moment. Remember that anxiety, stress responses (fight/fright/freeze), decreased interoceptive awareness (IA), & negative episodic memories (EM), can get in the way of engagement, regardless of what you think the individual "should" be able to do.
- 5. OFFER AUTONOMY & A COMPETENT ROLE THAT IS RIGHT FOR EACH UNIQUE MOMENT.**

When something is not working, it's important to give the individual the benefit of the doubt. Consider why you both might be stuck in that moment: Loss of autonomy? Uncertainty? Anxiety around feelings of competence? Attention? Comprehension? Processing time? Offer specific support that matches the moment.
- 6. SCAFFOLD LEARNING & ENGAGEMENT IN A DYNAMIC WAY.**

Use declarative language to reflect on the past & plan for the future, in an ongoing way. Enjoy letting your narratives develop over time. This is how we teach self-awareness, self-advocacy, repair, problem solving, time management, respectful taking, & more!
- 7. EPISODIC MEMORY IS CRITICAL.**

It is okay to set limits when needed, for example for safety. When you do, make sure the limit is reasonable & you have communicated it clearly & respectfully, and have explained your rationale, using declarative language. Understanding why you are setting the limit often helps the individual process and feel okay with it.
- 8. SET THOUGHTFUL LIMITS WITH CARE.**

declarativelanguage.com

<https://www.declarativelanguage.com/>

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Resources

<https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/research-professional-practice/education-professional-practice/>

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