

DEMAND AVOIDANCE

A demand arrives and the body blocks the action. The driver underneath is anxiety; the need underneath the anxiety is autonomy. It is not defiance, it is not laziness, and it is not procrastination — and it fires on the thing a person has waited years for as readily as on the chore.

CAN'T, NOT WON'T.

THE KNOWING IS INTACT · THE DOING IS NOT

“HE CAN DO IT WHEN HE WANTS TO.”

Offered as proof of choice. It describes a threat response that varies with load. The same demand is possible on a light day and impossible on a heavy one, and nothing about that is a decision.

“SHE MANAGED IT YESTERDAY.”

Yesterday was lighter. Demand avoidance is not about whether the task is wanted — it lands on a favourite film, on eating, on going to bed when tired. Desirability never enters into it.

“YOU’RE JUST GIVING IN.”

Dropping a demand a child cannot meet is not a concession in a negotiation. It is removing the load that was producing the response you want to reduce.

“we know what we should do, but the anxiety we’re feeling disables us. We just can’t do it.”

WENN LAWSON, AUTISTIC PSYCHOLOGIST · ‘DIFFERENT, NOT LESS’, 2026

WHAT COUNTS AS A DEMAND

Far more than a teacher's instruction. Lawson lists the ones that arrive from nowhere:

- a request from another person
- the turn of someone's voice
- a clock, or a time of day
- your own body asking you to eat, sleep, or use the bathroom
- a plan you made yourself and were looking forward to

A child who cannot start a task they chose, or cannot eat when hungry, is not negotiating for advantage.

WHAT TO ASK FOR IN THE ROOM

- the demand reduced **first**, not as a reward for progress
- choices offered instead of instructions given
- one trusted adult who holds the relationship
- rewards, sanctions and time-out named and taken off the table
- anger recorded as communication, not as an incident
- the question asked of the environment: what changed on the bad days?

WHAT THIS SHEET DOES, AND DOESN'T

- ✓ it does treat the refusal as a nervous system under load
- ✓ it does ask for the practice rather than the diagnosis
- ✓ it does hold the label as genuinely contested
- ✓ it does **not** claim PDA is a settled diagnostic category
- ✓ it does **not** claim every refusal is demand avoidance
- ✓ it does **not** argue that no demand can ever be made

You do not need the school to accept the label. The adjustments recommended for demand avoidance are “suitable for most children, not just those diagnosed with PDA.”

RICHARD WOODS · AUTONOMY, 2019 · ASK FOR THE PRACTICE, NOT THE DIAGNOSIS

Adapted from the *Demand Avoidance Why Sheet* at stimpunks.org/why/demand-avoidance, which carries every quotation and its source. Connolly, Constable & Mullally (*Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 2023) record that an unrecognised demand avoidant presentation is “viewed as defiance and deliberately challenging behavior, leading to school exclusions,” that “pressure to comply with direct demands is well-documented to lead to escalation,” and that a 2018 survey found **70% of school aged demand avoidant children were either not enrolled in school or unable to tolerate their school environment**. Truman, Crane, Howlin & Pellicano (*International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 28(1), 2024) found the operative factors “external to the child.” Wenn Lawson is an Autistic psychologist; his talks are quoted from the videos' own machine-generated captions. *The asks on this sheet are practice, not statute – the strongest legal framing in this literature is UK, and a parent in a US meeting cannot use it.*