

Demand Avoidance

The refusal is a threat response, not defiance. Compliance pressure is the one reply guaranteed to escalate it — and the adjustments that do work are good teaching for every child.

Reach for it when a school has decided a child is being defiant, and the child is drowning.

The Short Version

Demand avoidance is what happens when a demand arrives and the body blocks the action.

It is not defiance, and it is not a choice. The driver underneath it is anxiety, and the need underneath the anxiety is autonomy.

It fires on things the person wants to do as readily as on things they dread — so "they managed it yesterday" and "they do it when they feel like it" are not evidence of choice.

Compliance pressure is the one response guaranteed to make it worse. Rewards, sanctions, and escalating insistence are the standard school reply, and every one of them raises the demand the child is already unable to meet.

The adjustments that work — negotiation, choice, flexibility, dropping the demand — are ordinary good teaching. They do not require the school to accept any diagnosis.

Why This Sheet Exists

Somewhere in a meeting, someone says a version of this sentence:

He can do it when he wants to.

It is offered as proof of choice. It is a description of a threat response that varies with load, and it is about to become the reason for a behaviour plan.

This sheet is for the meeting where a child's inability to meet demands has been filed as defiance, and the plan on the table is more pressure.

Can't, Not Won't

The distinction the room keeps collapsing is the whole argument.

So, as autistic people, PDA people, we know what we should do, but the anxiety we're feeling disables us. We just can't do it.

— Wenn Lawson, 'Different, not Less': Autistic and PDA (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTMJ8HX_Lk0), The PDA Space, 2026

Lawson is an Autistic psychologist describing his own nervous system. The knowledge of what should happen is intact. The capacity to act on it is not.

That is also why the avoidance is not personal, however personally it lands:

This is not directed at you personally. This is self-preservation.

— Wenn Lawson, 'Different, not Less': Autistic and PDA (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTMJ8HX_Lk0), The PDA Space, 2026

A parent in the largest study of these children's school experience put the same distinction to a school that would not take it:

Because he doesn't look or behave like a 'typical' autistic child, the school have struggled to accept that his behaviour is not deliberate and that his reactions are due to anxiety, not disobedience.

— a parent, quoted in Truman, Crane, Howlin & Pellicano, The educational experiences of autistic children with and without extreme demand avoidance behaviours (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13603116.2021.1916108>), *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 28(1), 2024

It Is Not About Whether They Want To

This is the point that most often turns a meeting around, because it dismantles the evidence the school thinks it has.

The feeling at the heart of PDA is rarely related to the desirability of the task at hand, in fact in my case it wouldn't even cross my mind.

— Autistamatic, Deconstructing PDA: What Lies at The Heart of "Pathological Demand Avoidance" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOrsMUyGnq4>), 2023

It could be the most laborious and unpleasant job you could think of or something we've looked forward to and worked towards for years and we could still face the same emotional dilemma.

— Autistamatic, Deconstructing PDA: What Lies at The Heart of "Pathological Demand Avoidance" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOrsMUyGnq4>), 2023

A demand does not have to come from a teacher, or from anyone. Lawson lists the ones that arrive from nowhere:

it's not just about putting things off or procrastinating it's about the essence of innate [demands] of any nature from needing to use the bathroom watching a favorite movie [or] eating food getting dressed even going to bed when we are tired they can be the demand we hear in the turn of someone's voice the demand we place upon ourselves or even the demand around the time of day

— Wenn Lawson, PDA (Pathological Demand Avoidance) or Persistent Drive for Autonomy (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pw9fNf9jShw>), 2020

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

What the School Does Next, and What It Costs

When the response is not recognised, it gets read as character.

...when demand avoidant CYP are not identified, their presentation is viewed as defiance and deliberately challenging behavior, leading to school exclusions

— Connolly, Constable & Mullally, School distress and the school attendance crisis (<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychiatry/articles/10.3389/fpsyt.2023.1237052/full>), *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 2023

And then the standard reply makes it worse, which is not a surprise in the literature:

...pressure to comply with direct demands is well-documented to lead to escalation in emotional reactivity and challenging behavior

— Connolly, Constable & Mullally, School distress and the school attendance crisis (<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychiatry/articles/10.3389/fpsyt.2023.1237052/full>), *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 2023

The scale of the failure is visible in where these children end up:

...a 2018 survey found that 70% of school aged demand avoidant CYP were either not enrolled in school or were unable to tolerate their school environment

– Connolly, Constable & Mullally, School distress and the school attendance crisis (<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychiatry/articles/10.3389/fpsyt.2023.1237052/full>), *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 2023

Seventy percent is not a description of seventy percent of children failing. It is a description of a setting.

Truman and colleagues found the same thing pointing outward rather than inward:

...many of these potential factors leading to a negative school experience are factors external to the child and centre instead on the practice and understanding of those around them, particularly the education professionals with whom they interact.

– Truman, Crane, Howlin & Pellicano, The educational experiences of autistic children with and without extreme demand avoidance behaviours (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13603116.2021.1916108>), *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 28(1), 2024

Behaviorism Cannot Reach This, By Design

A behaviour plan assumes the behaviour is chosen. That assumption is the failure, and it is structural rather than a matter of implementation quality.

Teaching replacement behaviors is not possible for stress responses since they are automatic responses that occur beneath the level of conscious thought.

– The Problem With Behaviorism (<https://endseclusion.org/articles/the-problem-with-behaviorism/>), endseclusion.org

To be punished for a stress response is harmful and traumatic.

– The Problem With Behaviorism (<https://endseclusion.org/articles/the-problem-with-behaviorism/>), endseclusion.org

...the repeated assertion that students use their behavior to get something or to get out of something, along with the lack of information about autonomic reactions (stress responses) is incorrect and results in children being misunderstood and punished for behaviors that are not within their volitional control.

– The Problem With Behaviorism (<https://endseclusion.org/articles/the-problem-with-behaviorism/>), endseclusion.org

Lawson says the same thing from inside, about the specific tools a school reaches for first:

Rewards and sanctions are not effective for our young people.

— Wenn Lawson, 'Different, not Less': Autistic and PDA (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTMJ8HX_Lk0), The PDA Space, 2026

In non-PDA, you're giving clear boundaries. You're being quite directive. You might even use time out because they work. These do not work in PDA. They only make things worse.

— Wenn Lawson, 'Different, not Less': Autistic and PDA (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTMJ8HX_Lk0), The PDA Space, 2026

See also Behaviorism (<https://stimpunks.org/why/behaviorism/>) and ABA Tactics (<https://stimpunks.org/why/aba-tactics/>).

What Works Instead

Reduce the demand. Offer the choice. Negotiate.

...removing the demand and replace with negotiation can be very, very helpful.

— Wenn Lawson, 'Different, not Less': Autistic and PDA (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTMJ8HX_Lk0), The PDA Space, 2026

...negotiation brings huge relief and is very enabling

— Wenn Lawson, PDA (Pathological Demand Avoidance) or Persistent Drive for Autonomy (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pw9fNf9jShw>), 2020

The research describes the same two adjustments:

The importance of using these different strategies, which include allowing the child increased autonomy and avoiding rewards and sanctions, has been emphasised by some academics and practitioners.

— Truman, Crane, Howlin & Pellicano, The educational experiences of autistic children with and without extreme demand avoidance behaviours (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13603116.2021.1916108>), *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 28(1), 2024

And a parent in that study describes what changed when a school made the switch:

When his school tried using strategies that help children with autism, things got worse, anxiety increased and he ended up out of school (signed off with anxiety). Now PDA strategies and support are being used, he is thriving in a large mainstream school.

— a parent, quoted in Truman, Crane, Howlin & Pellicano, The educational experiences of autistic children with and without extreme demand avoidance behaviours (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13603116.2021.1916108>), *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 28(1), 2024

Same child. Same mainstream school. Different demands.

"You're Just Giving In"

This is the objection, and it deserves a direct answer rather than a defensive one.

Please don't feel guilty like you're giving in to this child's whims. No, you're lessening their anxiety because you love them.

— Wenn Lawson, 'Different, not Less': Autistic and PDA (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTMJ8HX_Lk0), The PDA Space, 2026

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

The objection also has a hidden premise worth naming: that compliance now buys capacity later. Nothing in the evidence above supports it, and the 70% figure runs the other way.

Parents carry a cost in this room too, and it is documented:

School number 4 decided to prosecute me instead of helping us.

— a parent, quoted in Truman, Crane, Howlin & Pellicano, The educational experiences of autistic children with and without extreme demand avoidance behaviours (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13603116.2021.1916108>), *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 28(1), 2024

You Do Not Need the School to Accept the Label

This matters practically, because many schools will not.

Truman and colleagues found that parents reported teachers who "did not necessarily 'believe' in the existence of PDA." A sheet that only works after the school concedes a contested diagnosis is a sheet that fails in most rooms.

It does not have to work that way. Richard Woods looked at the adjustments recommended for PDA and noticed what they are:

It is striking that besides a specific key worker for each person (due to the financial costs); most of these adjustments are suitable for most children, not just those diagnosed with PDA [...]. Implementing most of these practices with all pupils would help all pupils with their wellbeing and feel part of the school community, which is pivotal to reaching the highest level of inclusive education.

— Richard Woods, Pathological Demand Avoidance: Is it time to move beyond the pathological need to not to develop more inclusive pedagogical practices? (web.archive.org/web/2019/09/10/https://www.autism.org.uk/what-is-autism/what-is-demand-avoidance/what-is-demand-avoidance), *Autonomy*, 2019

The list he is describing — a trusted key adult, flexibility, indirect praise, letting things go, negotiating by offering choices, tone of voice, treating anger as communication, humour, variety in how material is presented — is good teaching. Ask for the practice, not the label.

The label itself is genuinely contested, and this sheet does not need to settle it. Damian Milton argues the behaviours could be read as "the behaviours of an autistic person who has gained a modicum of normative social skills and is simply asserting their agency," and that "the labelling of the expressions of autistic agency as pathological is in itself disempowering" (Milton, 2013 (<http://web.archive.org/web/20240223111844/https://kar.kent.ac.uk/62694/>)). Woods argues elsewhere that the category "attributes actions, behaviour and temperament onto the individual and away from the organisations and how organisations treat such individuals" (Woods, *Disability & Society*, 2017 (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09687599.2017.1308705>)).

Both critiques point the same way this sheet does: at the room, not the child.

What to Ask For in the Room

- **Ask for the demand to be reduced before anything else is tried.** Not as a reward for progress and not as a last resort — as the first adjustment, because pressure to comply is documented to escalate the very response the plan is meant to reduce.
- **Ask for choices to be offered instead of instructions given.** Two acceptable options are a demand a child can meet. One instruction often is not. This costs nothing and needs no diagnosis.
- **Ask for one trusted adult who holds the relationship.** It is the single adjustment Woods flags as genuinely resource-dependent, which means it needs naming in a plan rather than hoping.

- **Ask that rewards, sanctions, and time-out be taken off the table for this child.** Name them specifically. A general commitment to "positive behaviour support" will not remove them, and both Lawson and the behaviorism critique identify them as actively counterproductive here.
 - **Ask that anger be recorded as communication, not as an incident.** How a response is logged determines what happens next, and a log full of incidents builds toward exclusion.
 - **Ask what changed in the environment on the days it went badly.** This moves the question from the child's character to the setting's variables, which is where Truman and colleagues found the operative factors.
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A Note on the Quotations

Quotations from published papers are verbatim. A leading ... marks a sentence begun partway through, and [...] marks an in-text citation removed from the middle of a quotation.

Quotations from recorded talks are taken from the videos' own captions, which are machine-generated and carry no punctuation. They are reproduced as captioned. Square brackets mark the two places where the caption clearly mis-heard a word.

Every quotation on this sheet was checked as a string against its source.

What This Sheet Is Not

It is not a claim that PDA is a settled diagnostic category. It is not in the DSM-5 or ICD-10, and Autistic scholars including Milton and Woods argue against the construct. Nothing here depends on resolving that.

It is not a claim that every refusal is demand avoidance. Autistamatic distinguishes avoidance with transparent reasons — needing clarity, a sensory barrier, a moral objection — from the phenomenon described here. Those have their own answers.

It is not a claim that no demand can ever be made. It is a claim about which demands, how many, how they arrive, and what happens when one cannot be met.

It is not medical advice, and it is not a legal argument. The asks above are practice, not statute. Rights frameworks differ by country, and the research quoted here is UK-based.

It is not a claim that schools are staffed by people who want this outcome. The failure documented above is a failure of model and training, not of care.

The Principle

A child who cannot meet a demand is telling you the demand is too heavy, not that you are not heavy enough.

Lower the demand. Keep the child.

Further Reading

- [Demand Avoidance](https://stimpunks.org/glossary/demand-avoidance/) (https://stimpunks.org/glossary/demand-avoidance/) — our glossary entry, with the contested-label argument in the sources' own words
 - [Monotropism](https://stimpunks.org/glossary/monotropism/) (https://stimpunks.org/glossary/monotropism/) · [Exposure Anxiety](https://stimpunks.org/glossary/exposure-anxiety/) (https://stimpunks.org/glossary/exposure-anxiety/) · [Situational Mutism](https://stimpunks.org/glossary/situational-mutism/) (https://stimpunks.org/glossary/situational-mutism/) · [Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria](https://stimpunks.org/glossary/rejection-sensitive-dysphoria/) (https://stimpunks.org/glossary/rejection-sensitive-dysphoria/) · [School-Induced Anxiety](https://stimpunks.org/glossary/school-induced-anxiety/) (https://stimpunks.org/glossary/school-induced-anxiety/)
 - [Behaviorism](https://stimpunks.org/why/behaviorism/) (https://stimpunks.org/why/behaviorism/) — why a model that watches only compliance cannot see a stress response
 - [ABA Tactics](https://stimpunks.org/why/aba-tactics/) (https://stimpunks.org/why/aba-tactics/) · [Alternatives to ABA](https://stimpunks.org/why/alternatives-to-aba/) (https://stimpunks.org/why/alternatives-to-aba/)
 - [Monotropism](https://stimpunks.org/why/monotropism/) (https://stimpunks.org/why/monotropism/) — the attention theory that explains why an interruption is not a small thing
 - [PDA, Punk Rock, and Non Violent Communication](https://stimpunks.org/2026/08/28/pda-punk-rock-and-non-violent-communication/) (https://stimpunks.org/2026/08/28/pda-punk-rock-and-non-violent-communication/) — Peyton Belunek on autonomy as a basic human need
 - [What is demand avoidance?](https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/what-is-pda-menu/what-is-demand-avoidance/) (https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/what-is-pda-menu/what-is-demand-avoidance/) — PDA Society
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This sheet is also published as a page on [stimpunks.org](#).

There is a [one-sheet broadside](#) of this argument — the version you pin up.