

Anxiety-Based Demand Avoidance

Information for parents, carers and professionals

What is anxiety-based demand avoidance?

- Anxiety-based demand avoidance comes under the umbrella of ASD (Autistic Spectrum Disorder), as a Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) type presentation.
- This may apply in many children with ASD.
- This may not be an official diagnosis but a way of understanding your child.
- It's highly variable in its relevance depending on the environment and the demands. This may be more relevant at some points in time than others.
- It is important to recognise these difficulties as some of the advised strategies that help are different from 'typical' ASD strategies.

What does it look like?

- Changes in mood and behaviour are driven by a need for control, due to the child's anxiety rather than them being oppositional.
- Anxiety can sometimes lead to impulsivity, agitation and irritability. People around the child often report feeling as though they are "walking on eggshells".
- Child can't always help the fact they won't do what you want.
- High levels of anxiety in the face of very normal demands at school or at home, often leading to "fight or flight" responses. The nature of the demand makes little difference as the anxiety is caused by the process of demands being made.
- The child may cope using avoidance strategies, such as: delaying tactics and using distraction, shouting, explosive tantrums/meltdowns, making excuses, and prolonged evasive discussions or negotiations.
- Explosive behaviour often comes out when the child cannot respond in a better way. The child may cope by keeping a low profile at school, but then behaves much worse at home.
- Demand avoidance may lead to the child achieving significantly below their potential. Difficulties may get worse over time as academic and social demands increase.
- Sensory or learning issues might be overlooked due to other behaviours.
- The child can become exhausted from their hyper-vigilance to demands and change.
- Can cause low self-esteem due to child's anticipated failure to meet other peoples' demands and expectations. This leads to a greater fear of demands being placed on them.
- The child may try to control peer relationships, then blame the other child when things go wrong. They struggle greatly with managing disagreements using compromise and resolving conflict.

Demands – there are lots of different kinds

- Requests, orders, instructions from adults or peers.
- Social demands – fitting in, looking OK, being popular or cool.
- Physical, sensory, environmental, emotional, mental effort.
- Making and keeping friends.
- Being on time.
- Getting homework done.
- Being organised – right place, right time, right stuff.
- Pressures increase as we get older, demands become more complex and less direct or clear.
- Actual demands but also expectations, perceived or implied demands and peer pressure all contribute to the child's anxiety.
- The demands each child makes on themselves, e.g. to get things right, to fit in with peers.

Confusing for adults because.....

- The child is puzzling to 'work out' as behaviours can sometimes be changeable.
- The child's variable tolerance for demands – across minutes, hours, days and weeks. The child may cope with something one day but not the next, then manages well the day after that!
- Progress is not 'linear'. There may be periods of settled behaviour where the adults are lulled into a false sense of the problem being permanently solved. Services and support strategies are then removed, followed by rapid deterioration.
- Strategies that work for other children with ASD don't always apply.
- Rewards and consequences may not work for long, or not at all.
- It's hard to know if the child's behaviour is being driven by anxiety or they are simply misbehaving.
- The child might say "No" to something even though they enjoy the activity, simply to avoid the demand.
- They place more energy into avoiding the demand than complying, which may seem bizarre to adults.
- It's complicated by other developmental factors, personal circumstances and life events.
- Skills to cope with increasing academic and social demands develop more slowly in children with a PDA type presentation.
- The child may give the impression of having a greater social understanding than they actually do.



AT SCHOOL

What we need from schools.....

- A strong commitment to inclusion and not expecting the child to simply 'fit in', as adaptations will need to be made.
- Positive attitudes toward inclusion, flexibility, agility and child-centeredness.
- Strong support from the Headteacher and SENCO.
- School to be prepared to develop attitudes and expectations required to educate a child whose extreme levels of anxiety drives avoidance of adult demands.
- An understanding that challenging behaviour is driven by a child's anxiety about learning or their environment. Exclusions from school or activities are likely to reinforce a child's avoidance.
- Staff trained in managing demand avoidance.
- Small group of staff to be involved with the child and ideally not left to a single teaching assistant. Staff working with the child to be well supported, as the child's behaviour may be extreme, unpredictable and inconsistent. This work will be emotionally and physically draining.
- Staff to be able to debrief and regularly self-reflect on their interactions with the child so they do not take the child's behaviour personally, and are therefore able to maintain a positive relationship with the child.
- Effective team working is essential so staff are not played off against each other.
- Commitment to developing individualised strategies for the child and an acknowledgement that this child will need a higher level of individual support on a long-term basis.
- Provision of differentiated and personalised curriculum, emphasising their personal and social education, development of self-awareness, and social and emotional regulation skills.
- Academic work needs to be presented in a creative and flexible way, to encourage the child to engage using their interests.
- Ability to share the balance of power with the child and tolerate that sometimes the child will have more power than staff do.
- Commitment to work with and communicate with the family in a positive and supportive way. A open strong partnership is vital. Priorities and strategies need to be agreed within school and with the family.
- Prioritise what is important when determining which demands to insist upon, e.g. safety, positive experience of school, social opportunities etc. On other days, compliance with routines, completing work, wearing the correct uniform may be less of a priority – essentially 'pick your battles'.
- Recognition that progress is not linear, and that periods of improvement may soon be followed by setbacks.



The child as a learner

- The child may struggle to even get into school (allowing them to avoid everything to do with school), due to anticipatory anxiety of the perceived demands. Challenges with transport and transitions from home to school are very likely.
- Their predominant state is one of anxiety - fear of failure and fear of not being in control. Therefore, it may feel safer for them to avoid demands altogether.
- The child may put considerable time and energy into getting nothing done.
- Low self-esteem, ambivalence about success/enjoyment. The child may want to be good at things but avoidant of the effort needed to achieve this.
- Very poor emotional regulation with mood swings that can be short-lived or extended.
- The child's tolerance is anxiety related, so there will be days when very little can be achieved.
- The child is highly vigilant for perceived threats which can be exhausting for them.
- Peer relationships are much wanted but sabotaged by the need to be in control. They struggle to take responsibility for their own behaviour.
- Aggression is anxiety-based, so the child may use threatening and abusive language.
- The child may use fantasy and role play to cut off from everyday pressures. This can lead to difficulties differentiating fantasy from reality.
- The child will do well if they can, but they might not be able to help that they can't.

Teaching Strategies

- An initial focus on building trust with the child is crucial. The quality of relationship is important for progress to be made. Start with only a few demands while the relationship develops. Spend time with the child on their terms, find out what the child is interested in, what they like doing, what is soothing, what helps the child access learning, and what makes them laugh.
- Work toward expanding their network of key people (ideally 3-5 adults in school).
- Work with the family to manage transitions from home to school so the child has a positive start to the school day.
- Provide frequent opportunities to engage the child in activities that promote emotional regulation. Use these to manage obvious anxiety and also to reduce 'background' or anticipatory anxiety. When opportunities allow, teach strategies to reduce anxiety, such as relaxation, physical exercise etc.
- The child may be able to make use of talking/debriefing when calm. Develop a range of options to re-establish engagement. At times of greater insight and better regulation, work with the child to understand their experiences, and important things for staff and others to know about them.
- Meltdowns will happen, so have a plan for when they do occur and for helping the child to recover afterwards in a way that maintains their dignity and relationship with the adult.
- Adults around the child need to remain emotionally calm and level headed as possible. Anxious children need help to calm, not punishment for perceived 'bad behaviour'.

Continued.....

- As the child gets older and more able, encourage them to identify their own stress levels and provide ways for them to communicate this to others.
- Get to know when to pursue and when to reduce demands.
- Disguise and minimise expectations (see '**Disguising Demands**' section below).
- Avoid confrontation.
- Think ahead. What might be tricky? Are there predictable triggers, e.g. a change of teachers.
- Advance notice – tell the child what's going to happen next. This gives them a sense of being in control and allows them some extra processing time. Visuals or colour coding with timetables and schedules will help.
- Getting adults' own expectations right - perhaps teach the child in a lower ability group so the demands feel more manageable for the child and they can gain a sense of achievement and competence before focusing on academic progress.
- Flexibility and adaptability. A strategy that doesn't work, might work at some point in the future - so don't give up on it.
- Use drama and role play to depersonalise requests and teach the child about their social world and relationships.
- Praise and encourage in ways that the child can tolerate.
- Beware of alerting the child to the idea that they've just been compliant with a demand.
- Implement strategies for the end of school day so the child leaves school as calm and settled as possible, e.g. time to play or talk, or do an activity that soothes the child.
- If the child has to move schools, how this is presented to the child is important so they do not have sense of failure.

Disguising demands

While disguising demands might seem long-winded and effortful, think of them as a long-term approach to engagement rather than a 'quick fix'. There is a fine line between accommodating avoidance and getting the level of challenge just right for the child.

- Use indirect language e.g. "I wonder if you can..." "I can't see how to make things work.." "Could you help me with..." "Let's see how fast/slow we can..." "Shall we do it this way or that way?" "Shall we try it backwards/ upside down?" "Can you show me..?"
- Avoid "you must" and "you have to" statements.
- Allow time for the child to watch and process information before moving onto the next step.
- Use strengths, interests and favourite characters. Favourite characters can make the demand using role play and acting out. Time allocated to their interests can be used as a reward or to help the child to regulate their emotions.
- Offer choices – "shoes or boots?"

Continued.....

- Humour works well to diffuse conflict – jokes, physical play, being silly, pretending you don't know etc.
- Distraction, e.g. encourage the child to do some jobs if anxiety rises around the work/activity. Give the child 'special jobs' that make them feel important.
- Use of timers to help with transitions.
- Refer to a higher authority e.g. "the law says everyone has to go to school" or "we have to do this because of health and safety..."
- Break down learning into manageable chunks.
- Monitor, observe, offer support in a timely way.

Helping with friendships

- Socially, children may be best suited to a mainstream environment because they will identify most with a mainstream peer group.
- Support for positive peer relationships - small groups, structured activities, providing opportunities for successful negotiation and compromise under adult supervision.
- Social stories and comic strip conversations may be beneficial too.
- The child's peer group may need support to understand the child and tolerate disruption.
- Explicitly teach social context and social rules.

AT HOME

Many of the ideas given for schools are relevant for home too, particularly with regards to ways of disguising demands and helping with friendships.

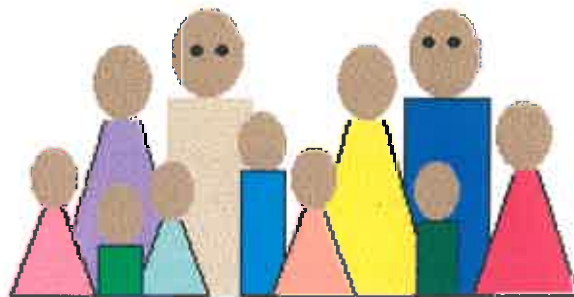
For parents.....

- Recognise anxiety as the driver for your child's behaviour.
- Choose your battles and your priorities carefully, and agree on this as a family to promote consistency.
- Stick to important boundaries on safety – always a top priority!
- Balance tolerance and demands – accept that you will get further on some days than others.
- Try not to take your child's behaviour personally.
- Get lots of support for yourself.
- Try to treat each day as a fresh start.
- Encourage your child to communicate their emotions – texting, writing, drawing, play, scaling (1-10).
- Try to keep your tone of voice as calm and even as possible.
- Disguise demands (see section above).
- Try to make your child feel useful and important.
- Try to give your child opportunities to succeed and experience competence.
- Offer limited choices, e.g. "are you going to have a bath or a shower?"
- Use 'when and then' techniques, e.g. "when your homework is done, then you can play on your x-box".
- Expect your child to have good and bad days (or hours, or even minutes!)
- Learn to recognise the small signals your child gives you, that tell you when you can gently push or when you need to pull back.
- Leaving the house – these are the times when your child has least control, particularly if unexpected things happen.
- Be prepared – have mobile ways to help your child cope, reduce unexpected demands and prioritise safety. Beware of spontaneity!!
- Routines, rewards and stickers imply parental control so take care on how these they are presented – make this a collaborative process.
- Try out using natural rewards and consequences, e.g. "because you have played so well with your sister today, we can/you can have..... (something your child likes)".
- Give natural consequences, e.g. if your child won't put on their coat, they will get cold.
- Indirect praise can help, e.g. parents talking to each other in front of the child about something they did well.
- Find ways to laugh with your child and ensure there is some time just to have fun together. But don't laugh at them!

Solving problems with your child

This can be a useful way to work out and resolve problems with your child, rather than making direct demands. It does take some effort though.

- Work on ways to solve problems with your child, so you tackle a problem together rather than end up in a battle for control.
- Listen to your child, try to understand their perspective – you don't have to agree with it.
- Encourage your child to understand your point of view too – your child doesn't have to agree with you, e.g. "I get that you are annoyed but I don't want your sister to get hit".
- Try to think of solutions together that take both views into account, e.g. "a different thing to do when you get annoyed might be.....let's think of all the options here". Let your child come up with suggestions.
- Make a plan that means both you and your child are trying something new – be a role model for change.
- If solutions don't work, repeat the process. You are aiming for you and your child being a team to solve a problem.



We Work Together

References and further reading

For more help, see:

- *"The Explosive Child"* by R.W. Greene (2005) Publisher: Harper
- Christie, P., Duncan, M., Fioler, R. and Healy, Z. (2012) *Understanding PDA in Children.* Publisher: JKP
- www.pdasociety.org.uk