



ASCT

Getting Started

Guide to:

Autistic

Demand

Avoidance



Introduction:

'Demand avoidance' involves not being able to do certain things at certain times, either for yourself or others, and refers to the things we do to avoid demands. This is a natural human trait, which shows in different degrees and for different reasons.

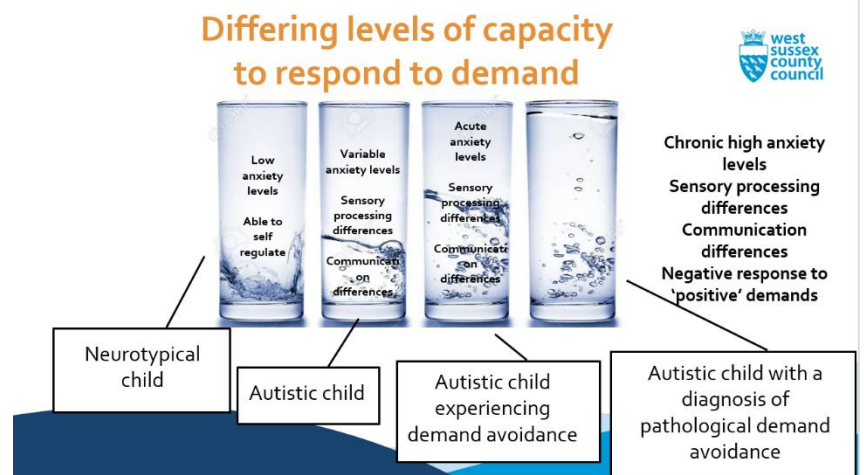
Autistic people may avoid demands or situations that are intrinsically unpleasant as they: trigger anxiety or sensory overload, disrupt routines, involve transitioning from one activity to another, and activities/events that they don't see the point of or have any interest in. They may refuse, withdraw, 'shutdown' or escape to avoid these things.

You may have heard of Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA), which although not recognised in West Sussex, is widely understood to be a profile on the autism spectrum. Individuals may avoid everyday demands, including seemingly motivating or enjoyable demands, and use 'social' strategies as part of this avoidance. Jane Sherwin, whose daughter has PDA, share that it is "an anxiety driven need to avoid demands and to remain in control at all times".

It is important to remember that an autistic person may be able to manage demands when regulated, but when dysregulated may appear demand avoidant. Whereas someone with PDA, will avoid all types of demands, all the time. The commonality is that this is due to anxiety.

Researchers have identified intolerance of uncertainty as the main cause of anxiety in autistic individuals. This uncertainty will be driven by three main factors: sensory processing differences, alexithymia, and repetitive behaviours.

- Sensory processing differences can create unpredictable sensory information or experience of negative sensory experiences which may raise anxiety.
- Alexithymia, the inability to recognize or describe one's own emotions, is linked to interoception and can create unpredictability as the person is unable to process their internal state so is difficult to regulate.
- Repetitive behaviours can reduce uncertainty, but when not accessible, may raise anxiety.



Key strategies for support:

Helpful approaches include addressing sensory differences, adapting language, and increasing opportunity for autonomy and autistic joy. It is also supportive to help individuals adjust to new situations, using visuals and social stories can be supportive, keeping to a predictable routine, giving plenty of notice about any changes or accepting that avoiding some things is perfectly acceptable.

Sensory

- Ensure the individual's sensory needs are being met. It may be beneficial to assess the environment using the ASCT's Sensory Environment Audit, in addition to exploring the individual's own sensory needs. You could use the ASCT's individual sensory checklist, then explore supportive strategies with the young person, using the Autism Level Up's Regulator.
- Specialist support could be sought from the Occupational Therapy team, especially if a sensory diet is required.
- If the young person has a difference in their interoceptive sense and appears to have alexithymia, then explicit teaching may be supportive to develop this awareness and skills.
- Consider creating an 'exit plan' with the young person, so that you can co create a plan that the young person can set into motion so they can leave an overwhelming environment or situation. Consider this being nonverbal, examples include a tug at the elbow or fiddling with Blu Tack.

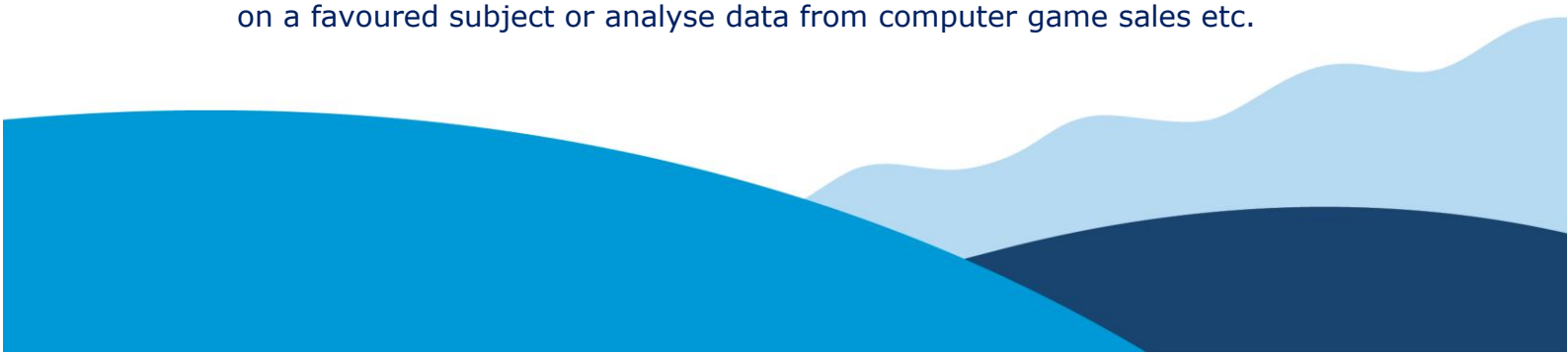
Language

We can adapt our language to support those with demand avoidance, by reducing the demand in our communication.

- Consider if the request is achievable to that young person, at that time, given their cognitive level and regulation state.
- Indirect demands such as 'Could you do this for me?' or 'I wonder if we...'
- Try giving the pretence that you need help with a task.
- Use of declarative language, which is nondirective, mostly descriptive and is a way of sharing and relating to the young person.
- Be empathetic of their situation and show sympathy.
- Try depersonalising rules, so explaining that it's a government requirement or a Health and Safety rule.

Increase Autonomy and Autistic Joy

- Offer adult led choices so that the young person feels more in control. This can be done in terms of which activity to try first, where to complete a task, or what they're going to choose during recovery/choosing time.
- Consider increasing access to their special interests to aide their regulation by creating predictable opportunities for autistic joy.
- Utilising special interests into their learning to enable their topic of writing to be on a favoured subject or analyse data from computer game sales etc.



Resources:

Anxiety and Autism:

https://www.city.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/466039/Anxiety-in-Autism-A5-guide.pdf

ASCT Getting Started Guides:

- Interoception
- 'Sensory-Focus-Recovery' Cycle
- Visual Supports for Primary Learner
- Visual Supports Secondary Learner
- Further Information and Examples of Visual Supports for both Primary and Secondary Settings

ASCT Individual Sensory Checklist

ASCT Sensory Environment Audit

[Autism Level Up Regulator 2.0](#)

Clare Truman's Spectrum Space - <https://spectrumspace.co.uk>

Coventry Grid including PDA - [gap_autumn_2018_text.indd \(pdasociety.org.uk\)](#)

Declarative Language Handbook: Using a Thoughtful Language Style to Help Kids with Social Learning Challenges Feel Competent, Connected, and Understood by Linda K. Murphy

PDA Society - <https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/>

PDA for Teaching Professionals - [Teaching professionals PDF \(pdasociety.org.uk\)](#)

The Teacher's Introduction to Pathological Demand Avoidance: Essential Strategies for the Classroom Paperback by Clare Truman.

Understanding Pathological Demand Avoidance Syndrome in Children: A Guide for Parents, Teachers and Other Professionals by Phil Christie, Margaret Duncan, Zara Healy and Ruth Fidler.

