

OxPCF & Oxfordshire CAMHS NDC Webinar: Demand Avoidance

January 2026

Introduction

Hosted by OxPCF in partnership with Oxfordshire CAMHS Neurodevelopmental Conditions (NDC) team, this session explored demand avoidance. The webinar focused on understanding what demand avoidance can look like, how it may relate to anxiety and neurodivergence, the differences between general demand avoidance and a PDA profile, and practical ways families and professionals can reduce distress and support young people more effectively.

Presenters:

Laura Agnew – Clinical Lead Nurse

Dr Sue Wimshurst – Senior Clinical Psychologist

Georgina Hobden – Trainee Clinical Psychologist

(All from Oxford Health, Oxfordshire CAMHS Service)

This document summarises the key themes, concepts, practical ideas, and anonymised Q&A from the session.

Key Insights from the Webinar

A gentle note about this topic

Demand avoidance can be exhausting and isolating for families. The presenters acknowledged that living with a child or young person who experiences high levels of demand anxiety can affect every part of daily life, including routines, relationships, school attendance, and family wellbeing.

The shared message was:

- Demand avoidance is not about poor parenting
- It is not simply defiance or wilful behaviour
- Anxiety and overwhelm are often at the heart of what families are seeing
- Understanding and reducing pressure is more helpful than pushing harder

How we talked about demand avoidance safely

The presenters encouraged an approach grounded in:

- Respect for the child or young person's lived experience
- A focus on needs, not labels
- Curiosity about what is driving the behaviour
- Compassion for both young people and parent carers

What is demand avoidance?

Demand avoidance is when a child or young person experiences strong difficulty engaging with demands, expectations, or requests.

The presenters highlighted that:

- Demand avoidance can happen for many different reasons
- It is often linked to anxiety
- It is not always the same as PDA

- The key is understanding the “why” behind the avoidance

Different reasons for avoidance may include:

- Executive functioning difficulties
- Low self-esteem or fear of failure
- Sensory overwhelm
- Anxiety
- Trauma or attachment-related needs
- A PDA-type profile

What is PDA?

The session also explored PDA, often understood as Pathological Demand Avoidance, although some people prefer alternatives such as Persistent Drive for Autonomy.

Key points shared were:

- PDA is not currently a separate diagnosable condition
- It is often understood as a profile seen within some autistic people
- It is characterised by an anxiety-based need to avoid demands
- The demand itself, rather than the task, can trigger distress

The presenters noted that:

- PDA is still an evolving area of understanding
- Research and clinical thinking are still developing
- CAMHS do not diagnose PDA as a separate condition
- Support should be based on needs, not on whether a label is given
- Anxiety is often at the centre

What can demand avoidance look like?

Demand avoidance may include:

- Refusing or delaying everyday tasks
- Finding reasons not to do something, including fantasy or role-play reasons
- Becoming overwhelmed by ordinary expectations
- Avoiding things the child actually wants to do
- Using humour, distraction, negotiation, or role play to reduce pressure
- Increased distress when demands are direct or controlling

The presenters highlighted that, for children with a PDA profile, even internal demands can feel overwhelming, for example:

- Feeling hungry
- Needing the toilet
- Going to sleep
- Doing something enjoyable
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A key theme throughout the session was that demand avoidance is often driven by anxiety.

The presenters encouraged families and professionals to hold in mind that:

- The child is not choosing to be difficult
- Their nervous system may be in a fight, flight, freeze, or fawn response
- The behaviour is often about feeling unsafe, overwhelmed, or out of control

This shift in understanding can help adults respond with more empathy and less confrontation.

Different kinds of demands

The session highlighted that demands are not only direct instructions.

A child may also experience stress from:

- Social expectations
- Internal body signals
- Suggestions or recommendations
- Implied expectations
- Self-imposed pressure
- Everyday routines

This helps explain why some young people may seem overwhelmed by things that appear minor to others.

What can help at home

Mindset matters

The presenters emphasised that traditional parenting strategies based on compliance, consequences, or reward systems often do not work well for highly demand avoidant children.

Helpful starting points include:

- Prioritising relationship over compliance
- Focusing on connection before correction
- Trying to understand what is driving the anxiety
- Seeing behaviour as communication

The PANDA approach

The webinar introduced the PANDA framework from the PDA Society as a helpful way to think about support.

Prioritise and compromise

- Focus on what is most important
- Reduce non-essential demands
- Be clear about why something matters
- Consider timing and whether the demand needs to happen now

Anxiety management

- Hold in mind that the young person is likely feeling unsafe or overwhelmed
- Recognise that anxiety may be driving behaviour
- Focus on reducing distress rather than increasing pressure

Negotiation and collaboration

- Work with the child wherever possible
- Reduce power struggles
- Offer some control and shared problem solving
- Help the child feel listened to and involved

Disguise and manage demands

- Reduce the pressure of direct instructions
- Use indirect language where helpful
- Consider how wording and timing affect the child's response

Adaptation

- Be flexible
- Think about what the child can manage right now
- Adjust routines and expectations when needed
- Accept that what works one day may not work the next

Language matters

The presenters highlighted that changing language can make a significant difference.

For example:

- Indirect, neutral language may feel less threatening than direct instructions
- Curiosity can be less overwhelming than commands
- Small shifts in wording can reduce pressure and increase cooperation

The session acknowledged that this takes thought and practise, and that it can be hard to do when adults are also stressed.

Equalising and reducing power struggles

Some children respond better when the adult-child dynamic feels less hierarchical.

Helpful ideas included:

- Sitting alongside rather than standing over
- Using “we” and “let’s” language
- Sharing control where possible
- Being respectful and honest
- Reducing unnecessary authority in tone or approach

The presenters were clear that this does not mean removing boundaries. It means reducing the sense of threat.

Low arousal approaches

The session also referenced low arousal approaches, which focus on:

- Staying calm
- Reducing emotional intensity
- Avoiding escalation
- Lowering demand and confrontation

This can be especially helpful when a child is already overwhelmed or close to meltdown.

Collaborative and Proactive Solutions

The webinar also referred to Ross Greene's Collaborative and Proactive Solutions (CPS) approach, which is based on the idea that:

Children do well if they can.

This approach encourages adults to:

- Understand what is getting in the way
- Work with the child to solve problems
- Focus on unmet needs or lagging skills
- Prevent difficulties, rather than only reacting to them

School and wider support

The presenters acknowledged that support in school is often difficult to secure, even where needs are very clear.

A key message was:

- Support should be needs led, not diagnosis led

The webinar recognised that, in reality:

- Some schools still rely heavily on diagnosis
- Some children mask in school and do not appear distressed there
- Even children with diagnoses, EHCPs, or medication may still not get the support they need

The presenters encouraged families to:

- Be clear about what works and what does not work for their child
- Share specific strategies with school
- Focus on the child's needs and the impact on them
- Seek support from SENDIASS and other advocacy routes where needed

Parent carer wellbeing

A strong message throughout the session was that parent carers need support too.

The presenters acknowledged that:

- Parenting a highly demand avoidant child can be relentless
- Many parent carers feel judged, isolated, or exhausted
- It is hard to stay calm when you are already running on empty

Important reminders included:

- Looking after yourself is not selfish

- Small moments of rest still count
- Modelling regulation helps children too
- Unrealistic expectations can add to the pressure on everyone

Strengths and positives

The session ended by recognising that children and young people who struggle with demand avoidance often have many strengths, including:

- Creativity and imagination
- Strong empathy and sensitivity
- Problem-solving skills
- Humour and charisma
- Passionate interests
- Determination and individuality

The presenters encouraged families to keep these strengths in view alongside the challenges.

Q&A Summary

The following questions were submitted by parent carers during the webinar and have been anonymised for privacy. Responses have been summarised from input provided by CAMHS clinicians and aim to reflect common themes and practical approaches for supporting children and young people experiencing demand avoidance.

1. Why is support so hard to get without a diagnosis?

The presenters acknowledged that this is a very real frustration for many families.

They emphasised that:

- Support should be based on need, not diagnosis
- In reality, this is not always happening consistently
- CAMHS can recommend support, but cannot make schools or other services implement it

Families were encouraged to:

- Be clear about the child's needs and what helps
- Use the Local Offer and SENDIASS for additional support
- Keep advocating for needs-led support, even when a diagnosis is absent

2. Can a child have demand avoidance without being autistic?

Yes.

The presenters explained that:

- Demand avoidance can happen for many reasons
- It may be linked to anxiety, ADHD, trauma, attachment differences, executive functioning difficulties, or sensory needs
- PDA is currently understood more specifically as a profile seen within some autistic people, but general demand avoidance is broader

3. Should we explore autism if our child has ADHD and demand avoidance?

Possibly, but not always.

The presenters noted that:

- Demand avoidance can occur alongside ADHD
- It does not automatically mean a child is autistic
- The most important thing is to understand the child's needs and the reasons behind the avoidance

4. Does prioritising relationship over compliance include school attendance?

The presenters encouraged families and professionals to be curious about what is driving school-based difficulties.

They suggested thinking about:

- What is making school feel unsafe or overwhelming
- Whether there is a trusted adult in school
- What adjustments might reduce the child's anxiety
- Whether the child's needs are being understood and supported properly

The emphasis was on understanding what is behind the avoidance, rather than forcing compliance.

5. How can families work with schools when behaviour policies are very rigid?

Suggestions included:

- Going into meetings with clear examples of what works for your child
- Sharing strategies that are already successful at home
- Framing conversations around needs and anxiety, rather than behaviour alone
- Asking schools to consider reasonable adjustments and more flexible approaches

The presenters acknowledged that this can be difficult, but emphasised that parents often know their child's needs best.

6. How do we tell a demand avoidant child not to do something, especially if it is dangerous?

The presenters suggested:

- Using indirect or less confrontational language where possible
- Framing things around safety rather than commands
- Redirecting attention if needed
- Helping the child understand the “why” behind a rule or boundary

They also noted that some things remain non-negotiable, especially around safety, but that the way adults communicate can still make a difference.

7. How do we manage the clash between routine and demand avoidance?

This was recognised as a real challenge, especially for children who are both autistic and highly demand avoidant.

Suggestions included:

- Offering limited choices within a routine
- Allowing flexibility in how something is done
- Focusing on what really matters and what can bend
- Remembering that routine can still be helpful, but the pressure around it may need reducing

8. What if my child deliberately does things “wrong” to avoid the task?

The presenters encouraged adults to think about:

- Whether the child is feeling overwhelmed by the demand
- Whether there is a way to reduce pressure around the task

- Whether the goal can be achieved in a different way

The emphasis was on flexibility and understanding, rather than assuming the child is being difficult on purpose.

9. How can we help after school if our child has masked all day?

Suggestions included:

- Allowing a buffer zone between school and home demands
- Keeping after-school time low demand
- Reducing questions and expectations immediately after school
- Giving the child time to decompress in whatever way helps them regulate

The presenters acknowledged that this can feel counterintuitive, but may be an important part of reducing pressure.

10. What is the most important thing to remember?

The strongest messages from the session were:

- Demand avoidance is often driven by anxiety
- It is not about defiance or bad parenting
- Connection is more effective than confrontation
- Small changes in language, timing, and flexibility can make a big difference
- Support should be based on needs, not labels

The presenters acknowledged that this is a very real frustration for many families.

They emphasised that:

- Support should be based on need, not diagnosis
- In reality, this is not always happening consistently
- CAMHS can recommend support, but cannot make schools or other services implement it

Families were encouraged to:

- Be clear about the child's needs and what helps
- Use the Local Offer and SENDIASS for additional support
- Keep advocating for needs-led support, even when a diagnosis is absent

Useful Resources/Further Signposting

These resources have been recommended by CAMHS clinicians, OxPCF, and parent carers as helpful sources of support, guidance, and practical tools for families navigating demand avoidance, anxiety, and neurodivergence.

They include information about demand avoidance and PDA, anxiety and emotional regulation, neurodivergence, practical strategies, and peer support networks across Oxfordshire and nationally.

Click on the blue text to visit each website directly. Where books are mentioned, we have included details so you can find them easily online or through local libraries.

Demand Avoidance and PDA.

- [The PDA Society](#)

Helpful information about demand avoidance, overwhelm, and reducing pressure for children and young people with a PDA profile.

- [National Autistic Society \(NAS\)](#)

Information about autistic burnout, sensory differences, masking, and practical support for autistic children, young people, and adults.

Understanding Anxiety and Emotional Regulation

- [Beacon House](#)

Free downloadable worksheets and resources explaining stress, overwhelm, trauma responses, and the nervous system.

- [Self-Reg – Dr Stuart Shanker](#)

Understanding stress behaviour and supporting regulation in children and young people. The link takes you to a free podcast explaining this

- Window of Tolerance

A useful framework for understanding when someone is regulated, overwhelmed, or shut down.

- Bucket, Battery, and Spoon Theories

Visual ways to explain limited energy, emotional load, and the need for recovery time.

- Low Demand Approaches

Supportive approaches that reduce pressure and help lower anxiety and overwhelm.

- Double Empathy Problem

A concept that recognises mutual communication differences between autistic and non-autistic people.

Practical Approaches and Strategies

- PANDA Approach (PDA Society)

A framework for supporting demand avoidant children through prioritising, anxiety management, negotiation, disguising demands, and adaptation.

- Collaborative and Proactive Solutions (Ross Greene)

Approach based on the idea that “children do well if they can,” focusing on understanding unmet needs and solving problems together.

- Low Arousal Approaches – Dr Andrew McDonnell

Strategies for reducing stress, confrontation, and escalation, particularly helpful for children experiencing high anxiety or overwhelm.

Neurodivergence and Education

- [Autism Education Trust \(AET\) now known as Neuroinclusive Education Network \(NEN\)](#)

Resources for supporting autistic pupils in education settings.

- [National Autistic Society \(NAS\) – Education Resources](#)

Advice and support for families navigating education and school-based challenges.

- [Ambitious about Autism – Education Resources](#)

Support and guidance around autistic young people's needs in education.

Communication and Emotional Literacy Tools

- Zones of Regulation

Framework to help children recognise and communicate emotional states.

- [The Incredible 5 Point Scale – Kari Dunn Buron](#)

Visual tool to help identify and manage levels of stress.

- [Social Stories \(Carol Gray\)](#)

Short personalised stories explaining social situations in predictable ways.

- [Widgit Symbols / Twinkl Visual Supports](#)

Visual aids to support communication and structure.

Mental Health and Peer Support

- [Oxfordshire CAMHS](#) – The main mental health service for children and young people in Oxfordshire.
- [Action for Children - Parent Support Line](#). Free, confidential support via phone, webchat, or email.
- [Walking With You \(WWY\)](#) – A parent and carer peer support group facilitated by Oxfordshire CAMHS, meeting online via Teams.
- [Supportive Steps](#) – A CAMHS-run peer support service for parents and carers of children with mental health challenges.
- [Carers Oxfordshire](#) – Support for unpaid carers, including wellbeing advice, training, and carer's assessments.
- [Oxfordshire SEND Room](#) - a peer support group hosted and moderated by Oxfordshire Parent Carers Forum
- [Oxfordshire Mind](#) – Children and Young People's Services – One-to-one support, workshops, and emotional wellbeing resources.

- [MindEd for Families](#) – Free online training and advice for parents and carers about children’s mental health.
- [YoungMinds](#) – National charity supporting young people’s mental health and parent advice.
- [The Curly Hair Project](#) – Practical and emotional support for autistic people and their families, founded by Alis Rowe.

Online Tools, Platforms, and Concepts

[NDC YouTube Channel](#) – Short, accessible videos on topics such as anxiety, self-harm, aggression, and emotional regulation.

[21 and Sensory](#) – Engaging, visual content sharing lived experiences and sensory coping strategies.

Education and Advocacy

- [IPSEA](#) – Free legal advice on SEND rights, EHCPs, and school support.
- [SENDIASS Oxfordshire](#) – Free, impartial advice for families navigating SEND services.
- [Oxfordshire’s SEND Local Offer](#) – Directory of local SEND services across education, health, and social care.
- [Contact](#) – National charity providing information on education rights, benefits, and advocacy.

Recommended Reading

For Parents and Carers

[The Explosive Child](#) - Dr Ross Greene

- [Avoiding Anxiety in Autistic Children: A Guide for Thriving](#) – Dr Luke Beardon
- [The Parents’ Guide to Managing Anxiety in Children with Autism](#) – Raelene Dundon
- [Self-Reg: How to Help Your Child \(and You\) Break the Stress Cycle](#) – Dr Stuart Shanker

- [A Different Kind of Parenting: Neurodivergent families finding a way through together](#) - Eliza Fricker
- [The Family Experience of PDA](#) – Eliza Fricker
- [Changing Our Minds](#) – Dr Naomi Fisher
- [A Different Way to Learn](#) – Dr Naomi Fisher

For Children and Young People

- [All Birds Have Anxiety](#) – Kathy Hoopmann
- [What to Do When you Worry Too Much](#) - Dawn Huebner

Stay Connected and Share Your Voice with OxPCF

Join OxPCF (Oxfordshire Parent Carers Forum) to stay informed, connect with other parent carers, and have your voice heard in shaping services for SEND families.

Links


 Website: www.oxpcf.org.uk


 Email: info@oxpcf.org.uk


 Join our Mailing List: eepurl.com/dNVTTE

 SEND Connect Newsletter: tinyurl.com/SENDConnectNewsletters

 Events: oxpcf.org.uk/events

 Volunteer with Us: oxpcf.org.uk/volunteer

 Join our Online Peer Support Group: facebook.com/groups/oxsendroom/

 Join our Community WhatsApp Group: [chat.whatsapp.com/
BRH9Knm8fuNBIFY1OhrZIE](https://chat.whatsapp.com/BRH9Knm8fuNBIFY1OhrZIE)

Help Us Build Our Resource Page!

We're putting together a comprehensive resource page to support families of neurodivergent children in Oxfordshire. If you have any useful recommendations—whether it's a local support group, charity, website, book, or practical resource—we'd love to hear from you!

Please email your suggestions to: info@oxpcf.org.uk