



The PDA Demand Avoidance Cycle

Understanding the cycle — and how to interrupt it

In PDA, demand avoidance is not defiance. It is an anxiety-driven, neurological response to perceived loss of control. Understanding the cycle helps you find the intervention points before things escalate.

The Cycle — Stage by Stage

1. Trigger: A Demand or Perceived Demand

The trigger can be explicit ("time to get dressed") or implied (the routine suggests something is expected). For PDA children, even enjoyable activities can trigger avoidance if they carry a sense of obligation or external expectation.

- Direct instructions: "Come here," "stop that," "eat your breakfast"
- Implied expectations: the school bell, a schedule on the wall, the queue forming
- Internal pressure: "I need to do this," "I should feel..."
- Transitions between activities or environments

2. Anxiety Spike

The demand triggers a rapid rise in anxiety — the nervous system reads it as a threat to autonomy and safety. This is automatic and not within the child's conscious control.

3. Avoidance Response

The child uses a range of strategies to escape the demand and reduce the anxiety. These strategies are often creative, socially sophisticated, and can be disarming. They include:

- Distraction and diversionary tactics ("look at that!", sudden topic changes)
- Negotiating, bargaining, and rule-lawyering
- Appearing not to hear or understand
- Physical illness or sudden pain
- Role play and fantasy escape
- Involving others ("tell her to do it instead")
- Outright refusal — often with increasing emotion

4. Escalation (if avoidance doesn't work)

If the avoidance strategies are unsuccessful — if the adult persists with the demand — anxiety continues to rise. The child moves toward more extreme responses: aggression, meltdown, shutdown, or flight.

5. Recovery (if the demand is removed)

When the demand is removed, anxiety drops and the child recovers. Over time, each cycle reinforces the pattern: avoidance works, so avoidance continues.



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Interrupting the Cycle — Key Strategies

Interrupt at Stage 1 — Reduce demand load

- Rephrase demands as choices: "Would you like to do this now or in 5 minutes?"
- Use indirect language: "I wonder if anyone's hungry..."
- Embed the demand in a game, narrative, or role play
- Reduce the total demand load across the day — notice when the bucket is full

Interrupt at Stage 2 — Validate before the spike builds

- "I can see that feels really hard right now."
- "There's no rush — take your time."
- Offer an out: "We don't have to do that yet."
- Drop the demand temporarily and return to it later with a different framing

Interrupt at Stage 3 — Collaborate instead of instruct

- Make the task feel like their idea: "What if we tried it this way?"
- Give them the problem to solve: "I'm not sure how we're going to get this done — any ideas?"
- Use humour or novelty to shift the energy
- Reduce the size of the task until it feels manageable

Long-term approach Interrupting the cycle once helps in the moment. Building a consistently low-demand environment over time changes the baseline — the bucket fills more slowly, and recovery happens faster. The goal is not compliance. The goal is safety and trust.