



# The 4F Threat Response Guide

Fight, flight, freeze, fawn — in PDA children

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When the nervous system detects threat, it activates one of four survival responses: fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. In PDA, where the nervous system is persistently in threat-detection mode, these responses are activated frequently and can look like very different things across different children — and in the same child at different times.

## Fight

The nervous system mobilises for confrontation. In PDA, this is not aggression for its own sake — it is anxiety expressed outward.

- Explosive verbal aggression — arguing, screaming, abusive language
- Physical aggression — hitting, kicking, throwing objects
- Intense, rigid insistence — "I will NOT do this"
- Destructive behaviour — breaking things in the environment

### What helps in fight response

- Remove demands immediately
- Create space — do not stand over them
- Lower your voice, not just your volume
- Do not argue or reason — this is not a thinking moment

## Flight

The nervous system mobilises to escape. In PDA, this often manifests as avoidance behaviours.

- Physically running, bolting, or leaving the space
- Hiding (under beds, in cupboards, in small spaces)
- School refusal — avoidance of the environment itself
- Distraction, diversionary tactics, topic changes

### What helps in flight response

- Do not physically block or pursue — this escalates to fight
- Remove the demand that triggered the flight
- Let them go to a safe space
- Check in once regulated: "I could see you needed some space — I'm here when you're ready."



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## Freeze

The nervous system shuts movement down. This is the "shutdown" state — the child becomes immobile, unresponsive, or appears to switch off.

- Becoming very still, staring blankly
- Unable to speak or move
- Not responding to name or gentle prompts
- Appearing dissociated or emotionally absent

**What helps in freeze response**

- Reduce all input — quieter, dimmer, calmer environment
- Sit near without speaking or demanding
- Wait — do not try to "snap them out of it"
- Offer sensory comfort gently when they begin to return

## Fawn

The nervous system attempts to neutralise threat by appeasing and people-pleasing. This is the most invisible response — and one of the most damaging long-term.

- Agreeing to everything to avoid conflict
- Excessive apology and self-blame
- Changing personality and preferences to match others' expectations
- Unable to express own needs or preferences
- Complete masking — performing compliance while inwardly collapsed

**Why fawn is a serious concern**

Fawn responses in PDA are particularly dangerous because they look like compliance. A child who is fawning may appear to be doing well at school while experiencing severe internal distress. This is the pattern that leads to long-term burnout and trauma.

**Key message** All four responses are the nervous system protecting itself from threat. None are character flaws. Your response to each one can either increase the child's sense of safety — or deepen their experience of threat.