AUTISM, DEMAND AVOIDANCE AND PDA

Practice-Oriented Support Concept

Relationship before correction. Safety, autonomy, co-regulation and individual fit.

Scientific context. PDA is not a standalone diagnosis in the ICD-11 or DSM-5-TR. In practice and self-advocacy, terms such as «PDA profile» or «pronounced demand avoidance» are widely used. Research remains limited and partly debated. Consequently, this concept treats PDA and demand avoidance as a descriptive working term rather than a blanket explanation for every behaviour. The causes of avoidance vary and must always be understood individually. [1–5]

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Purpose of this concept

It outlines my pedagogical framework for supporting children, particularly when demands, transitions, sensory stimuli or uncertainty rapidly trigger stress. It does not replace medical, psychological or speech and language assessment.

The structure is deliberately practical: core attitude first, everyday methods second, and background knowledge third.

1. Core Attitude: Relationship, Autonomy and Ethics

Person-Centred Attitude and Unconditional Positive Regard – Carl Rogers [14]

Relationship comes before correction. Authenticity (congruence), empathy and unconditional positive regard form the foundation of my work. Care and warmth are directed at the child as a person and are never tied to performance or compliance; the person and the behaviour are kept clearly separate.

Practice: If a child completely blocks on a task, my support remains steady: «I can see this is too much right now. Let's put the workbook aside – what matters to me is how you are doing, not whether this page gets finished today.»

Equal Dignity (Gleichwürdigkeit) – Jesper Juul

I treat children with the same dignity as adults: at eye level, without an artificial mask of authority or shaming. Equal dignity does not mean that the child has to carry every decision alone, but that their feelings, boundaries and perspectives are taken seriously as equally valid.

Practice: Instead of lecturing from above, I engage in genuine dialogue: «I can tell that my suggestion does not feel right for you right now. It is important to me that it works for both of us – let's figure out together how we want to shape the afternoon.»

Self-Determination Theory (SDT: Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness) – Richard M. Ryan, Edward L. Deci [6]

Self-Determination Theory identifies autonomy, perceived competence and social relatedness as core psychological needs [6]. When autonomy is restricted by unnecessary coercion, a stressed nervous system frequently reacts with resistance, freezing or withdrawal.

Practice: The child is given genuine, manageable choices in everyday life – such as deciding the order of tasks, choosing where to sit or shaping how breaks are spent.

Self-Directed Learning and Co-Construction – Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky

The child is the active constructor of their own development. Learning processes do not grow out of external lecturing or pressure, but through intrinsic curiosity, self-efficacy and exploring the world together at eye level.

Practice: When playing chess or exploring the forest, I do not hand down ready-made answers; instead, I build on the child's own questions, ideas and problem-solving paths through shared discovery.

Intrinsic Motivation Instead of Reward Charts – Alfie Kohn

Evaluative reward systems (token charts) can increase pressure or resistance in some children because they are experienced as external control. Concrete, matter-of-fact feedback and shared joy without manipulation are preferred. If a child genuinely enjoys direct praise, they are of course warmly praised.

Practice: When a difficult step succeeds, there is no stamp on a reward chart, but genuine recognition of the effort itself: «You stuck with that problem and figured out the solution on your own.»

1. Core Attitude – Continued

Attachment Security Through Quiet Co-Presence – John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth

Reliable emotional safety serves as a safe haven when a child feels overwhelmed. In neurodivergent children, attachment is often expressed quietly – for instance, by calmly remaining in the same room without eye contact or pressure to talk.

Practice: If a child sits down near me without saying a word after a tiring school day, this quiet presence is respected as an offer of connection without immediately asking questions.

Curiosity Stance (Not-Knowing Stance) – Harlene Anderson, Harold Goolishian

I refrain from premature judgements, assumptions or leading questions. I view challenging behaviour with calm, open curiosity as a signal that a demand is currently too high or an underlying need is unmet.

Practice: If a worksheet is pushed aside in frustration, I do not jump to conclusions, but ask calmly and openly: «I can see that this exercise is really frustrating you right now. Is it the maths problem itself, or should we take a short break first?»

Functional Reframing and Resource Orientation – Paul Watzlawick, Steve de Shazer

Behaviours are not prematurely labelled as «manipulative», «lazy» or «provocative», but understood as coping attempts aimed at self-regulation. Focus is deliberately placed on the child's existing strengths and interests.

Practice: If a child retreats to a quiet corner or under the table when noise levels rise, I recognise this not as defiance, but as a sensible self-protection strategy against sensory overload.

Justice Sensitivity – Manfred Schmitt, Anna Bondü

Many neurodivergent children react strongly to arbitrary rules, double standards or illogical unequal treatment. What looks like resistance from the outside often stems from a deep sense of fairness and logical consistency.

Practice: When everyday agreements apply, I hold myself to the exact same standards as the adult and explain any necessary exceptions transparently and logically.

Physical and Psychological Integrity – Haim Omer, Arist von Schlippe

In moments of acute danger, protection is provided calmly, clearly and as minimally invasively as possible. Safety is non-negotiable, yet it requires no punitive logic. Physical contact is never a standard calming technique; it only occurs when clearly wanted and appropriate to the child's age and situation.

Practice: By a busy road, I will briefly hold a child back by the arm if danger arises, without threats or shaming. Afterwards, language is reduced and we only discuss what would have helped once calm is restored.

2. Professional Collaboration and Reflection

Parents as the Primary Source of Knowledge – Arist von Schlippe, Jochen Schweitzer

Parents know their child's developmental history, everyday life and effective strategies best. In the spirit of a systemic partnership with parents, their observations are taken seriously without automatically turning every interpretation into a clinical diagnosis. The goal is a shared, verifiable working hypothesis.

Practice: At the start, I clarify together with the parents: «What helps reliably at home? What tends to increase stress? Which early warning signs do you notice, and what should I definitely avoid in everyday life?»

Privacy During Handovers – Erving Goffman

Difficult situations are not discussed at length in front of the child at the front door, preventing shame and the feeling of being talked about over their head. Doorstep handovers are kept brief; sensitive topics belong in a separate conversation.

Practice: When saying goodbye in the hallway, I say calmly: «We had an eventful afternoon, but we managed to cushion everything well. I will give you a quick call this evening for the details.»

Relieving the Family System – Urie Bronfenbrenner, Donald Meyer

When one child requires intensive everyday support, siblings often feel silent pressure to hold back their own needs. One-to-one support relieves the entire family system and deliberately creates breathing space.

Practice: While I accompany a child during sports, in the forest or with homework, the parents gain uninterrupted one-to-one time at home for the sibling.

Observation Before Interpretation – Edmund Husserl, Klaus Grawe

Documentation and discussions start with what was concretely seen or heard. Interpretations are clearly marked as hypotheses. This protects against hasty labels as well as the assumption that every behaviour is explained by PDA alone.

Practice: Observation: «The child puts the pencil down, looks away and does not answer for 40 seconds.» Hypothesis: «The task layout may have been too cluttered or the background noise too high.»

Reflection Models (Gibbs, Borton) and Metacognition – Graham Gibbs, Terry Borton, John H. Flavell

After challenging situations, structured questions guide reflection: What happened (What)? What was my own contribution (So What)? What will I adjust next time (Now What)? Through metacognition, I monitor my own stress responses in real time so I do not transfer impatience onto the child.

Practice: If a child rejects a suggestion, I notice my own impulse to debate, step back internally and plan more quiet buffer time in advance next time.

3. Everyday Methods: Structure and Transitions

Reducing Demands (Low-Demand Orientation) – Naomi Fisher, Luke Beardon

It helps to distinguish clearly: What is genuinely necessary for safety or health? What is merely habit? What can wait? Lowering everyday friction reduces baseline stress and frees up capacity for the things that truly matter.

Practice: If shoes left by the front door instead of on the rack pose no danger to anyone, they do not need to trigger a power struggle in an exhausted moment after school.

Decompression Time After School and Groups (Transition Buffer) – Judy Eaton, Andrea Nair

After demanding social or sensory hours at school, the nervous system needs a quiet buffer period free of expectations in order to down-regulate. Long explanations or questions wait.

Practice: After a taxing school day, we start with quiet time, water or an afternoon snack and very little talking. The question «How was your day?» can wait until the child chooses to share.

Preparing Transitions Flexibly – Dörte Gutknecht, Phil Christie

Many children benefit from advance notice, clear information and a manageable next step. While some prefer set routines, others experience rigid schedules as pressure. Structure is therefore adapted together rather than assumed.

Practice: «In ten minutes we are heading towards the football pitch. You can finish building this round; your shoes are ready.»

Supporting Autonomy Without Decision Fatigue – Roy F. Baumeister, Naomi Fisher

Genuine participation strengthens autonomy. However, too many options can create additional pressure when a child is already exhausted. In those moments, a familiar default option provides relief.

Practice: When rested, the child chooses freely between cycling or football. When exhausted, no further decision is demanded; instead, our familiar walk is calmly offered.

Practical Support for Task Initiation (Scaffolding) – Jerome Bruner, Lev Vygotsky

Executive functioning difficulties can block the start of an activity. Tasks are broken down into small steps, prepared materially or started together instead of repeating verbal prompts.

Practice: Not «Get started on your homework», but opening the book to the right page, laying out the pencil and covering the rest of the page with a blank sheet of paper.

3. Everyday Methods – Continued: Co-Regulation

Co-Regulation and Sensitivity – Stuart Shanker (Self-Reg), Mary Ainsworth

An overloaded nervous system often cannot calm down on its own. As a caregiver, I notice subtle signs of stress early and lend the child my own calm as an external anchor: through a steady voice, slow movements and unhurried presence.

Practice: If I notice inner tension rising during study time or before leaving the house, I stop adding requests, slow my speech pace and calmly take over a supportive partial step.

Bottom-Up Regulation (Body Before Cognition) – Bruce D. Perry

Under high tension, the capacity to process language, rules and consequences cognitively drops sharply. Physical arousal is stabilised first through quiet, rhythm or movement; only afterwards does thinking become accessible again.

Practice: When a child is mentally blocked, we do not debate; instead, we silently pass a ball back and forth for ten minutes until breathing settles.

Body Doubling and Parallel Activity – Mildred Parten, Russell A. Barkley

Being calmly in the same room or pursuing a quiet parallel activity can make it much easier to start a task without generating extra prompts or feelings of surveillance.

Practice: While the child works on assignments, I sit calmly at the table reading – available for questions, but without staring critically at their worksheet.

Bridging (Interests as a Bridge) – Dinah Murray, Luke Beardon

Special interests, humour or shared activities can smooth transitions. They are not used as tricks, but connect respectfully with the child's current focus before announcing a change.

Practice: A child deeply focused on building or playing chess is not abruptly pulled away. I briefly connect with their project and then agree on a save point for the break.

Stretchy Demands (Flexible Expectations) – Ruth Fidler, Phil Christie

When the child knows in advance that every small partial step counts and that opting out without losing face is possible at any time, the barrier to starting drops significantly.

Practice: «Let's just look at the first problem together. If it gets too much after that, we will take a break right away.» Often, this very freedom of choice creates the calm needed to continue.

4. Communication and Low-Pressure Language

Declarative Language and Processing Time – Linda K. Murphy, Barry M. Prizant

Declarative language shares brief observations or factual information rather than direct commands. This is followed by a genuine pause: not every delay is refusal; auditory processing often simply requires time.

Practice: «Your backpack is by the coat rack.» Then wait calmly without adding further sentences.

Depersonalised Demands and Shared Uncertainty (Columbo Approach) – Phil Christie, Ruth Fidler

Necessary boundaries or times are linked to neutral external factors (clock, timetable, game rules) so they do not feel like personal power struggles. When the adult also adopts a wondering rather than lecturing stance, the child can step into a competent expert role.

Practice: Matter-of-fact: «The bus leaves at 4:15 pm, so we have five minutes left.» Or wondering during chess: «I cannot quite see how to save the knight here – can you spot a move?»

Clear Language Instead of Hidden Power (Including Written Offers) – Marshall B. Rosenberg, Naomi Fisher

Indirect language or short notes reduce social pressure, yet they are not dogma. The word «No» is not forbidden: when safety is involved, a calm, honest «No» with a brief reason is far more predictable than artificial rephrasing.

Practice: Clear: «No, we are not climbing onto the railing, that is too high. We can gladly climb onto the wall over there.» Indirect during withdrawal: a brief note outside the door («Water and apple slices are on the table»).

Perfectionism and Paralysing Fear of Mistakes – Judy Eaton, Carol S. Dweck

Some children freeze before a task or immediately destroy their work because a minor mistake feels like a total loss of control. Low-pressure formats remove the fear of failing.

Practice: Instead of writing straight into the neat exercise book, we first sketch out maths steps casually on scrap paper or a wipeable board.

Low-Shame Support (Low-Shame Approach) – Brené Brown, Paul Gilbert

Many children react to their own mistakes or accidents with intense shame, expressed as denial, hiding or anger. I avoid scolding and strictly separate the mishap from the child's worth.

Practice: If a glass tips over, I say calmly: «That happens. The cloth is right next to you.»

5. De-Escalation and Crisis Support

Low-Arousal Approach – Andrew McDonnell [15]

Core principle: During an escalation, the goal is never compliance, but safety and returning to a regulated state. Low-arousal practice immediately reduces confrontation, vocal volume, pace, body tension and unnecessary sensory input [15].

Practice: As soon as I notice tension tipping over, I immediately drop the task, lower my voice and create physical breathing space.

Proxemics (45-Degree Positioning) – Edward T. Hall, Andrew McDonnell [15]

Standing directly face-to-face and maintaining fixed eye contact feel threatening under high stress. Standing slightly to the side at a 45-degree angle while leaving an unobstructed exit route immediately lowers tension.

Practice: In tense moments, I stand at a calm distance slightly to the side and look in the same direction as the child.

Acute Six-Step Protocol – Andrew McDonnell, Bo Hejlskov Elvén [15]

1. **Lower own arousal:** Quieter voice, slower movements, calm and friendly facial expression.
2. **Reduce language:** No debating, no lecturing, no lengthy questions.
3. **Give space:** Increase distance, never force eye contact, never block the exit.
4. **Reduce stimuli:** Immediately minimise onlookers, noise, bright light or additional demands.
5. **Protect safety:** Remove hazardous objects; in immediate danger, intervene physically only as much as strictly necessary to prevent injury.
6. **Allow recovery afterwards:** Offer water, a quiet space, a familiar activity or a snack if suited to the child.

Shame-Free Debriefing (Reflection Only After Recovery) – Bo Hejlskov Elvén, Ross W. Greene

After an escalation, physical and emotional recovery comes before analysis. Memory and speech can remain impaired under stress. There are no forced apologies while distressed and no interrogations about who was «at fault». Repair and brief reflection take place only after full recovery.

Practice: After an outburst, calm is restored first. Later or the next day, I ask quietly: «Is there anything that could help us earlier next time?» If the child does not wish to talk, that is respected.

When School Attendance Becomes Overwhelming (School Overload) – Kévin Leduc et al. [11], Naomi Fisher

School avoidance or absenteeism is multifactorial and may involve anxiety, neurodevelopmental differences, social experiences, sensory density or physical complaints (Leduc et al., 2024) [11]. Rather than jumping to blanket labels like «PDA» or «School Can't», I work in alignment with parents, school and specialists.

Practice: My afternoon support provides a pressure-free counterbalance in which the child can experience calm and self-efficacy again.

6. Background Knowledge: Autism, PDA and Stress Physiology

Autism Spectrum (ICD-11: 6A02) and Neurodiversity – WHO [1], Judy Singer

Autism spectrum disorder is described in the ICD-11 under code 6A02 [1]. Assessment is based on persistent characteristics in social communication and interaction alongside focused interests and sensory patterns. In line with neurodiversity, I view this not as a defect, but as a neurological way of perceiving the world that requires a fitting environment.

Practice: If a child avoids eye contact in order to concentrate better on listening, this is naturally respected.

PDA and Pronounced Demand Avoidance – Elizabeth Newson, Arild N. Kildahl et al. [2–5]

Literature and practice use phrases such as «autism with a PDA profile» or «demand avoidant traits». Systematic reviews from 2021 and 2026 point to links with anxiety, a strong need for autonomy and intolerance of uncertainty, while also highlighting the still limited evidence base [2–5].

Practice: I take the experienced need for relief around demands seriously without creating false certainty about causes or diagnoses.

Internal Demands and Equalizing Behaviour – Elizabeth O'Nions, Phil Christie

Not only external requests, but also a child's own wishes, anticipation or bodily signals can be experienced as internal pressure. Out of a feeling of overwhelm, children may also try to regain safety by directing the rules of play (equalizing).

Practice: If a child freezes before a desired outing, saying «We do not have to do anything specific, let's just step outside briefly» relieves the pressure. During play, I gladly let them take the lead within safe boundaries.

Distinction from ODD (Oppositional Defiant Disorder, ICD-11: 6C90) – WHO [1], Ross W. Greene

Oppositional defiant disorder is a clinical diagnosis with defined patterns [1]. Differentiating between anxiety, autism, ADHD and demand avoidance belongs in qualified clinical assessment. ODD is not treated as mere wilful defiance; punitive charts usually worsen overwhelm.

Practice: Rather than responding to resistance with harsher consequences, I work with the parents to identify the triggers behind the overwhelm.

Stress Physiology and Allostatic Load Instead of Pseudo-Precision – Bruce S. McEwen, Daniel J. Siegel [12]

It is well established that acute stress affects attention, speech, impulse control and behaviour (Window of Tolerance and the accumulation of minor daily stressors into allostatic load). By contrast, polyvagal theory remains scientifically contested [12]; this concept therefore does not rely on specific polyvagal claims or neurobiological absolutes.

Practice: If a child bursts into tears over a broken pencil tip, that tip was often just the final drop in an already full stress bucket.

Masking, After-School Exhaustion and Burnout – Dora M. Raymaker et al. [13], Laura Hull

Masking and cumulative strain in group settings can lead to marked exhaustion. Differences between school and home behaviour can relate to masking, sensory density and differing expectations; they do not prove a single cause. «Autistic burnout» has mainly been studied in adults and is not used as an automatic explanation in children [13].

Practice: A collapse after school is met pragmatically with recovery and sensory reduction rather than lecturing.

6. Background Knowledge – Continued: Cognition and Sensory Processing

Executive Functions and Monotropism – Russell A. Barkley, Dinah Murray

Executive functions govern working memory, impulse control and task initiation. In addition, attention is often channeled deeply into a single focus tunnel (monotropism), meaning that abrupt interruptions cost significant energy.

Practice: If a child sits paralysed in front of a task, a small first entry step is missing. During deep concentration, I first step calmly into their field of view and announce transitions in advance.

Context Blindness, AuDHD and Intolerance of Uncertainty – Peter Vermeulen, Jacqui Rodgers, Christopher Gillberg

Learned routines often cannot be transferred automatically to new places or people (context blindness). When autism and ADHD co-occur (AuDHD), the need for movement and novelty competes directly with the need for calm and predictability.

Practice: Active outdoor movement (football, cycling) is deliberately alternated with low-stimulus rest phases (chess, building). New locations and routines are clarified transparently beforehand.

Double Empathy Problem and Echolalia – Damian Milton, Barry M. Prizant [9, 10]

Misunderstandings between neurodivergent and neurotypical people arise from differing modes of expression on both sides, not from a lack of empathy. Echolalia (repeating phrases or quotes) can serve communicative or self-regulatory functions; however, the popular stage model «GLP/NLA» is not considered empirically established [9, 10].

Practice: If a child repeats a set audio-story quote during a hectic moment, I recognise it as their signal of tension and reduce my own speech.

Sensory Profile and Stimming – Winnie Dunn, A. Jean Ayres, Steven K. Kapp [7]

Hypersensitivity (noise, light, clothing) can coexist alongside sensory seeking for movement or pressure. Research shows that repetitive movements or sounds (stimming) frequently support self-regulation and are never suppressed for purely social reasons as long as no danger arises [7].

Practice: Disturbing stimuli are adjusted pragmatically (ear defenders, low-stimulus seating). If a child rocks while thinking or squeezes a ball, they are free to use that movement.

Deep Pressure and Weighted Blankets: Voluntary, Never Physically Imposed – Paul Gringras et al. [8], A. Jean Ayres

If a child enjoys familiar sensory aids, a heavy cushion on their lap or a familiar blanket can be offered voluntarily. Never apply pressure using an adult's body, never use «bear hugs» and never use restraint. A randomised trial found no objective sleep benefit from weighted blankets, although many children liked them subjectively [8].

Interoception, Alexithymia and Basic Physical Needs – Kelly Mahler, Peter E. Sifneos

Hunger, thirst, fatigue or pain are sometimes perceived with a delay (interoception), and emotions can be hard to name under stress (alexithymia). Around food, toileting, personal care and sleep, coercion and shaming are avoided; persistent physical or health complaints are never explained away as demand avoidance alone, but referred for medical assessment.

Practice: When unusual irritability appears, I think first of thirst, hunger, lack of sleep, sensory overload or physical pain.

References and Scientific Context

This reference list combines diagnostic standards, systematic reviews, empirical research and clearly marked practice approaches. Not every method mentioned carries the same strength of evidence; therefore, contested models are not presented as established neurobiology in this concept.

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