

## **The Resource Room**

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### **Understanding Anxiety and Behavior**

#### **Four Target Areas to Support Regulation in Neurodiversity**

As educators, we are responsible for the safety and care of the students in our charge. Across the school day and across settings we observe and are required to manage the manifestation of behaviors that may vary in underlying source and severity.

The two high incidence disabilities that often include characteristics of both externalizing and internalizing problem behaviors that make navigating academic and social situations difficult are Autism and ED. Many manifestations derive from diagnosed disorders, such as ADHD or ODD. Recent conversations around Autism and behavior include PDA or pathological demand avoidance, although it is not a recognized disorder or diagnosis within the DSM-5. In the 1980's, Newson coined the term, pathological demand avoidance, to describe children on the spectrum who demonstrated "an obsessive resistance to everyday demands, an extreme need for control, and an apparently poor sense of social identity, pride, or shame". (Simonoff et. al, JAACAP, 47:8, 921-929, 2008),

There is often an emphasis on the diagnosis or the disability, while regardless, the behavior often presents similarly. Statistically, there is a high probability that there is a co-occurring or comorbidity across the areas of neurodiversity, resulting in students having multiple factors contributing to their lagging skills in executive functioning and specifically self-regulation. In one study exploring the concept of pathological demand avoidance, ten-fourteen-year-olds with autism were assessed for other child psychiatric disorders. The study found that 70% of the participants had at least one comorbid disorder and 41% had two or more, with the most common being social anxiety disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity, and oppositional defiant disorder. (Simonoff et. al, JAACAP, 47:8, 921-929, 2008).

The probability of a comorbid disorder can often mean that there is a high correlation to diagnosis within neurodiversity and anxiety, resulting in many externalizing and internalizing behaviors. "In her seminal work, Newson argued that avoidance was driven by the child's need to reduce anxiety and distress triggered by real or anticipated demands. The wider research literature on ASD (autism spectrum disorders) suggests that anxiety is indeed often a driver of avoidance in ASD." (Simonoff et. al, JAACAP, 47:8, 921-929, 2008).

Regardless of the diagnosis or disorder, the behavior manifests often in an avoidance and/or refusal to meet demands or expected behaviors. Much of the current research in neuroscience and neurodiversity has made connections to those behaviors and difficulty with emotional regulation and executive functioning. Being able to approach the student

with an understanding of the likelihood that anxiety is very much present and directly affecting their response to stimuli or perceived demands, can help educators proactively support students who struggle.

What neuroscience research also shows is the importance of regulation and “felt safety” to be ready to learn. “Basically, when humans feel safe, their nervous systems support the homeostatic functions of health, growth, and restoration, while they simultaneously become accessible to others without feeling or expressing threat and vulnerability” (Porges SW (2022) Retrieved Jan. 2024 from <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles>). Current discussions around PDA indicate that a part of feeling safe is having autonomy or perceived autonomy. Oftentimes the demand in each situation, whether academic or social, can be perceived as a threat to safety and therefore contribute to dysregulation.

What we also know is that the autonomic response can disconnect us from our being able to access our prefrontal cortex. Executive functioning is not fully developed until after adolescence, and skills such as self-regulation, conflict resolution, problem solving, and self-management are going to need to be supported, modeled, taught, and reinforced. With this insight in mind, as educators we can come to understand the behavior as a manifestation of anxiety, emotional dysregulation, and lagging executive functioning skills. This can be a crucial step in framing responses and informing interventions and the strategies to be implemented. We can focus on the following four areas to support all students that are struggling to meet expected behaviors in the classroom.

## **1. Understanding Demand**

Demand can come in many forms. A demand can be to interact socially with peers in a small group, to join peers at recess, to sit at a table, to complete a task, or any situation that places an expectation on a student to act. The level of risk involved in a demand, perceived or actual, can affect the likelihood that the student will engage pro-socially. Understanding how to manage risk and alter demand based on student needs can set the student and teacher up for success. It is important to understand what individual students may perceive as the risk involved in a demand and whether they consider it a high demand, a low demand, or a threat. Altering the demand based on what we know about their perceptions and current skills and needs can help us meet the student where they are and take them where they need to be.

## **2. Creating Felt Safety**

Beyond being able to alter the demand, there are other things we can do to build a sense of “felt” safety. For a student to be prepared to learn, there must be a sense of “felt” safety devoid of perceived threat. Two highly effective things we can do as educators to support that “felt” safety are providing consistency and predictability across the day and being

intentional with our language and communication. We provide consistency and predictability through teaching expectations, using consistent procedures and routines, using schedules and instructional tools with visual supports, and being consistent and predictable in our reactions. We can also support that feeling of safety by being intentional and aware of how and what we communicate. The body language we use, our tone, our voice level, and the words we use, can all help prevent a behavior and support de-escalation. A fantastic way to approach language with students that need a perceived level of autonomy as a part of their perceived safety, is to use declarative language. Rather than giving a demand or directive, instead notice and declare. For example, instead of “Get your backpack,” you could notice that the student still might need something before going home. Check this book out on declarative language: *Declarative Language Handbook: Using a Thoughtful Language Style to Help Kids with Social Learning Challenges Feel Competent, Connected, and Understood* by Linda K. Murphy.

### **3. Need for Autonomy**

Many students may perceive losing their autonomy or control in a situation as a threat to their safety, resulting in an autonomic response. This may feel like the student wants control and is acting in ways to gain control. It may feel very much to them like they are out of control, but it is a perceived threat triggering the amygdala and resulting in dysregulation and the flight, fight, or freeze response. Using choice and declarative language and “disguising” demands are all excellent strategies to support that student with trusting you and their surroundings.

*Check out these resources for more ideas:*

Strewing Demands - <https://youtu.be/ySjyg4B8dTA>

PDA for Teaching Professionals: <https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/PDA-for-teaching-professionals.pdf>

### **4. Modeling, Teaching, and Reinforcing SEL skills**

Another terrific way to help students trust not only you and their surroundings, but also to learn to trust themselves is by modeling, teaching, and reinforcing social emotional skills. When a student learns the skills needed for social and academic situations, they can meet the demands and expectations. Consider incorporating the modeling, teaching, and reinforcing of social emotional skills across the school day.

*For more information on teaching SEL visit [casel.org](https://casel.org)*

#### References

Emily Simonoff, Andrew Pickles, Tony Charman, Susie Chandler, Tom Loucas, Gillian Baird,

Psychiatric Disorders in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Prevalence, Comorbidity, and Associated Factors in a Population-Derived Sample, *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, Volume 47, Issue 8, 2008, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0890856708600593> (Retrieved Jan 2024 from <https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/PDA-for-teaching-professionals.pdf>)

Porges SW (2022) Polyvagal Theory: A Science of Safety. *Front. Integr. Neurosci.* 16:871227. doi: 10.3389/fnint.2022.871227 (Retrieved Jan. 2024 from <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fnint.2022.871227/full>)