

Children who refuse to do as you ask and avoid demands = An avoidance of everyday demands and an anxiety-driven need to be in control.

It's important to remember what is driving the behaviour – **it's anxiety**.

The child can't help the fact that they won't do something, and by understanding that, you can approach it in a calmer / different way.

School can be particularly fraught and full of demands. We ask children to do what we want them to do all the time. For an already anxious child their need to feel safe, through taking control will override their ability to do as you ask.

This can lead to a range of behaviours from refusal to rudeness and angry outbursts. **It is not that the child doesn't want to do what you've asked ... it is that they can't help saying 'I won't'**

There may be endless procrastination and manipulation. The child may use lovely, social language to explain that... 'Sorry - they really can't do that right now because... they're too busy, too tired or their legs don't work properly!'

They may try to divert your attention and go to great lengths to keep it. The negative attention is just as important as positive in times of high anxiety, dysregulation, and crisis – as long as the child has your undivided attention – that is all that matters at that time. It feels like the child is pushing you to your limit and pushing you away – paradoxically to keep you close.

By pushing you and 'testing you out' the child is asking how reliable and resilient you are in keeping them safe. After angry outbursts the child needs you to still be there, no matter what because you need them to understand they can trust you. Eventually, the consistency and reassurance results in trust and so less need to keep control. This means adults need to be patient and resilient.

Things to try

➤ **Choose your battles**

There are some rules that we must stick to, but it's about giving *enough* control – or the *feeling* of control. Consider how vital it is that the request if followed and score it 1 to 3. 1 is vital and the request must be followed i.e., to leave the building in a fire drill. 2 can be flexible and 3 is not important. You can get into the habit of always considering the reason for your request and where and when you can share control over the decision. For example ...

- Hurting self, others or equipment is a 1 – a request to stop is very important and the child will be prevented from doing so.
- Writing on a blue piece of paper rather than in the book is a 3 – not important and the child can be given the choice. (The important thing is that they have a go at writing.)
- Sitting up, cross legged on the carpet is a 3 – not important and the child can be given the choice i.e., sit on a chair or a cushion – at the front of the group or at the back. (The important thing is that they access the activity and take part and listen.)
- It is really important that all adults working with a child use the same language and expectations because consistency enables trust.

➤ **Consider how the request is given**

- Use physical prompts rather than directly asking them to do something. 'If I asked her to put her shoes on it wouldn't work. If I sit with her and tap her foot with the shoe next to it, she will.'
- Use the child's special interests – the Fat Controller says we will ...
- Depersonalise the request – it's not me asking, it's government policy. **It is my job to keep you safe and I care too much to let you fail.**
- Make them believe they are helping you. 'Oh, I don't know how to do it', or 'Where's your shoes, I can't find them.'
- Introduce competition. 'Let's race ... I can write a word in 5 seconds, can you?'
- Invite them to collaborate – do you want to do A, B or C first? Which job should I do in this task?
- Reduce demands: 'Let's get half of you dressed, and then I'll come back later and get the other half of you dressed.'
- Take turns. 'I'll write 3 words, then you write 3 words.'

➤ **Question or statement?**

Consider what is *implied* by your request and what the child might *infer*. We may ask a question, but the inference is that there is no option. We sometimes say I need you to... or I would like you to ... However, consider that an anxious child, who is feeling unsafe and dysregulated won't care what *you* want at that moment. Their overriding motivation is what *they* want and need to keep *themselves* safe and in control.

Demand	Implication	Inference	Phrases to try
Would you come here please and sit on the carpet?	Sit on the carpet now	No, I wouldn't like too so 'no'	Come here... Sit on the carpet ... Thank you
Would you like to get your book bag and read to me now?	Come and read with me now	I wouldn't like to thank you 'no'	Time to get your book now ... Thank you
Shall we line up by the door now?	Line up now	No, I shan't thank you	Let's line up ... Thank you
Is it ok if you finish your writing now and have your snack?	Stop and have your snack when you have finished writing	No, it's not ok and I don't know when I will finish	In 1 minute, stop writing. Then have your snack ... <i>countdown</i> ... thank you

You don't have to demand and bark instructions but by phrasing things differently, you can still infer kindness and care but phrase it in a different order. State clearly what you want the child to but not as a question – keep the key information carrying words to 1 or 2. Add a lovely, kind, expectant 'thank you' on the end which implies both your expectation and appreciation that the request will be followed.

➤ **Limited or closed choices**

Offering limited choices instead of making demands can be very effective. Children often respond to choices when they will not respond to demands, especially when you follow the choice with, "You decide." Choices should be respectful and should focus attention on the needs of the situation.

Whenever a choice is given, either alternative should be acceptable to the adult. We might be tempted to say, "Do you want to read the book with me?" Because of a child's demand resistance, the answer is going to be 'no.' Obviously, the choice offered did not include an alternative the adult is willing to accept. So – to reduce demand, whilst offering limited choices and an element of control ..."Would you like to read the bear book or the elephant book? You decide." **Adding, "You decide," after a choice is very empowering. It adds emphasis to the fact that the child does have a choice.**

What if they don't want either choice and want to do something else? If the something else is acceptable to you, fine. If it is not, say, "That isn't one of the choices." And, then repeat the choices and, "You decide."

Children may not have a choice about many things, such as whether or not to do their work. Work needs to be done, but children can be offered a limited choice as to how they would like to do it. It is important to remember that there isn't one tool that works for every child in every situation. It is also important to remember that the feeling behind what you do is as important as what you do. The key is to be kind and firm at the same time. Get used to using the same intonation when saying 'you decide' or 'you choose' as this seems to help the child tune in and listen.

- Time to go out to play – you put your coat on or I will help- you decide.
- Let's go to the music room – hold my hand or walk slowly – you decide.
- Tidying up now – pick up the pencil first or the paper – you decide.
- We need to do our must do math's now – then we'll play a game – dobble or snap – you decide.
- Etc...

➤ **Avoid going head-to-head with them over an issue. Nobody wins!**

- If the child asks you to do something, try not to see it as them bossing you about or that you are giving in. They just might need you to do it at that moment because they need to feel in control of their environment. You can work on manners and how we ask for help later when they are more responsive.
- If there are things that you want the child to try, let her/her know that s/he can try if for five minutes and walk away if it's no good or too stressful. Trying is good and it doesn't matter if they need loads of help or even fail. This is especially useful for activities that are challenging for them (often writing). The child may find it really difficult and even tiring or physically painful and you suggesting it will raise feelings of impending failure, shame and heighten anxiety.
- Try to read their moods around whether you would be able to gain their compliance with a task. Sometimes they will, and others they will be unable to meet the demand and it is not worth pushing as you will end up with a highly stressful situation which spirals out of control. When calm, but things are starting to 'bubble', use noticing and wondering to help the child verbalise their feelings and support them to solve problems together.
- Read them stories to teach them about social situations indirectly. Social stories and comic strip conversations are really useful to 'depersonalise' tricky situations and problems the child has encountered. Use the third person - you can encourage the child to relate to what might have gone wrong without the guilt and shame that might occur by them blaming themselves.
- Visuals prompts and structures can keep a child feeling safe and sharing control with you. Refer to visual timetables, now/next boards and must dos for example. Use prompts to remind a child what is expected of them at times of transition and use a visual timer or count down when an activity is going to end soon and the child will be expected to follow a demand to move on.
- If a strategy seems to work then stops working, don't bin it, just shelve it for a while.