

A FAMILY-FRIENDLY COMMUNICATION GUIDE

Declarative Language Guide for Demand-Avoidant Individuals

Supporting Autonomy, Safety, and Engagement

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A helpful starting point

Declarative language shares information, wonders aloud, and invites thinking without requiring a particular answer or action. It can make more room for autonomy, connection, and problem-solving.

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Use what feels supportive for your child and family. This guide is a tool for reflection, not a script to follow perfectly.

01 Understanding the Why: Demand Avoidance + Language

Demand avoidance is a nervous system survival response, not willful defiance.

- Demand avoidance occurs when an individual experiences requests, expectations, or perceived demands as overwhelming or threatening, leading to resistance, withdrawal, distraction, negotiation, or emotional outbursts.
- This behavior is not deliberate opposition; it is a protective mechanism aimed at preserving autonomy, reducing perceived threats, and maintaining emotional and physiological regulation.
- Demand avoidance can be seen in many neurodivergent individuals, including those with a PDA (Pathological Demand Avoidance) profile, but it can also occur more broadly across autism, ADHD, and trauma histories.

The demand-avoidance cycle

Step	What may be happening
1. Perceived Demand	The individual detects an internal or external expectation (even something subtle like “time to leave”).
2. Nervous System Activation	The brain interprets the demand as a potential threat to autonomy, safety, or regulation.
3. Fight/Flight/Freeze/Fawn Response	The body prepares to resist, escape, shut down, or appease.
4. Avoidance Behaviors	Resistance, distraction, negotiation, humor, shutdown, aggression, or refusal emerge.
5. Escalation or Withdrawal	If pressure continues, behaviors may intensify—or the individual may shut down completely.
6. (Optional) Recovery	With co-regulation, declarative language, and autonomy restoration, safety returns and engagement may restart.

Key reminder

The avoidance isn't about defiance—it's a survival-based protection of autonomy and emotional regulation.

- Traditional demands (imperative language) can trigger threat detection.
- Declarative language invites collaboration and reduces perceived threats.

02 What Declarative Language Sounds Like

Definition of language types

Imperative language

Tells, directs, or commands someone to do something. It prioritizes compliance and control, and can increase pressure.

Examples: “Sit down.” “Stop.” “Put your shoes on.”

Declarative language

Shares information, wonders aloud, or invites thinking without demanding a specific response. It prioritizes autonomy, connection, and problem-solving.

Examples: “I wonder if your shoes are by the door.” “I’ll leave your juice box next to us in case you get thirsty.”

Core principles of declarative language

Imperative language	Declarative language
Tells, directs, demands	Shares, wonders, invites
Prioritizes compliance	Prioritizes connection
Sparks resistance or shutdown	Sparks curiosity and safety

Mindset shift

From controlling outcomes → To co-creating experiences

In short: Imperative = control + compliance. Declarative = collaboration + thinking.

03 Declarative Starters You Can Use Right Now

These stems share what you notice or wonder while leaving the other person space to respond in their own way.

"I wonder if..." Invites curiosity	"I notice..." Shares observation without judgment
"I'm thinking..." Models shared thinking	"Maybe we could..." Offers collaboration
"It looks like..." Reflects experience back safely	"I'm curious about..." Sparks problem-solving

A gentle reminder

A declarative comment is not a hidden test. You can share an observation, pause, and enjoy the moment without waiting for a particular performance.

Try one stem that feels natural to you. You do not need to narrate every minute or follow a script perfectly.

04 Real-World Examples: Reframing Imperatives

The goal is not to avoid direct language altogether. These examples show how a small shift can leave more room for autonomy and connection.

Situation	Imperative (Demand)	Declarative (Invite)
Transition to a new task	"Come sit down now."	"I wonder when your body might feel ready to move."
Safety moment	"Stop running!"	"It looked like that almost felt unsafe."
Emotional regulation	"Calm down."	"Looks like your feelings got really big."
Social expectation	"Say hi."	"I noticed they smiled at you."

Follow your child's lead

Use comments that match what your child is already interested in. If they are lining up toy animals, you could notice, "The penguins are all in a row." If they are watching a favorite show, you could share, "That character looks surprised." These moments can give children language to hear while keeping their interests at the center.

Keep every communication mode welcome

If your child uses AAC, sign, or gestures, keep those ways of communicating available and respond to them. You can model language on a communication device when it fits, without requiring your child to copy you. A child's communication does not need to be spoken to count.

05 Why Declarative Language Can Help

Reduces threat detection

Declarative language lowers the activation of the nervous system, allowing the individual to stay regulated rather than entering fight, flight, freeze, or fawn.

Offers perceived control

By inviting participation rather than demanding action, declarative language helps individuals feel that they have a choice, preserving their autonomy.

Strengthens internal motivation

When individuals feel like collaborators rather than subjects, their natural curiosity and willingness to engage increase.

Promotes flexible thinking

Declarative language fosters problem-solving, creativity, and resilience by encouraging individuals to consider possibilities rather than fixed outcomes.

Models emotional regulation

Staying calm, reflective, and flexible models important self-regulation strategies that demand-avoidant individuals can internalize over time.

06 When Imperative Language Might Still Be Necessary

There are times when using imperative language is appropriate and necessary, but these instances should be mindful and intentional:

- **Safety emergencies:** Immediate, clear directives are critical when there is a physical danger (e.g., “Stop!” when a child is about to run into the street).
- **Predictable, secure routines:** If a child has agreed upon and finds comfort in routines (like brushing teeth before bed), a gentle imperative may feel expected and safe.
- **Pre-agreed reminders:** When an individual has consented in advance to reminders (“Can you remind me to grab my water bottle if I forget?”), imperatives are supportive rather than controlling.

Repair after a necessary imperative

After any necessary imperative, repair by reconnecting with declarative language.

Example: “That was a fast moment—I felt my heart jump! I’m glad we’re safe.”

07 Common Pitfalls to Avoid

Understanding the philosophy behind declarative language is essential—but application can be tricky. Common pitfalls include:

Overusing “choices” that are disguised demands

Offering two options but forcing an immediate answer can still feel controlling. True declarative language leaves room for uncertainty and doesn’t pressure an immediate decision.

Fake collaboration

Saying “maybe we could...” while internally expecting a specific response isn’t authentic. True collaboration means you are open to any outcome, even one you didn’t plan.

Declarative language with hidden pressure

Using a declarative stem but with an urgent, pressured tone negates the benefits. Tone, body language, and pacing matter just as much as words.

It’s about more than the words

True declarative language is not just about what you say, but how you say it. It requires genuine curiosity, emotional neutrality, and respect for the other person’s nervous system pace.

Remember

The goal is not simply to “get compliance in a nicer way.” The goal is to create felt safety, autonomy, and partnership.

Fewer words
less pressure

More pauses
more thinking time

Neutral tone
greater safety

08 Sample Scripts: Full Conversations in Declarative Language

Scenario: Transition from play

"I'm noticing our time is getting closer to being done. I wonder what things you still want to do before we leave."

Scenario: Shoe refusal

"I'm thinking these shoes are waiting patiently. I wonder if they're feeling lonely by the door."

Declarative Language Cheat Sheet

Try a starter that feels natural in the moment:

"I wonder..."	"I notice..."
"I'm thinking..."	"Maybe we could..."
"It looks like..."	"I'm curious about..."

Speak less. Invite more. Trust the process.

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