



[What We're Learning About \(Pervasive\) Pathological Demand Avoidance](#)

EPISODE #128

Sandra McConnell 0:00

If you look at the fight that's happening over the homework over the screens, or whatever the fight is, right, that's not working, and you've got to change something unless you want that to continue. Unless you want to create a self feeding cycle of force and anxiety, you've got to change something.

Emily Kircher-Morris 0:23

Why is it that some kids, teens and even adults have a hard time meeting the expectations that to most people seem simple? And how can we help reframe those requests, so demand avoidance doesn't prevent their success? Sandra McConnell is here to talk to us about pathological or pervasive demand avoidance. That's straight ahead on episode 128. I'm Emily Kircher-Morris, and this is the Neurodiversity Podcast.

Intro 0:53

What is neurodiversity? This is the Neurodiversity Podcast.

Emily Kircher-Morris 1:14

Before we launch into our conversation, I want to take an opportunity to invite you over to our Facebook group, "The Neurodiversity Podcast, Advocacy and Support Group." If you heard our recent AMA episode, all of the questions came from individuals in that group. We have other opportunities to connect and support each other, and we would love for you to join us. Up next, the PDA Mama Bear, Sandra McConnell, stayed right there.

Dave Morris 1:42

Gifted and special ed administrators and educators we have officially released our new training course "Strategies for Supporting Twice Exceptional Students", hosted by Emily Kircher-Morris. The course is a multimedia experience combining video elements, principles, support documents, audio and video clips of experts in the field of gifted education, and real case studies. It's broken into six modules and comes in two versions, one designed so directors and administrators can conduct a classroom style learning experience. The second version is for self study so participants can take the course on their own when it's convenient for them. The course is entirely in the cloud, and each module ends with a review quiz. Then a certificate is awarded that can be used to track continuing education credits. Once again, it's called "Strategies for Supporting Twice Exceptional Students", and it's available now find the link in this episode show notes or go to neurodiversity.university or if you prefer call the Neurodiversity Alliance at 929-445-8255.

Intro 2:43

You're listening to the Neurodiversity Podcast.

Emily Kircher-Morris 2:51

Today we are talking to Sandra McConnell. Sandra is the PDA Mama Bear and spends her time training others to understand and support pervasive demand avoidance. Sandra, thank you so much for your time today.

Sandra McConnell 3:04

No problem. Thank you for having me.

Emily Kircher-Morris 3:07

So I think it's always useful to spend some time giving just a bit of foundational information for our audience. So to start us off, can you share a bit about how you understand pathological or pervasive demand avoidance and its connection with autism?

Sandra McConnell 3:25

Certainly, I think PDA can be accurately captured with the three A's is how I think about autism, anxiety, and avoidance. Of course, the avoidance is the feature that calls the most attention to itself, right, avoiding everyday demands to great extent using practically any tactic as fair game. So a child or an adult for that matter, but usually parents are seeking to know about their child because the child ignoring using distraction, perhaps being silly, claiming incapacity using shocking behavior sometimes, flat out refusal, of course, at times, but also things that are even more concerning, like eloping, shutting down and into physical resistance, right, a meltdown, like fighting and

biting and kicking so naturally, this is a huge challenge for parents when PDA is on the radar so, and it is and I think it is properly located within the autism framework. It's not a perfect example. Perhaps years from now it will be a cousin of autism, but for now, that's a good place for it to live conceptually, but with a few twists. So it does seem to come with some sensory anomalies, it comes with some limited use of perception. So for example, not noticing things, not using, you know, vision to pick things out of the environment. Definitely some stimming behaviors at times, which is very classic autism, hyperfocus definitely there and special interests still definitely there. Interestingly, I usually deal with people, which I don't know the significance of completely, but it is very interesting, and, of course, splinter skills, definitely there as well. Usually, high IQ, high creativity, you know, those sorts of things, you know, a 2e twice exceptional framework. But there's some differences too, and I think this is why sometimes parents aren't finding answers right away, is that PDA children are not interested in rigidity, right, they don't need a precise routine. In fact, that's their kryptonite, and so they'll resist that, but they still, you know, I suppose many people feel like this, but they don't like to face the unexpected, that will throw them off. In my experience, PDA, also, the children have a normal prosody of voice and prosody is like the pitch, the cadence, the tone, and that sort of thing, and I think society in general is used to autistic people having some sort of detectable variance in prosody, and PDA kids don't usually have that. And a lot of neurotypical people will, you know, talk to the child and say, nope, no autism here, right, because they're looking for something that isn't there truly, right. But I think that throws them off the trail to a certain extent, right, and they're, they're not thinking about autism, when I think they should be thinking about autism, and then the other thing that can throw adults off the trail of autism is they do PDA kids have superficial social skills, especially if you ask them about it, they know what they're supposed to do, but in practice, it's a bit different. But I think especially in terms of social skills, they seem to be missing some of that deeper understanding, right? They're missing, sometimes even impervious to social signals and pressures, like, the reciprocity isn't there in a conversation, they're not necessarily copying other people, right? They're not using and they're not picking up on gestures for communication purposes. And then not understanding some basic ideas like property, boundaries, social rank, and things like that, which are heavily prevalent in modern society. And I think this is very important for PDA, that a lot of the social shoulds must have too's, you know, and, of course, the can'ts and don'ts and so forth, don't make sense to them on a very fundamental level. And that's where autism, I think, is especially important, because, you know, wherever it's coming from, whether it's the IQ, or the sensory anomalies, or whatever, it's there. And that seems to be putting them on a collision course with society, and children don't know that it's society yet, right, they don't, they're only getting this from their parents, and they're locking horns with their parents, who are using these socially based norms and styles, which is basically just obedience, right? You know, you obey, and you do

what I say, and you're happy with it, and PDA children, of course, aren't naturally happy with that. I think they feel entitled to know, and probably not getting explanations and answers from a very young age, and I think this difference can create huge fissures between them. And, you know, their parents and teachers and so forth, and the anxiety basically just deepens from there.

Emily Kircher-Morris 9:14

That's an excellent explanation, and probably one of the best that really delves into why PDAers might not fit exactly that prototype that I think people think of with autism, and that's really useful. I'm curious, how did you start to even learn about PDA and kind of end up in this world professionally?

Sandra McConnell 9:36

Um, through my own son, of course, right? Couldn't detect any autism, it wasn't even on the radar, but once he hit preschool, the first semblance of control, he started to melt down in the classroom and that set us on our journey as we tried to figure it out. And you know, we circled around ADHD for a while, but eventually it was clear that there was some sort of artistic component to that. And eventually, you know, Google led me to a PDA of course, right, and, you know, I have a little bit of recognition of it, too, it feels a bit familiar. I don't know if I'm perfectly PDA, but it makes a lot of sense to me, and that's been actually a great tool and way to strengthen my relationship with my son.

Emily Kircher-Morris 10:22

You can understand why he's kind of feeling the way he is in those situations.

Sandra McConnell 10:27

Yeah, definitely.

Emily Kircher-Morris 10:29

What are some of the different ways that you've seen these characteristics manifest? Like, are there ways to differentiate between autistic PDA traits versus other types of demand avoidance? Or is it even necessary to make that designation?

Sandra McConnell 10:43

I don't know if you have to make that designation, because to a certain extent, the pursuit of a diagnosis, especially in North America can be quite frustrating, because it's barely even here, recognized in North America, the UK has a leg up on us that they know quite a bit about it, even though it's not professionally, fully recognized there. I think the parents and teachers might run into a lot of unnecessary frustration for themselves there, and so I would, if I were a parent, I would definitely take a hard look

at what your intended outcome from a diagnosis would be. If you don't need it, you know, for some sort of accommodation, I just would let it go and then just use the strategies. But you did ask about different presentations, and this is not in the literature. I've seen it appear in some of the posts out there in social media and other blogs, and so forth. But there seems to be an avoiding type and a controlling type, and there are two sides of the same coin. Avoiding type is, of course, the classic, avoiding, you know, eloping and melting down and so forth, escaping the demand. Controlling seems to be a little bit less common, but definitely out there, and this is somebody who's issuing commands to their family members, or telling them where to stand or when to go to the bathroom, and so forth, and both presentations can be difficult for parents, and teachers, of course, to work with. I alluded to it when I defined, you know, PDA, however, I want to just revisit it again, that the anxiety and the avoidance of demands isn't the core of PDA, that's the presentation and it's usually the first thing that parents and teachers are encountering, it's, you know, it's baffling them, right, they're out there on Google and trying to figure out what's going on. The anxiety and the avoidance are not the the only part of PDA in fact, there's something that was there, before they started running into these social norms, these you have to's, and you should, and you must, something else was there, I'm not precisely sure all the features of it, but I do know it has something to do with the autism, of course, right? Perhaps a high sense of counter will counter will is an instinct to resist coercion, it's in everybody, to different degrees, and so it would make sense that perhaps in a particular type of autism, they have a high sense of control, and that leads to PDA. Their high IQ, I know for a fact plays a role in this because they question things, even young children, they may not know how to do so with finesse, but that's where their mind is taking them. And they interestingly have that sense of justice, they're creative and divergent thinkers, they're special interests in people, and they, you know, those imperfect social skills are all just, you know, things that have to do with them before the anxiety and the demand avoidance show up. And so the social model of defining neurodiversity in general and PDA specifically, works really, really well because when PDA children first start encountering, you know, the social world, in any sort of structured sense, you know, pre K and, and so forth. They don't necessarily need to run into all of this resistance that's coming from society. And if they're placed in the right environment, and if their tendencies are recognized, as well as their skills actually looked upon as an advantage, there's no reason why PDA can't exist positively as they go through life.

Emily Kircher-Morris 14:49

All those little factors that add up definitely influenced that I've done a presentation in the past called "When 'Because I Said So' Doesn't Work", which wasn't necessarily directly related to PDA, but there are definitely parallels there, and I brought up the topic during that conversation. But you know, you have those bright kids who, if they don't

understand why they're being asked to do something, they're going to push back against that, you know, and then you have these other components. And I've heard people describe some of it, as, you know, having a difficult time identifying like, what's a threatening demand, and what's a request, like, where's that level of communication there, which I think is then sometimes associated with the, with the social language piece.

Sandra McConnell 15:28

There's a conflict existing between PDA and society at large in terms of motivation, and I think that throws a lot of adults for a loop. Because normal society is of course, based on a structure of hierarchy, expectations of obedience, and expectations of compliance and that all of this is supposed to kind of come together into a certain level of harmony, and missteps are basically corrected under the same philosophy, right, we apply some external enforcers, rewards, punishments, maybe some shaming, disappointment, and those sorts of things. And I suppose this works reasonably well for a neurotypical society, wherein, you know, all the individuals are on board with this, they're plugged in, and they want their social groups to accept them, and that's good enough for them, right, those enforcers is good enough for them. But PDA isn't plugged into that, you know, again, like I said, their IQ sometimes is a bit too high for their own good there, they have a desire to question and they also, their motivations are drawn from within themselves, like their own wellspring. So before PDA turns into the more pathological flavor of PDA, they're curious, they're interested, they're asking questions, they're interested in things according to their own merits, right, the merit of the thing, right? I think if we stepped back from that, we would know and observe that society often holds that kind of structure up to a level that we would like to achieve, like, oh, that's good, that's a great way to be. But it's not usually expected in children.

Emily Kircher-Morris 17:24

Or in schools.

Sandra McConnell 17:25

Or in schools exactly, right. And so they're not ready for it, and so when the I told you so's don't work there, their mind doesn't immediately go to oh, well, you know, this is just an intrinsically motivated child and if I, you know, adequately get out of the way, they'll actually just, you know, engage on their own, you know, using their own motivational engine, if you will, that's not even occurring to them. And usually, what adults do is being baffled, they then apply more external enforcers, you know, they, they basically raise the pressure and escalate it. And this is a child, of course, who, under the

pressure of anxiety, encountering a social system that doesn't quite gel with them, they're getting flustered, they're getting anxious, and they're resisting, and I think claustrophobia might be a good way to describe how they're feeling as that pressure mounts, or perhaps even like being preyed upon, right being cornered. And that's why no amount of social enforcement is really going to work on a PDA kid. Because if you are cornered by an animal, would you give up and not fight? Of course not, right, they're feeling that kind of emotion in the height of a meltdown, and so they're not going to give up. And so parents and adults have to step back and say, you know, okay, so when the typical social enforcers are not working, the rewards and the punishments now what, and acknowledging that this internal intrinsic motivation is there is going to help. Because when you think about that, when you think about enabling that you're engaging in a very positive way with somebody who so far, from pre K on or so right, has been encountering a system that is not working with their neurological profile. And so for somebody in their life, a parent or a teacher, so forth, to show up and say, we're going to loosen our grip, we're going to let go, we're going to relax, we're going to you know, take our ruffled feathers and we're going to, you know, calm them down, and that can help them calm down, it's, you know, co regulation, of course, but it's immensely helpful if parents can get and arrive at this place to recognize that that's what's going to be needed of them to do for their child.

Emily Kircher-Morris 20:04

I'm thinking of a client that I've worked with for quite a while, and this particular client is a little bit older now, high school age. And we've seen a big transition and only recently where they were diagnosed as autistic, even though I think we all kind of knew, but there was a lot of masking and compensating that was going on. And it's interesting, because when we first began therapy, part of the issue was that I think the anxiety was driving a lot of their performance at school. So they would dig in and spend hours on homework and do all of these things, they would still get frustrated when they would want to do an assignment their way, and they couldn't, but they would still kind of do that. And as they got older, both the content got harder, and I think they were just experiencing some burnout, and then that avoidance, I feel like came forward a little bit more, and now it's very difficult, just to complete anything, and it is such a 180 for this particular client. But I guess my question to you is, is that something that you also see where sometimes I attribute that maybe to, you know, you have your fight, flight or freeze, but also the fawning piece that I think we talked about with PDA kids sometimes where it's like, they'll almost lean into it to avoid the pressure or the pushback of the demand that might come after if they don't go along with it. Does that make sense to you? What are your thoughts about that?

Sandra McConnell 21:33

Yeah, my, my thoughts on that are that anxiety will often try to find a way to express itself, it tries to explain itself, I've had anxiety, and so I understand, right? I've had anxiety when I was a little kid, and it was no fun, and I remember my anxiety was actually, you know, I was thinking about it, I was trying to identify it as a way to negate it. And they probably would have called it generalized anxiety, had I ever been diagnosed, and they would have just said, oh, well, you know, she's anxious about school, she's anxious about this, she's anxious about that. But it was none of those things, and I don't know if I would have been able to explain that when I was a child, but it was none of those things, I was looking for a way to get out from underneath it. And so I think we oftentimes will see children doing similar things right there, it's not necessarily like a one, one for one, you know, switch where they, you know, they're like, if I do this thing, the anxiety is gone. If they're trying, they're hoping they're crossing their fingers that it will, but they don't really know it, you know, oftentimes adults don't know where their anxieties are coming from, that's why we have therapy, of course. Children are going to be even less capable of that, and so the thing is that they're investing their time in well, you basically have to be careful before you take it at face value because they're just searching for a cure, so to speak, for their anxiety. And I think sometimes parents can get led astray here too, because I've heard and read about a lot of situations where the parent is trying to create a safe environment and so forth, and they'll describe that their child is asking for everything right needs this needs that right and, and a parent is saying, I deliver I give them this and I give them that and it's still not enough, nothing's helping, nothing seems like it's enough. And I go back, and I think about it, I had a psych professor in college who said, "you can't get enough of something you don't need." That child was looking for a way to chase their pain away, they thought that maybe if they asked for everything, every video game there is on the planet, whatever it was, that maybe that would help, and of course, we know, right, of course, that's not going to help, they're trying but it's not going to help. And so the parents can maybe be helpful in that regard by not getting so frustrated with giving their child everything and having it not work. Zero in instead on the fact that the child is under stress. They're in pain, they're they're, you know, in a place of discomfort, and you can work off of that alone as your foundation. By them thinking about what kind of relationship they need, you know, and you fill in the gaps. And because the child is there, not in the best capacity for problem solving this one, but the parent can, just by recognizing that you know, stress, stress, anxiety is anxiety and starting from that as their foundation.

Emily Kircher-Morris 24:58

Kind of validating that for them and then using that as the starting point to understand what's really going on, because you can't fix a problem if you don't understand what it is. You've mentioned throughout our conversation, different things about, you know, traditional parenting styles, PDA parenting styles, and I think we kind of recognize that

that has to look a little bit different. What are some specific strategies? Like where does the rubber hit the road for, for parents, or even educators or clinicians that can be used to support this type of kid?

Sandra McConnell 25:29

I think first and foremost, parents need to, and practitioners and teachers need to kind of take a step away from their authoritarian gatekeeper, you know, judgment type role, because that's, you know, based in traditional social society, and that's not what we've got here, right. And so it's more useful to frame oneself as a mentor, and advisor. So you're not trying to make children behave a particular way. You're not trying to tell them what to think. Instead, you're trying to teach them how to think since you can't force them into anything, you've got that kid, the kid that you can't force into doing anything, right? Well, what does that leave that leaves helping them understand the context of the situation, and that is better served from the role as mentor and advisor. And of course, this is a bit more passive to be an advisor, you're crossing your fingers if they're gonna hear your lesson, but it lessens that pressure, it takes the edge off, it makes you more of a trusted adviser. I would put punishments and rewards frankly, on hiatus until further notice, basically the times outs and the spankings and the you know, groundings and lectures and so forth. Because they're only expressing that as an individual, as an adult, you're not a safe person. In fact, you're a person that, you know, the PDA child has to protect themselves from, so drop all of those things. But more importantly, I would say, drop judgment, drop conflict, right, the things that you teach are not going to be done on a plane of disagreement and judgment and disappointment. That is what's going to throw you into the mentor role, and it's going to convey a lot of things, which will be to your benefit, it's going to convey that you have patients that you have mercy that you have hope that it's safe to fail in your presence, that your love or your respect is not at risk, even when they're in, you know, a terrible state and they're not feeling very well at all. And it also sets up just a better way of living, right, that has a lot of curiosity in it, a lot of funniness and goofiness as well, which is a huge investment in a relationship, you're not going to be able to teach anything if the relationship is not there. So I'd start there. In fact, I wouldn't do anything else until the relationship feels pretty sturdy.

Emily Kircher-Morris 28:12

What do you say to the parent who hears you saying that, and their response is, "well, the only way that I can get them to do their homework or to, you know, fill in the blank, is by taking away their phone, if I back down, then you know, they're gonna think they win, that's just not how the world works." What would your response to that be? That's something I sometimes get and I'm curious how you would respond?

Sandra McConnell 28:34

Well, I like the phrase evidence based and I that often pops into my head here, because I know it shows up in research and professionals use it and so forth. But in that context, if you look at the fight that's happening over the homework, over the screens, or whatever the fight is, right, that's not working, so talk about evidence based, it's not working, and you've got to change something. If it's not working, unless you want that to continue, unless you want to create a self feeding cycle of force and anxiety, you've got to change something. And it is immensely powerful, in fact, for one of the parties to lay down their arms in reconciliation. Oftentimes, PDA children have not encountered that yet in their lives, it can be extremely powerful for them to find that person. Because as far as they're concerned, the entire world is trying to force them into something that they either don't understand. Or they might be inherently motivated but everybody's trying to poke and prod them into a behavior that they don't need the poking and prodding, which is highly insult thing, I think especially teenagers are gonna fall into that category, I don't you know, this is what it feels like, I don't need you on this one. And so I would ask the parent if they want to get to an outcome on this, because those fights have become their status quo.

Emily Kircher-Morris 30:22

I feel like too, one of the things that is hard to hear as a parent, but it's also sometimes okay to recognize is that school, for example, because I feel like that's where a lot of the power struggle sometimes comes into play, for example, or where parents at least maybe experience a lot of anxiety. It's better to try to work through some of these things when kids are younger, and help them develop that independence, you know, their their grades in middle school, yeah, okay you want them to do well, but it's also not the end of the world, if they don't have straight A's, or whatever the case might be, even if they have to go to summer school, that is not ideal. But if that means, though, that you repair that relationship, so that you can move forward, maybe that is a worthwhile experience to have, and get through together.

Sandra McConnell 31:10

Yeah, and I think you're bringing up something that sounds like we both encounter quite a bit of parents and teachers, not necessarily reconciling their goals with the needs of the child. You know, I don't mean like, you know, they need food, and, you know, and they think they need x number of hours on video games, I'm not talking about that I'm talking about their psychological health. Psychological health is the key to any future success whatsoever, and so when you have somebody who's in distress, that's a threat to psychological health, meaning it's a threat to any future success. So if you're beating the drum for grades or screen time, or what have you, there's a couple of things that's going to happen, the child is going to remember, as they age that you weren't there for them in their darkest of moments, they're going to remember that you weren't in touch

with them, enough to realize that they were in significant amounts of pain. And I think that's just going to create a huge chasm between them and the adults, you know, their mom or dad, or what have you. When you think about a different kind of parenting style, it's not just to be, you know, just because it's a new age, good and kind way to be no, this is the path to your goals as a parent. That's how this is 100% outcome oriented, where when you say, I need my child's mental health to be squared away enough that they can grow into whoever they're meant to be a positive version of that. Because clamping down the enforcing the rewards and the punishments, that's all for society, that's for society. The kid doesn't need that, they need somebody to help them put the pieces back together.

Emily Kircher-Morris 33:18

The trauma of being a PDAer, and being in that survival mode for most of your life growing up, like there's a dramatic effect to that. One thing that, that I think is kind of another interesting piece that is important, is also just talking to kids about PDA. Do you have any advice for parents about how they can have that conversation with their child? Or like how can we help kids understand what PDA is and how to work within it?

Sandra McConnell 33:48

Well, I suspect that kids with PDA probably already know all about it, and they just don't have the label yet, they just don't know what to call it. I would have the parent take a careful look at their idea in their head of PDA first before they say anything at all. Because society has taught us that autism in general and PDA specifically, right, it's baked right into the name Autism Spectrum Disorder, right. Which is stacking the deck against them, first of all, which is not fair. But if the parent has bought into that, there's a good chance that the conversation could go sideways. Because it's not a cancer diagnosis, but if that's how you're feeling that you're delivering some sort of like death sentence or just something really dark, oh my god, how do I do this, well, you probably need to backup first before you have that conversation because you're not in the right area. I'm proud even though it wasn't as as overt, overtly planned, as I would like to say, but I'm proud that when I gave my son I told my son that he was an Aspie, and I use that term specifically because it's sounds cute, and I said, hey, the report came back and the doctor says you're an Aspie, he bounced through the house in glee and he told all the other family members room by room, right, I'm an Aspie, I'm an Apsie, yay! That's where you want to be, if you can get there, now, granted, if you have a teenager, the whole thing is riddled with a lot of negativity, you still want to try to say this is actually a good thing. Because now you can reverse engineer yourself using the right map and find other people out there who've been through this, and not only find friends, but turn yourself into the best you that you can be. Autistic people all across the world, that's what they deserve, I think they deserve a narrative about themselves, even with the

challenges that says you can be good at who you are. There's no reason that you have to spend this much time in survival mode with other people telling you that you're somehow broken or disordered or whatever. There are good aspects of this. That's how I would talk about PDA.

Emily Kircher-Morris 36:20

Sandra McConnell, thank you so much for your time today.

Sandra McConnell 36:25

Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Emily Kircher-Morris 36:29

Understanding how we can support neurodivergent kids who struggle with meeting the everyday demands of life is vital. It isn't just defiance, and it isn't just laziness. The more we are able to understand the why behind a child or teens difficulties, the better we're able to help them develop strategies to work through it. And not just any strategies, not our strategies, but strategies that work for them based on their needs. That's the essence of what we're talking about when we talk about finding ways to be neurodiversity affirming, whether it's at home school, or anywhere. I'm Emily Kircher-Morris, I'll see you next time on the Neurodiversity Podcast.

Dave Morris 37:54

Thank you, Sandra McConnell, we appreciate the conversation today. If you'd like to know more about her and the work she's doing with PDA, we have links on the episode 128 page at neurodiversitypodcast.com Thanks to North Sphere, SA Carl and Arc De Soleil, they made the music for this episode. Thanks also to our Patreon patrons who help us keep the lights on here, you can join them and help support our efforts by clicking the support link at the top of our website. Our host is Emily Kircher-Morris. Our social media and production assistant is Christa Brown and by the way, kudos to her for helping make our first Ask Me Anything episode, a huge success. The executive producer and post production editor is me, Dave Morris. For everyone here, thanks for listening. See you next time. This is a service of the Neurodiversity Alliance