

A FREE GUIDE FOR LOW-DEMAND HOUSEHOLDS

50 Declarative Language Swaps

The exact sentences we use instead — for PDA, ADHD and autistic kids who hear every request as a demand.

How to use this: don't try all fifty. Pick *one* swap, use it for a week, and notice what changes. Then pick another.

Written by a family of three, at home, still figuring it out.
Parent, not a professional — this is our experience, not medical advice.

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Why the words matter more than the rule

A direct instruction does two things at once. It passes information — *your shoes need to go on* — and it transfers control from your child to you.

For most kids, the second part is invisible. For a demand-avoidant nervous system, the second part **is the whole event**. The shoes were never the problem.

Declarative language separates the two. You make an observation, or a statement about yourself, and the information lands — but nothing has been taken from them. There's no control to defend, so there's nothing to resist.

1 Describe, don't direct

State what you notice. "The toast is done" carries the same information as "come and eat," minus the transfer of control.

2 Talk about yourself

"I'm heading upstairs" is about you. It's an invitation your child can join without being summoned.

3 Let the object do the asking

The clock, the weather, the bus timetable, the bathwater. Depersonalizing the demand means there's no person to push back against.

4 Leave the silence

The hardest part. Say the thing once, then stop. The pause is where their own idea forms — and their own idea is the only one that isn't a demand.

One important caution

This is not a trick for getting compliance. The people who developed declarative language are explicit about that, and kids spot a workaround almost immediately. It works because it genuinely hands the choice back — which means sometimes the answer will be no, and you have to be able to live with that.

Mornings & getting out the door

● The hardest ninety minutes of the day

1-8

01 ~~"Get up, it's time for school."~~

"It's seven."

That's the whole sentence. The time is information; "get up" is an instruction.

02 ~~"Put your clothes on."~~

"Your clothes are on the end of the bed."

Then say nothing else about them. Ever. The commentary is the demand.

03 ~~"Put your shoes on."~~

"I wonder where the shoes ended up."

04 ~~"Put your coat on."~~

"It's colder out there than yesterday."

05 ~~"We need to leave now."~~

"The bus comes at seven forty."

Let the timetable be the villain. It has no feelings and it never argues back.

06 ~~"Hurry up."~~

"I'm going to start the car in a few minutes."

07 ~~"Do you have your backpack?"~~

"Backpack's by the door."

A question is a demand for an answer. Statements cost nothing.

08 ~~"Did you brush your teeth?"~~

"Toothbrush is loaded and waiting."

Mornings are won the night before

Clothes on the bed. Backpack by the door. Toothbrush loaded. Breakfast on the counter. Every task you move to the evening is a demand deleted from the hardest hour of the day.

Food & mealtimes

● Where most of us are still negotiating

9–14

09 ~~"Come and eat."~~**"Dinner's on the counter."**10 ~~"Eat your dinner."~~**"There's more if you want it."**11 ~~"Just try one bite."~~**"I put some on the side, in case."***Presence without pressure. Food that's been offered is a very different object to food that's been required.*12 ~~"You need to eat something."~~**"I'm making toast — I'll do two slices."**13 ~~"Sit at the table."~~**"There's a space here."**14 ~~"Don't play with your food."~~**"That plate's getting a real workout."***Humor lowers arousal. It's also the fastest way to signal you're not in trouble.*

Remember the interoception problem

A lot of neurodivergent kids get faint or delayed internal signals — hunger genuinely may not register as hunger. "Are you hungry?" is a question they often can't answer. Leaving food out where they'll see it does the job that the question can't.

Transitions & endings

● Stopping is harder than starting

15–20

15 ~~"Five minutes and we're going."~~

"The episode's nearly finished."

Anchor the ending to something in their world, not to a number you control.

16 ~~"Turn it off now."~~

"I'll be ready when you are."

17 ~~"Time to go."~~

"I'm putting my shoes on."

18 ~~"Stop playing, we're leaving."~~

"The park closes when it gets dark."

19 ~~"We're going to Grandma's — get ready."~~

"We're heading to Grandma's later on. I'll holler when I'm heading out."

20 ~~"You've had long enough."~~

"You got a good long turn at that."

Why transitions cost so much

Every transition is at least three demands stacked together: stop the thing you're absorbed in, tolerate the gap, start something you didn't choose. That's why the fight is almost never about the destination.

Bath, teeth & bedtime

● The end of the day, on empty

21–27

21 ~~"Time for a bath."~~

"I've run the bath. It's there if you want it."

22 ~~"You need to wash your hair."~~

"Hair wash day's crept up on us."

"Us" is doing quiet work here. You're on the same side of the problem.

23 ~~"Get in the bath."~~

"Water's warm right now."

24 ~~"Brush your teeth."~~

"I'm doing mine."

25 ~~"You need to get out of the bath."~~

"Water's going cold."

26 ~~"Time for bed."~~

"I'm heading up."

27 ~~"Go to sleep."~~

"I'll leave the light on low."

Sleep is the one demand you genuinely cannot enforce. Dropping the instruction and offering the conditions is the only move that exists.

Safety & big feelings

● When it's loud, use fewer words

28–33

28 ~~"Don't touch that."~~**"That one's fragile."**29 ~~"Stop hitting."~~**"Hands are for keeping safe. I'm moving over here."***Name the boundary, then change your own position. You've acted without issuing an order.*30 ~~"Calm down."~~**"That was a lot. I'm here."**31 ~~"You're fine."~~**"That really hurt."**32 ~~"Use your words."~~**"No rush."***During a meltdown, every question is another demand. Say almost nothing.*33 ~~"Stop shouting."~~**"That's a bit loud for my ears."**

The exception: actual emergencies

If your child is about to step into a road, be direct. "Stop." One word, loud, no softening. Declarative language is for the ninety-nine per cent of demands that aren't urgent — and keeping it that way is exactly what makes the direct ones land when you need them. Repair afterwards: "I shouted. That was scary. There was a car."

School, homework & screens

● After a day of holding it together

34–39

34 ~~"Do your homework."~~

"That worksheet's still sitting there looking at us."

35 ~~"How was school?"~~

"I had a really weird lunch today."

Offer something of your own instead of asking. Most of what we learn arrives sideways, twenty minutes later.

36 ~~"Have you finished it yet?"~~

"Holler if you want a hand with that."

37 ~~"Get off your iPad."~~

"I'm grabbing a snack — want one?"

Bridge out of the screen with something appealing rather than prying them off it.

38 ~~"You've had too much screen time."~~

"My brain's turned to mush. I'm going outside for a minute."

39 ~~"You need to practice your reading."~~

"This one's got a dragon in it."

The first hour home is not for demands

A child who has masked all day arrives home with nothing left. Homework, questions and admin land on an empty tank. Whatever you need from them, it will go better after food, quiet and an hour of nothing.

Manners, sharing & repair

● The ones other adults judge you for

40–44

40 ~~"Say sorry."~~**"I think they felt sad about that."**

A forced apology teaches performance. An observation teaches noticing — which is the thing you actually wanted.

41 ~~"Say thank you."~~**"That was kind of them."**42 ~~"Share with your cousin."~~**"There's another one in the box."**43 ~~"Be nice."~~**"I'm going to go and check on them."**44 ~~"What do you say?"~~**"Thanks so much — that's really good of you."**

You say it. They hear it modeled, with no spotlight on them. This is the slower route and it's the one that sticks.

You are allowed to look like the permissive parent

In front of relatives, at a party, in the grocery store — the swaps will make you look like you're letting things slide. You're not. You're choosing a quieter, slower route to the same place, and you're the only person in the room who knows what it costs your child to take the fast one.

Praise, connection & comfort

● Where well-meant words become pressure

45–50

45 ~~"Good job!"~~**"That looked hard. You did it anyway."***Praise is a rating, and a rating is pressure to produce it again tomorrow. Describe instead of score.*46 ~~"Well done for getting dressed!"~~**— say nothing at all about it —***Drawing attention to a hard-won thing is often what stops it happening again. Let it pass unremarked.*47 ~~"I'm so proud of you."~~**"I liked being with you today."**48 ~~"You're being so good."~~**"This has been a nice morning."**49 ~~"Tell me about your picture."~~**"There's a lot going on in that corner."**50 ~~"Do you want a hug?"~~**"I'm right here if you want me."***Even comfort can be a demand when it has to be answered. Make it available rather than offered.*

If you're not praising, what are you doing?

Three things. **Notice** — "you found the tricky bit." **Describe the effect on you** — "that made me laugh." **Or say nothing at all** and just stay in the room. None of these ask your child to be anything tomorrow, which is the whole reason they land.

When it doesn't work

It won't always. Here are the four reasons it usually hasn't — none of which mean you should go back to instructions.

1 You're using it as a workaround

If the sentence changed but the expectation didn't, they will feel it. Declarative language only works when the choice is real — which means being genuinely prepared for no.

2 The jug was already full

Demands accumulate all day. At capacity, no phrasing survives. The fix isn't a better sentence at 5pm — it's fewer demands at 11am.

3 You said it, then said it again

The repeat converts an observation back into a demand. Say it once. Then leave a silence that feels far too long.

4 You're not regulated either

Tone carries more than wording, and PDA kids read adult stress with uncanny accuracy. The right sentence delivered tight and fast is still a demand.

Give it two weeks, not a morning

Pick one swap. Use it for two weeks without measuring. This is a change in the weather of a house, not a technique with an outcome you can check by Thursday.

And then he still doesn't move.

You said "the food is on the table." He didn't come. This is the page every other guide leaves out.

First, the uncomfortable bit

If you say it and then wait for him to comply, you haven't used declarative language — you've disguised a demand. And he will detect that faster than you can say it. The disguised version is worse than the direct one, because now there is something dishonest in the room and he can feel it before he can name it.

1

Say nothing

That sounds like a dodge. It is the entire technique. The first mention is information; the second is pressure; the third is a confrontation. Almost all of this fails on the second mention, about forty seconds later, in a slightly tighter voice.

2

Check which demand you actually need

Does he have to come to the table, or does he have to eat? Most "he won't come" is really a rule about where eating happens. Notice what coming to the table asks: stop what you're doing, walk into a room where people are already seated, and be watched arriving. The food was never the demand. The audience was.

3

Narrate yourself, not him

"I'm going to eat mine now." A statement about you transfers nothing, so there is nothing to resist. Compare it with "come on, it's getting cold," which is the same instruction wearing a coat.

4

Hand the decision back, out loud

"It's there whenever you want it. I'm not going to keep mentioning it." All of the power is in actually keeping that promise. Say it once and mean it, and the next time you say something like it, it will be worth more.

5

Budget for the wait

He may need ten or twenty minutes before the request stops feeling like a request. Most of us manage under a minute.

This is for the optional ones.

Declarative language is not a way of making mandatory things feel optional. That is where people get frustrated and decide it doesn't work.

Most of what we ask children to do in a day is genuinely optional — it just doesn't feel that way while we're asking. Those are the demands this guide is for, and there are far more of them than you think.

A small number of things truly must happen: medicine, a seatbelt, leaving for a flight, anything about safety. For those, stop pretending. Say plainly that it isn't negotiable, keep that list as short as you possibly can, and give away control of everything surrounding it — the order, the route, the timing within reason, who does it, what's playing while it happens.

The skill isn't disguising demands. It's having fewer of them.

Every demand you drop entirely is one you never have to phrase well. Auditing your day for the things that don't actually matter will do more than any sentence in this guide.

Which means sometimes he doesn't eat. That has to be survivable. If it isn't — if the choice was never really available — then this is ordinary parenting with better wording, and he will know before you do.

You're not being soft. You're being accurate.

Every swap in here does the same thing: it gives your child the information without taking their autonomy. That's not lowering the bar. That's understanding what the bar was actually made of.

Four times a week we take one ordinary two-minute disaster — the shove, the refusal, the standoff — and show you what was actually happening underneath it.

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Declarative language is recommended throughout PDA practice guidance but has not been formally trialed. Everything here is our lived experience as parents, not clinical advice. If you're worried about your child, speak to someone who knows them.

Sources and further reading: PDA North America (pdanorthamerica.org) · Declarative Language Handbook, Linda K. Murphy · PDA Society (pdasociety.org.uk) · National Autistic Society (autism.org.uk)

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