

All About PDA: Positive Descriptive Acknowledgement

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What is PDA? PDA Plus?

Simply defined, positive, descriptive acknowledgement (PDA) involves describing children's positive behaviors using explicit and specific language, i.e., "Mariana, you are sharing the crayons," or "Brian is taking turns on the bike with Furaha." PDA might also include additional information such as the impact of the child's behavior on others, the feeling state of the child/children, or the character trait linked to the behavior observed. When used in this way, it is called PDA Plus, i.e., "David, you are sharing the crayons. Looks like you feel happy when you help your friends to color," or "Celine you are waiting your turn. You are being friendly!"

PDA Statements: PDA or PDA Plus

△ *Narrates children's positive actions*

With PDA, the adult describes, or narrates, the observed positive behavior to the child/children, "Nigel and Sarah, you are both really focused on building that train station." In this way, the children tune into a description of exactly what they are doing. With PDA Plus, the adult includes a little more information for the child about his or her behavior linked to observed or potential outcomes, feeling states or character traits, "Christine, you are being respectful giving a turn on the bike to Emiliano. Now he can use it, too! You look so proud." Using PDA Plus, the teacher explicitly describes the child's demonstrated behavior (taking turns on the bike), and can include one or more of the potential outcomes of the behavior: impact on the other child (now he can use it too), what that behavior might signify about the child (she is being respectful) and the child's possible feeling state (you look proud). Of course the adult has flexibility with how much information to include in the PDA Plus statement. Like a camera, the teacher's statements capture exactly what has occurred without subjective information such as value

judgments or the evaluation of the teacher, i.e., "I like" or "That's good" qualifiers. Instead, PDA and PDA Plus keep the description focused on the child's actions and any potential impact or outcome observed. Inherent in a PDA statement is the invitation to the child to add his or her own perceptions or additional information about the encounter, i.e., "I wasn't proud, I was happy," or "I also gave her my helmet for the bike! I was being friendly."

△ *Focuses on the child's efforts*

Research has shown that children are more likely to persist when tasks get difficult if they are acknowledged for effort versus outcome, i.e., "You **are working** hard cleaning up the toys." versus "You **worked** hard cleaning up the toys." When the child's attention is brought to the task he is working on, he can make the connection between his actions and potential outcomes with self-talk or thoughts that parallel the PDA statements he or she is hearing, "Oh, this is what working hard during clean-up means. I clean up all the Legos and put them back in the bin. It is taking time, but I can do this!" Children can use their knowledge of success with previous *efforts* when called upon to do tasks that are difficult, confident with their ability to take on tasks, and motivated to do so because they know it's a positive experience. When acknowledgement is solely outcome based, efforts are overlooked and implicitly devalued, possibly leading to children giving up when challenged, i.e., "I can't complete this task, so why bother trying?"

△ *Gives credit back to the child*

Using the child's name or saying "you" at the start of the PDA statement keeps the child's attention focused on his actions versus the teacher's perspective. Adults are encouraged to "just say what you see" or to "be the camera" and capture exactly what the child is doing without value judgments used in praise,

such as “I like the way...” or “Good job.” For example, saying, “Deandra is helping Milanea open her milk. Now they can both have a drink” is a PDA Plus statement that keeps the focus on the child’s actions. In contrast, a praise statement like, “I like the way.../ I notice that.../I see...Deandra is helping Milanea with her milk,” is language that risks shifting the child’s focus away from what the child is doing on to the adult’s impressions of the actions. PDA statements give children clear and specific information that invites them to pause and tune into their positive actions as a means of developing their internal narrative, or story, about themselves. A healthy self-understanding contributes to future choices motivating them to continue the positive behavior they have come to know is part of their repertoire.

Why should I use PDA statements? How do they benefit children?

△ *PDA statements (PDA and PDA Plus) shape children’s internal narratives to help promote healthy social and emotional development and prevent of challenging behavior.*

Drawing a child’s attention to his or her positive behaviors through PDA and PDA Plus has many potential benefits, all linked to social and emotional development as well as the prevention of challenging behavior. PDA and PDA Plus provide children with rich, descriptive language about their behaviors, feelings, and character traits that contributes to the development of a healthy internal narrative as well as a sense of belonging and significance.

“Thought,” Len Vygotsky noted, “is language turned inward.” This powerful statement captures the essence of how a child’s sense of self begins to develop. The words a child hears about his actions become part of the story that child has about himself. When adults describe children’s actions using PDA i.e., “You are sharing the cars!” or PDA Plus i.e., “You are sharing the cars. Now everyone can play. You look so proud,” children have been exposed to descriptive, objective,

positive language about themselves. Over time, children turn this language inward to become thoughts or beliefs about themselves, “I share the toys. I help everyone to play. I feel proud/happy/loved.” As a result of PDA statements, the child’s internal narrative has the potential to include that she enjoys being a person who shares and is helpful to others so she may seek out more experiences that are congruent with this belief about herself. As the child continues to develop, and areas of her brain responsible for planning, decision making, and impulse control become more integrated, she begins to draw from the beliefs included in her internal narrative to make decisions about her actions.

△ *Help strengthen the focal attention and promote intrinsic motivation*

By giving credit back to the child with PDA statements, children are encouraged to engage in focal attention, pausing to tune in to the present moment to notice the link between actions, positive outcomes and feeling states. Focal attention enhances the development and strengthening of pathways in the brain that support attention and self-regulation as well as other important prefrontal cortex functions tantamount to learning and overall well-being. With PDA and PDA plus, children are encouraged to cast the spotlight of their attention onto their positive behaviors and the various outcomes in part to increase the likelihood of future replication of those positive behaviors. Because the child is encouraged to notice how his or her positive actions felt and how they impacted others, PDA statements have the potential to contribute to the development of intrinsic motivation: doing something because it is believed to be of value versus doing something to avoid punishment or receive reward. As children develop an internal narrative that is positive, they have the chance to see themselves as competent and connected to the world around them, which may increase their motivation to behave in pro-social ways. With PDA and PDA Plus, children’s behaviors are described and can be connected to positive traits, i.e., “You are sitting at circle quietly. You are being respectful,” not to external motivators like

pleasing an adult that come with praise statements such as, i.e., “I like the way you are sitting in circle,” or “You did a good job.” Over time, the child has the chance to develop confidence in his or her ability to achieve goals, attribute success to efforts made, and find interest in the mastery of tasks and contributing to the world in purposeful ways, not just in final outcomes or receiving external rewards. In this way, children are positioned to choose actions from a place of awareness of their strengths, desire to contribute to their environment in meaningful ways, and motivation to maintain their sense of belonging and significance rather than to achieve a reward or to please someone else; or worse, to avoid punishment.

△ ***PDA statements contribute to the development of self-understanding and feelings of confidence and competence.***

PDA and PDA Plus build the higher-order, cognitive capacity for self-understanding that includes: a) self-awareness, or knowledge of one’s self, b) a sense of efficacy, or the belief in one’s ability to accomplish something, and c) a sense of agency, or the awareness of one’s impact on the world and the ability to make choices. Such capacities can be expected to lead to the growth of confidence and competence as well as a sense of belonging and significance, important building blocks for social and emotional development, prevention of challenging behavior and those skills linked to “school readiness.”

The descriptive and explicit nature of PDA statements, coupled with the process of engaging in such attuned interactions with adults throughout the day provides children with repeated and novel experiences of learning about themselves in relationship to the world around them. Instead of being in an environment dominated by directions and corrections from adults, children who receive PDA and PDA plus grow to understand their actions, how they impact themselves and others, and may use this information to make choices.

Research has shown that social and emotional skills, or the “how” of learning, set children up for success tackling the “what” of learning, or the academic skills. In this way, then, the internal narrative that forms from consistent PDA statements helps children develop myriad social and emotional skills while contributing to a growing sense of themselves as connected, competent, and confident learners ready to take on new challenges!

How are PDA statements different from Praise?

The movement toward PDA and PDA Plus stems from the research regarding praise as an evaluative tool, one that runs the risk of creating dependency in children for adult approval and the relative ineffectiveness that praise has shown in developing children’s self-esteem.

PDA and PDA Plus statements explicitly describe a child’s efforts, abilities, feelings and characteristics, while praise is vague and non-descriptive, i.e., “Good job!” or puts the focus on the adult’s value judgment of the child’s behaviors, i.e., “*I like the way you are sitting at circle.*” or “*I’m proud of the way you shared your toy.*” Praise has been linked to reinforcing extrinsic motivation as children seek adult approval as their primary goal, losing sight of the value of the task itself. The internal narrative of the child accustomed to praise might sound like, “I’m a good job,” or “Miss Angela likes it when I sit at circle,” versus the narrative of a child who is exposed to ongoing PDA statements, “I sit at circle because I feel happy when I am being respectful and sitting with my friends.” With praise statements, the child is likely motivated by the desire to seek adult approval; with PDA statements, the child is more likely to be motivated to act in accordance with internalized beliefs about himself as a person of value and the subsequent belongingness and significance that results from his or her behavior. While praise appears to “work” for teachers in the short term, research shows that it does not have long-term effectiveness in part, it’s believed, because praise does not teach children to look for the intrinsic value of their behaviors and instead focuses them on pleasing others or striving for external rewards.

While it is developmentally appropriate for children to seek and receive adult approval, teaching children ways to tune in and reflect upon their actions, feelings, and impact on others are goals more in alignment with promoting healthy social and emotional development. The positive tone, affect, and body language of the adult convey the implicit message that the child's actions are positive, but the adult offers no explicit value judgments inherent in praise statements such as, "You are so great at that," or "I like it when you play nicely." Instead, adults serve as a mirror, reflecting the child's actions and feeling states in a manner that invites the child to integrate what he or she is experiencing and formulate his or her own value judgments. As a result, these attunement practices of PDA and PDA Plus support brain development in all regions; in particular, the pre-frontal cortex, the area involved in executive functioning skills such as attention, focus, and self-regulation, crucial to school readiness.

When should I give PDA statements?

Adults can provide PDA and PDA Plus in a wide variety of contexts for all different types of behaviors. It's important for adults to have a sense of flexibility in their interactions with children; thus, the distinction between PDA and PDA Plus. With PDA the children's actions are simply described while PDA Plus links those actions to feeling states, impact on others, or to character traits. Key behaviors that adults might want to acknowledge are those associated with the program-wide expectations because they include important positive and pro-social behaviors that are the focus of intentional teaching. Making lists of positive behaviors that teachers want the children to perform at specific times (i.e., cleaning up at transitions, sharing blocks during free play, etc.) can provide targeted behaviors to acknowledge. Adults can deliver PDA or PDA Plus when children replace a challenging behavior with a more appropriate one, when they use problem solving skills, and when they follow directions, are engaged in activities, express feelings appropriately, help others or work together. PDA statements can be used for the content of children's activities—the richness of their play and art, or their developing literary, scientific, mathematical, and conceptual skills displayed in their activities. As noted above,

adults should watch for and acknowledge specific instances of effort and persistence and also look to draw attention to the relationship between effort and ultimate success. Finally, PDA or PDA Plus is used as a key strategy in behavior support plans as a new response to the child's use of replacement behaviors. The general principle is that any positive behavior, skill, interest, or attribute must be acknowledged as part of the child's plan to learn the targeted behavior.

How can I learn to use PDA? How can I help others learn how to use it?

Adults often report challenges in learning PDA and PDA Plus. Some feel intimidated by what they perceive to be a somewhat daunting formal structure. Others find it difficult to break the habit of using praise statements such as "good job." By recognizing that it will take some time to become comfortable with a new way of speaking to children, and trying some of the strategies listed below, teachers can begin to use PDA statements on a daily basis and see for themselves how it impacts their relationships with the children in their classrooms and supports positive behavior and interactions.

△ *Practice makes perfect permanent!*

PDA statements can become part of a teacher's everyday practice in the same way that many other behaviors do—by establishing it as a habit. The more frequently adults use PDA or PDA Plus, the more likely it becomes that they will continue to use it. Utilizing some of the strategies in this section can help them get to the point where their practice becomes permanent.

△ *Step One: Scan for Success! Encourage focal attention toward the positive behaviors you see.*

PDA and PDA Plus begin with the adult being present and tuning in to positive behaviors. Most adults, especially teachers, scan for danger or what is going wrong in order to keep children safe or "manage" their classroom/home. When adults only look for what is going wrong, they miss critical opportunities to acknowledge what is going

well! It can be helpful for adults to make lists of the specific behaviors they would like to see and to put prompts throughout the room to remind them what they might say when they see those behaviors. Training themselves to look for the positive, while not ignoring danger, can be a simple, unthreatening way to begin the practice of PDA and PDA Plus.

△ ***Say what you see***

Teachers reconnecting to their professional training as close observers of children, and revisiting their coursework on observation can support the inclination and ability to provide specific descriptions of behavior as PDA or PDA Plus. Teachers typically have some training in describing behavior objectively. For both teachers and other adults, reminding themselves to “say what they see” can help them connect their efforts to adopt PDA statements to their previous experience and professional skill set. In addition, this can help adults see how simple PDA can become, reducing the intimidation they may be feeling from hearing more complex examples of PDA statements and feeling like they have to memorize special phrases. If adults catch themselves using praise as they are learning PDA or PDA Plus, they are encouraged to just add in the *description*, i.e., “Good job (praise)... you are putting all the markers back in the box! Now everyone can use them later (description).” With practice, the praise statements will fall away and teachers will be fluent with PDA statements.

△ ***Post examples in the classroom or home***

Writing examples of PDA or PDA Plus and placing them in highly visible locations in the classroom or home is helpful for some adults. It serves as a reminder and also provides the form of the statement, helping them practice providing PDA without having to formulate the statement themselves. This can, however, support the notion that PDA is complex and can slow their adoption of their own, original PDA statement tied directly to what is happening in the moment with the children.

△ ***Data, counts and visible reminders***

The “paper clip method” can serve as way that adults can monitor their own behavior and support the development of PDA statements as a habitual practice. In this method, adults put a set number of paperclips (or other objects) in their left pocket and move one over to their right pocket each time they provide PDA or PDA Plus to a child or co-worker. This helps them keep track of how many times they are acknowledging the children and can help them gradually increase the amount of PDA statements they are providing by increasing the number of paperclips they begin with and subsequently move over. The paperclips in their left pocket also serve as a tangible reminder to be on the lookout for positive behaviors to acknowledge.

Another method is to create a system for providing written PDA statements. For example, a paper hand with PDA or PDA Plus written on it can be read and posted both in the classroom and at home. The class can try to make a chain of such hands go around the classroom or across a wall at home. Other classrooms and families have made “friendship trees” and written PDA statements on cut-out paper leaves as they were given throughout the day, trying to cover the tree trunk with a full set of leaves capturing the children’s, and adult’s, efforts to be friendly, kind, or respectful with each other. The visual cue serves as a reminder to the adult to gather leaves throughout the day, and can be revisited throughout the day to discuss what children are learning.

△ ***Getting PDA and PDA Plus out into the room***

Have fun with creative ways to use PDA and PDA Plus! Try making it up when given examples in a staff meeting or training event, even reading PDA statements written by others can help teachers acquire this new skill. Adults will often joke with a coworker or family member when they hear praise and remind each other to “Stop saying ‘Good job!’” Hearing PDA statements and having fun while learning to use it will accustom adults to its

sound and form. It will become part of the classroom or family language.

Supporting one another can be another way that adults can build their “PDA muscles.” Adults can remind each other, gently challenge each other, and provide one another with PDA statements for providing PDA to the children! For teachers, selecting using PDA statements as a goal for their work with a Teaching Pyramid coach or with their supervisors can also help them practice this new way of acknowledging children. Even if they forget between coach or supervisor visits, providing PDA statements when the supervisor or coach appears in the classroom still benefits them.

△ ***Classroom or home jobs: PDA Patrol***

Teaching children to share PDA statements with each other may help adults focus more on PDA and PDA Plus themselves. One creative transitional kindergarten teacher had “PDA Patrol” as a classroom job. After teaching all the children the Program-wide Expectations and leading activities where they generated examples of behaviors related to each expectation, she assigned two children each day to go on PDA patrol. Equipped with hats and clipboards they began by drawing the examples of PDA/PDA Plus and experimented with writing names. They shared their PDA statements at circle. Other times, teachers have assigned a “Kindness Monitor,” who looks for classmates who are following the expectations or being friendly and kind to others. Family members can do this at home as well and the benefits of having siblings engaged in “catching each other being good” are far reaching. The adults are expected to participate, too, with the PDA patrol on the look out for their positive actions as well!

△ ***Summary: Slogans***

There is some evidence that condensing complex ideas to simple slogans can help people change their behavior. Several of the points presented here can be thought of in this light: “Practice makes permanent!” “Be

the camera: say what you see,” “PDA Patrol,” “Kindness Monitor,” “Our team project,” “Push the paperclips!” “Fill the tree (with PDA leaves),” “What do you want them to do instead?” Using these slogans can help remind adults to grow their PDA/PDA Plus practice.

How do PDA and PDA Plus affect my relationship with the children in my classroom? With parents? With my children at home?

Providing PDA or PDA Plus and then increasing the amount and the breadth of contexts and types of behavior it is applied to, can transform relationships between adults and children. At the most basic level, adults come to know each child better by observing children to determine and provide PDA statements for their abilities, efforts, feelings and engagement. Knowing about what interests a child, how they go about tasks, who they play with, what their play themes are, what challenges them, and their varied feeling states is the basis for a deeper and more meaningful relationship. It also provides the basis for more complex, multi-turn conversations (feedback loops) between children and adults. Observing for and providing PDA and PDA Plus for children can alter the content of interactions. When an adult is trying to support adherence to rules and safety conditions, they are typically observing for violations of those classroom standards. The interactions that follow will be focused on those violations. In a sense, interactions are being built around situations where the child was less than successful. Observing for opportunities to give PDA and PDA Plus shifts the focus from directions and corrections to pro-social interactions. Adults become aware of children’s strengths, events where they have been successful that they might never have noticed under the old observation-intervene paradigm. They begin to see children’s capabilities and to build on those.

This shift can be transformative for adults. One preschool classroom teacher reported that PDA statements changed her life— “I never knew what a negative person I was. Not just inside the classroom, but outside of it as well. This has totally changed my perspective.” It can also be transformative of a child’s relationship to school.

Another teacher reported that after giving more PDA and PDA Plus, the parents of the children in her classroom kept asking when they could go back to school over a holiday vacation. “That has never happened before,” the teacher reported. Children are now participating in an environment where their strengths, abilities, feelings, and efforts are being noticed and acknowledged, rather than participating in an environment where their weaker moments are consistently put into the public spotlight. In classrooms, the teacher’s role shifts from classroom management to child development as a space is opened for providing instruction in core, preschool content versus behavior management. Over time, children begin to use PDA statements to describe their own and other’s behaviors, i.e., “I shared the blocks with Jamiah. I was being friendly!” or “Elijah gave Sandra the toy. Now she gets to play!”

Providing PDA has the potential to improve the relationships between adults and children. It is not just a relationship with any adult that is altered. It is the relationship with an attuned adult. For teachers, it’s crucial to also know the sequence of child development and provide talk and materials that support and encourage the unfolding of that sequence. Becoming a more PDA-centered teacher creates new pedagogical opportunities. When adults attend to what engages a child, they not only provide PDA statements to the child around engagement, they can also begin to put out more activities that are engaging for the child. Children’s interest in activities increases, challenging behavior decreases, and learning is deepened. When a teacher is providing PDA Plus for behaviors related to the Program-wide Expectations, he is at the same time teaching children the meaning of the terms employed in the expectations—what friendly means, what safe means, and what being respectful means. Likewise, when the teacher is providing PDA or PDA Plus for friendship skills, social problem-solving, emotional literacy, and management of strong emotions, they are teaching the child these critical social and emotional skills in an intentional and powerful way. They are helping the children generalize from lessons on these topics to their real life interactions and experiences by tuning in to the child’s experience in the moment. PDA statements provide a method by which teachers, or any adult, can provide instruction in “learning

to learn” skills and abilities—following directions, engaging in transitions independently, solving problems with peers on their own, selecting learning activities and sticking with them. In these ways, PDA statements can enhance the pedagogical relationship between the teacher and the child as well as the more personal relationship.

Finally, acquiring the skills and the intentionality around PDA and PDA Plus can enhance and strengthen relationships with parents. Just as a child might hear only negative things about themselves under the old paradigm of directions and corrections based interactions, parents may hear only negative things from the teacher about their child. Just as children may become more excited about coming to school when the experience involves the acknowledgement of their strengths, capabilities, potential and successes, parents also will become more excited about participating in a program that notices these things about their child. Parents also may notice improvements in the child’s behavior at home and query teachers about what is happening at school. One teacher reported that parents seemed to feel that she was more competent and the possessor of important teaching skills because they had affected observable and positive changes in their children. This can shift relationships with parents by opening up dialogue around positive parenting practices. The teacher no longer has to push these practices to parents who resist, but can become their partner in exploring what the teacher is doing differently that has such positive influence on their child’s behavior and growth.✂