

Validating Feelings



When offering emotional support to children and teens, validating their feelings is a crucial component of developing trust. Providing validation lets young people know that their feelings matter, are natural, and deserve to be heard.

Why Validation Matters

- **Trust and Rapport:** Often, youth can feel afraid to open up to adults about how they are feeling. They may fear that they will be judged or shamed. When adults validate young people's feelings, this enhances their emotional connection. It also enables youth to feel they have someone they can go to when they need it.
- **Emotional Intelligence:** When adults validate the feelings of young people, this supports the development of emotional awareness. When youth are aware of their feelings, they may be better able to identify what is underneath those feelings. This can help them understand what kind of support they may need or what actions they need to take next.
- **Self-esteem and Confidence:** As children grow, their sense of self is impacted by a number of factors, especially what others say to them and about them. When young people are told that their feelings are valid, they develop a stronger sense of self and can trust that their experiences matter. They will also feel empowered to validate their own feelings because this was modeled for them by a caring adult.

Do's

- **Respect Privacy:** Keep conversations confidential when needed and appropriate. This helps build trust and creates a space where young people feel comfortable being vulnerable.
- **Encourage Expression:** Allow children/teens to share openly without fear. Provide the space for them to safely express big emotions if needed (doing intense physical activity, yelling into a pillow, etc.). Offer many ways that they can express their feelings. Some young people may be more comfortable talking. Others may prefer to write or draw to tell you what they are going through.
- **Practice Active Listening:** Pay full attention and show genuine interest. You can show that you're listening by nodding and/or making eye contact if that feels comfortable. You can ask follow-up questions to show that you're listening and want to know more. You can also repeat back what they've shared to show that you understand.

- **Acknowledge and Normalize Feelings:** Use phrases like "I understand why you feel that way." Assure them that it's OK to feel the way they do and that many other people in their situation would probably feel the same way. When adults acknowledge and normalize feelings, it lets youth know that feelings are OK to talk about and that they are not alone.
- **Show Empathy:** Put yourself in their shoes and remember what it was like to be their age. If you had an experience like theirs when you were younger, you can say something like, "I hear you; I've been through something like that." If they want to know more, you can share more about your experience. But be sure their feelings and their experiences are the center of the conversation.
- **Use Encouraging Language:** It can take a lot of courage for a young person to open up to an adult. Celebrate this courage. Let them know that you recognize it probably took a lot of strength to share. Offer support and reassurance. Assure them that you are there for them and will continue to be a listening ear.

Don'ts

- **Minimize Concerns:** Don't downplay their emotions. Avoid saying things like, "That doesn't matter that much; I don't understand why you're upset about that." To them, it matters a great deal. Validation from an adult supports their ability to self-soothe in the moment and in the future when they face "bigger" problems.
- **Judgment:** Refrain from criticizing or dismissing their feelings. This can make many young people shut down. They may then learn to judge their own emotions and struggle to manage them in a healthy way. They may also be hesitant about seeking support from you in the future.
- **Problem-Solve:** Sometimes young people just need to be heard, not given solutions. Youth are often told what to do or given advice without many spaces where they get to have their own voices heard. You can create that space for them. If you have wisdom to share, ask something like, "Do you want advice right now, or do you just want me to listen?" This way, youth can identify what they think would be most helpful for them.
- **Impose Expectations:** Young people often fluctuate in the ways they share and how much they share. This can be especially true if having conversations about feelings is new for them. Avoid expecting young people to share in a way that is convenient for you. Do not rush them and give them the space and time to share when/how they feel comfortable.
- **Make Comparisons:** Each individual's feelings are valid on their own. They should not be compared to the feelings of others. Avoid saying things like, "Your sister is never upset by this - why can't you be more like her?" This can have a negative effect on a young person's self-esteem and can make them feel unloved.

Additional resources for caregivers and educators can be found at mhanational.org/youth.