



# Validate Your Kids' Feelings



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INSIGHTS FOR FAMILIES is provided by your child's school in recognition of your role as a partner in education. Insights is produced by Marcia Latta, communications consultant.

At the risk of stating the obvious, this is a stressful time — for everyone.

It's important to remember the impact of this stressful time on our children. Young people are affected by outside stress — COVID-19-related disruptions to their routines and social lives, high levels of uncertainty and anxiety, and their parents' stress levels.

This stress is on top of the already rising levels of anxiety among children and teens, which are higher than any previous generation.

According to a study by the Pew Research Center, "The total number of teenagers who recently experienced depression increased 59% between 2007 and 2017. The rate of growth was faster for teen girls (66%) than for boys (44%)." <https://pewrsr.ch/3gtwIFR>

### **How do you respond to your children's stress and anxiety?**

Stress among young people is not a new problem, but the current health, social and economic issues in our communities make it worse.

We can't change the external factors that cause stress — nor should we. Our children must learn the essential life skill of understanding their feelings and managing their responses to stressors outside of their control.

### **The value of validation**

Before kids can develop skills to manage their responses to external factors, they should understand that the feelings behind their reactions are valid. Feelings should not cause shame. Validating children's feelings teaches empathy, helps children feel understood, and creates a space for a calm reaction.

Dr. Jeffrey Bernstein, child psychologist, said this is essential for helping them build emotional health. "It is crucial to remember that when children feel validated, they will be better able to hear you and change their own behaviors... Validating your child's or teen's feelings is crucial to building his or her self-esteem and will promote solid, overall emotional health." <https://bit.ly/2NZ2YV7>

### **Tips to help validate your child's feelings**

- Communicate your intent to listen without judging or blaming.
- Be sensitive to feelings and acknowledge how difficult and even embarrassing it is to be "different" from everyone else.
- Acknowledge the problems in your child's life and convey that they matter. Do not dismiss their struggles.

- Reflect on how upsetting it feels to them when his/her emotions seem to spin out of control.
- Understand how deep shame, which you may not detect when you are frustrated, can keep influencing your child's behavior.
- Above all, be calm, do not try to problem solve, and resist being defensive. Try to see things from your child's perspective.

Validating does not mean that you are agreeing with everything your child says or trying to force them to turn their distress into a positive feeling.

### **Prompts to encourage sharing and express validation**

Parents are busy, and many are filtering their responses to children through their own childhood experiences. When children are distraught, it doesn't feel natural to listen without defensiveness or dismissiveness — a reaction may be to minimize concerns because they are only kids. It helps to reflect on how we feel when our feelings are dismissed out-of-hand.

Sharon Selby, a registered clinical counselor in private practice, shared a list of conversation prompts to foster empathy. (<https://bit.ly/3eMmboy>)

Ask your child to share a concern by starting with: I feel, I feel...because...and I need..., or I feel... when...and I wish...

Use one of the following validating statements for your nonjudgmental response:

- It sounds as though you're feeling...
- What I hear you saying is...
- You would like me to understand that you're feeling... because... and you wish...
- What I'm learning about you is...
- On a scale from 0-10 (with 0 being the worst and 10 being the best), how well did I summarize what you are thinking and feeling?
- Is there any part that I'm missing or not understanding well enough?
- What else would you like to tell me about your feelings and this concern?
- How can I support you?
- How long have you been feeling this way?
- What you would like me to know and understand better is...
- Thank you for being open and sharing your feelings with me. I really appreciate it and now have a better understanding of...
- I'm sorry that I didn't fully understand how you were feeling about... until now, and I'm grateful that you've shared this with me.

Find a pdf download with these 12 prompts on her website: <https://bit.ly/3eMmboy>

Selby offers a cautionary note:

Your child may bring up a concern from a few months ago or even a year ago, and that's okay. Remember the goals of this conversation. Your job is to deeply listen and understand your child's point of view. Do not judge what they are saying. They might be "testing the waters" to see if they can really trust you with deeper, more vulnerable feelings.