

CORNERSTONE
DAY SCHOOL

Parents Matter

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Using validation to strengthen relationships with children

Validation means recognizing, understanding, and accepting another person's feelings as real, even when we don't agree with them. Validation is a powerful tool for building strong relationships with our children. It helps them label and regulate their emotions and equips them with the skills to foster relationships with others.

As a parent, it can be really painful to see our child upset, and we may be motivated to alleviate that upset as quickly as possible (e.g., by problem solving or telling our child why they shouldn't feel the way they do). Unfortunately, while well-intentioned, this can backfire and create divides with our children. Worse, trying to dismiss or change the feeling can make them feel bad for having the feeling (without making the feeling go away). Instead, when we validate, we are trying to understand the meaning of our child's behavior, thoughts, and feelings, rather than attempting to change it, judge it, or criticize it. In essence, validation communicates: "I hear you."; "I understand what you're feeling or thinking."; "Your experience makes sense to me."

There are different 'levels' of validation:

- **The first, most basic level, is simply paying attention. To show we are paying attention, we:**
 - Make eye contact.
 - Avoid multitasking.
 - Use verbal cues like, "I see."
 - **Example:** *your child tells you they have a big presentation today. You look them in the eye and say, 'Uh Huh.'*
- **At the second deepest level, we show interest:**
 - Ask open-ended (not 'yes/' 'no') questions
 - Express genuine curiosity about their thoughts/feelings
 - Stay open to learning something new.
 - **Example:** 'How are you feeling going into the presentation today?'
- **Third, we reflect the content of what they have said accurately:**
 - Paraphrase to confirm understanding
 - **Example:** *your child says, 'I think my presentation is going to go terribly today.' You might say something like, 'Oh, I see. You're thinking it's not going to go well at all. What are you thinking is going to happen?'*

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Using validation to strengthen relationships with children: cont.

- **Fourth, we empathize:**

- Put yourself in your child's shoes. We can do this even when we don't approve or agree with your child's thoughts or feelings.
- We are simply acknowledging that the feelings/thoughts are there (because they are, whether we agree with them or not).
- Even when we don't agree with the thought or feeling, we can often find something that we can acknowledge as valid – a 'nugget of truth'. However, it has to be genuine. Don't validate what you really don't agree with.
- **Example:** *You may not agree that your child's presentation is going to go terribly today. You can still empathize by saying, "I'd feel nervous too if I thought my presentation might go poorly."*

- **Fifth, we mirror feelings:**

- Reflect on what your best guess is of what your child might be thinking/feeling, even if unspoken. Use clues from their words and body language.
- We will get it wrong sometimes, and they'll tell us. But the main point is that we're really showing interest and curiosity in their inner world.
- We acknowledge that we don't know for sure what our child is thinking or feeling...and are trying our best to understand or guess. It is this effort to understand that feels good because it shows we are taking the time to think about their inner world.
- Acknowledge uncertainty: "Is that right, or is it something else?"
- **Example:** *"I wonder if you're nervous because it's in front of the class, and you're worried about how you'll come across?"*

- **Sixth, we normalize the thought or feeling:**

- Find the part of the feeling that makes sense. Communicate that this thought or feeling doesn't mean there is something wrong with them. It makes sense, and others in the same situation would feel the same way too.
- Example: "So many people can get nervous during presentations. It can be so scary to think other people are judging you while you're talking."
- Seventh, we hold in mind what we know about our child:
- Validate in the context of what you know about your child, their personality, their values, and their history as a whole person.
- **Example:** *"I know the last time you had a presentation, you stumbled over your words, and you really pride yourself on speaking clearly. That makes it all the more understandable that you'd be feeling nervous."*



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