

--- Intro ---

You are listening to Supporting Supporters, a ChangetoChill podcast. This is a free mental well-being resource offered by Allina Health. My name is Tonya Freeman. I'm a licensed psychologist and regional lead psychologist with Allina Health.

These podcast episodes are aimed with the goal of providing quick, tangible resources and information from Allina Health mental health providers on a range of mental health topics relevant to day to day lives of the listener. We invite you to join us in any way you please, whether you sit back and kick your feet up, or as you engage in movement, your daily commute, or as you prepare for your day. However you choose to join us, we welcome you and we honor your time.

--- Episode ---

Hello, and thank you so much for the warm welcome. My name is Jaime Zander, and I am a psychologist with Allina Health, and I primarily work with children, adolescents, and families. Before we even get started with this episode, I want to say thank you so much for the important work you all do to provide a safe and supportive learning environment for your students. So thank you so much for being who you are.

In this episode, I am going to talk about validation. By definition, validation is the recognition or affirmation that a person and their feelings or opinions are valid or worthwhile. So, why is validation important? Validation communicates to an individual that the relationship is important and worthwhile of acceptance regardless of disagreements. Validation is a way of connecting to another person, strengthening a relationship, and helping a person feel both seen and heard. On a much more practical level, feeling validation is significantly important in the reduction of emotional reactivity and behavioral outbursts. When students and even parents feel seen, heard, and valued, they are better able to engage in emotion regulation and have a more useful and productive conversation.

Before discussing what validation is, it is important to first recognize what validation is not. Validation and agreement are often used interchangeably in a regular conversation. For example, people will say, "Valid point." However, validation is not an agreement with a person's ideas, behaviors, or opinions. One can validate a person's emotions or understand their point of view but disagree with what a person is saying or doing. For example, one can understand why a student was upset and pushed another student but not agree that pushing was the best behavior choice given that situation. Validation is recognizing and accepting an individual's ideas, feelings or behaviors as understandable given their specific worldview or situation.

Validation is also not fixing someone's problems. It is not offering solutions or giving advice, but connecting without getting absorbed in the individual's problems. Validating does not mean that a person's problems or emotions will automatically go away, but it will likely not make the situation worse and allow the person to feel accepted regardless of the problem or disagreement. For example, let's say a student discloses that their parents are putting a lot of pressure on them to improve their math grade this term. This does not mean you, as the teacher, are obligated to email the parents or offer unreasonable accommodations. Feeling validation instead may sound like, "That sounds really stressful. I can tell you've been working hard in this class."

Finally, validation does not mean you get to be treated with disrespect or be expected to apologize for something when you are not in the wrong. If someone, a parent or student for example, is treating you

with disrespect or is acting in an aggressive manner, it is still ok to hold boundaries for communication. This may sound like: "I can hear that you are really upset about this, and I would like to discuss this further when we can engage in a respectful conversation."

So, what are some ways you can show or act in validating ways to strengthen relationships with students and/or the caregivers of these students? I am going to briefly talk through three actionable skills you can start doing today to strengthen relationships with students through use of feeling validation.

### 1. Presence

Although it may sound obvious, it is first and foremost important to be fully present with the individual, student, and/or caregiver. This means being present cognitively, physically, and emotionally. Physically, presence looks like orienting yourself to the individual, getting on their level if they are a small child, maintaining eye contact, and removing yourself from the task you are currently doing if necessary. I realize this is much easier said than done. During the hustle and bustle of the day-to-day activities, teachers are often juggling multiple demands at once. Taking a pause to fully attune to the student can often reduce escalating behaviors or further behavioral challenges down the line. Cognitively, this means full attention to the person and listening to the words they are saying, while also bringing awareness to your own thoughts or attitudes about this interaction. And finally, emotionally, this means tuning in with your own emotions. How are you feeling about this student? Are you feeling frazzled from earlier that day? Are there any preconceived notions of what the student might say? Presence not only means providing undivided attention to a person, but also being present with your own internal state.

### 2. Name the Emotion

The core of feeling validation comes down to understanding and naming the emotion the person is communicating. Again, this ultimately stems from being fully attuned to what the individual is saying and how they are communicating. This includes noticing nonverbal communication patterns, in addition to what the student is communicating. Naming the emotion, simply means stating what you believe the person is feeling. This may sound like "I can see you're really upset about this" or "That sounds very stressful." By naming the individual's emotion, it signals that you can understand how they are feeling about this situation.

Additionally, feeling validation can often be accomplished through the use of reflection statements. A reflection statement signals to the person that you are actively listening and understanding what they are trying to communicate. A reflection statement is essentially a sentence that reiterates what the person is saying. Put together, this may sound like "I can see you are really mad that you did not get the grade you wanted" or "You seem really sad about not getting a turn on the swing."

With caregivers, the same principles can apply. For example, feeling validation may sound like, "I can see you are really worried about your kid. He did not get the grade you hoped for him, and you're worried how this may affect him in the future." Or "I can see you really care about your kid and want him to have a positive outlook on school but your worried that pulling him out of class will impact his learning." By naming the emotion and reflecting back what you heard them saying, signals to the person that you've been actively listening and understand what they're trying to communicate.

### 3. Manage your own emotional reaction

Finally, effective feeling validation often comes from a place of authenticity and empathy. Therefore, it is so vital to be attuned to your own emotional reactions and internal state during disagreements or difficult conversations. We each come to the table with our own experiences and viewpoints that impact how we see the situation, and it is very possible that the person you are talking to has a completely different worldview. Therefore, in order to truly validate the feelings of others, it is also important to acknowledge our own feelings when entering more difficult conversations. If you have the time, this may include engaging in some self-reflection questions prior to responding to the email or engaging in that difficult conversation. This list is not exhaustive; however, some self-reflection questions may include:

- What are my preconceived notions of the student?
- How might this family's values be different than mine?
- What role are cultural differences playing in the situation?
- Am I emotionally able to handle a difficult conversation right now?

Taking a pause and approaching the situation from a neutral stance can help us be more empathic and understanding of the individual's experience.

I hope you have found this topic useful and have some simple strategies to incorporate validation into your daily practice with students. Here are 3 things I would suggest trying out in the next few weeks to see how they feel:

1. Remember to be fully emotionally, physically, and cognitively present when entering conversations.
2. Utilize skills of naming the emotion and incorporating reflection statements.
3. Attune to your own emotional reactions and internal state when entering difficult conversations.

Thank you so much for your time! And, as always, I so appreciate you.

---Outro---

On behalf of Allina Health and Change to Chill, we thank you for taking the time to listen to our podcast. We do hope you enjoyed this episode and we hope that you join us in other episodes covering even more interesting topics with mental health providers. As always, you can find the show notes and any accompanying research and tools at the change to chill website at [www.changetochill.org](http://www.changetochill.org). In health and wellness, take care and see you next time!