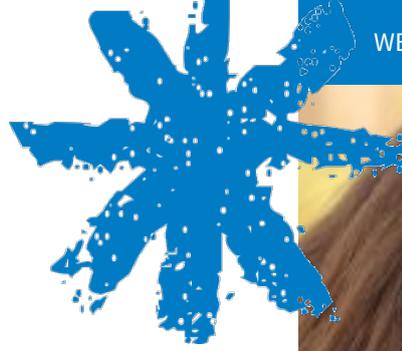


insights



5 ways to validation: showing distressed kids you get it

by Dr Jodi Richardson

Every day, we send messages to our kids that shape their thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Equally, our kids are sending us messages about their thoughts and feelings through their behaviour, particularly when they're feeling distressed.

When kids feel distressed their behaviour can vary enormously. Some might lash out while others cry. There can be displays of frustration, fear, sadness, anger or disappointment, to name a few.

There are times as parents when we do and say all the 'right' things in response to such situations, but there are also times when we don't. It makes it especially hard to respond in helpful ways when we think our kids are completely overreacting or are feeling differently to what we'd expect to (or what we'd feel) under the circumstances. Feeling this way can prompt us to say unhelpful things like "Don't be silly", "You're overreacting", "It's not as bad as you think it is" or "It will all be forgotten tomorrow".

Our responses can also be influenced by how distressed we feel in the situation. It's hard to hear our kids crying and upset, no matter how old they are. So we might find ourselves saying things like "stop crying", "settle down", "take some deep breaths" or "it's not that bad", all in an attempt to calm our child down, stop the crying and feel better ourselves.

By understanding that all behaviour is a form of communication, we can begin to respond in ways that show our kids that their message has been received, that we get it, and that we genuinely understand and care about how they're feeling – whether we agree with their reactions and feelings (or the extent of them) or not. This is called 'validation', and it's the first step to helping our kids wind back their emotional response. Done properly, validation also helps them to connect their feelings with the situation that provoked their reaction in the first place. "You're frustrated that you have to re-sit the chemistry test" or "You're disappointed that you didn't get invited to the party", for example. Validation also shows them that you care and you understand.

[Here's how to go about validation:](#)

Use 'ahh' and 'oh' statements and keep it brief

"Ahh, you're feeling jealous that you weren't picked for the team and she was", "ahh, you're having the idea that you can't do it", "oh, you're feeling nervous about the exam."

When it comes to validation, keep it brief. When our kids are distressed, it's harder for them to listen and concentrate so keep validation clear and to the point. The intention for now is for our kids to know that their

message (via their behaviour) has been received; there'll be time for more of a discussion about the situation later.

Build a more nuanced emotional vocabulary

Validation is the perfect opportunity to help your child broaden their language when it comes to their emotions. It's never too early, or too late, to start. Try replacing 'upset' with 'disappointed', or 'angry' with 'frustrated'. The [Mood Meter mood tracking app](#) is a great tool that offers a wide choice of emotions associated with positive and negative feelings of high and low energy. In it you'll find 100 emotions including apathetic, at ease, proud, timid, alienated, furious, alone, inspired, ecstatic and more.

Show some emotion

Another important component of validation is showing some emotion yourself. It can feel intuitive to try to remain calm when your kids are distressed but this actually sends the message that you don't get it. They actually need to see an emotional response from you. Use your facial expressions and your body language to match your validation statements.

Remind them that thoughts are not facts

Recognise also that thoughts and ideas can feel like facts when kids and teens are distressed. It's hard for them to differentiate between the two. You can help by saying things like: "Oh, you're having the idea right now that it will be too hard", "it looks like you're having the idea that you'll never find it", "ahh, you're having the thought that you won't be included."

Sit with them

One of the most helpful things you can do is to sit with your child or teen while they are suffering psychologically. Once you've shown them validation you need to simply be there for them. Sit with them and comfort them by holding their hand, putting an arm around their shoulder or giving them a big hug. In doing this you're strengthening their ability to tolerate their discomfort.



Try not to let your distress hurry them or shut down how they're feeling.

Reassure them that you understand, that you're there for them, that they can tolerate their discomfort and that it will pass. By doing this, you're building within them strength, tolerance and emotional intelligence which will all contribute to their lifelong resilience and mental health.

Of course, if at any time you're concerned about your child or young person's mental health, make time to see your family GP for reassurance and answers to your questions.

Parenting Anxious Kids is our new online course, created to help the parents of children with anxiety. You can find out more by [visiting our website](#).



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Jodi is a happiness and wellbeing speaker and writer, and is mum to two primary school aged kids who light her up. For more great ideas on flourishing mental health for the whole family, subscribe to her newsletter at drjodirichardson.com.au and say hello on facebook.com/DrJodiRichardson. Enquiries to jodi@drjodirichardson.com.au