Validation: What do I say?

What is validation & why does it matter?

Validation means recognising and accepting someone's internal experience (their feelings, thoughts, or reactions) as understandable. It doesn't mean agreeing, approving, or excusing behaviour. It's about saying, "I see you, and it makes sense you feel this way."

Validation is not the same as agreeing with a student, excusing their behaviour, or lowering expectations. You can validate an emotion and still set a boundary or offer guidance.

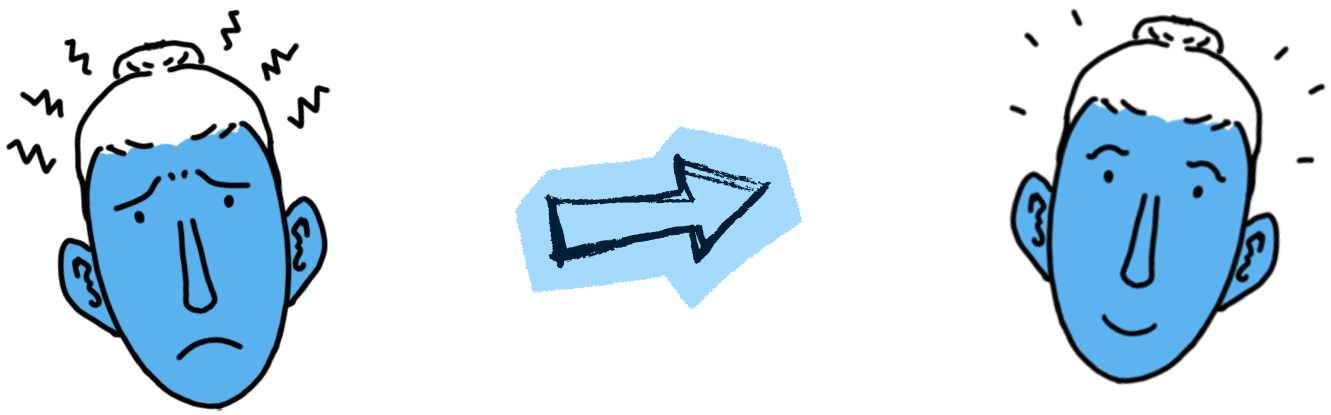
For example: "I can see that you're really angry, and it's not okay to throw things."

Using the word "and" helps hold two truths at once: the student's feelings matter and we can still support safe, respectful behaviour.

Validation helps students feel seen and safe, especially when they're overwhelmed. It builds trust, supports emotion regulation, and increases the chances they'll re-engage, reflect, or be open to problem-solving.

When students feel understood, they're more likely to calm down, open up, and connect.

Use the phrases on the next page to support validating responses when emotions run high or behaviour is challenging. These can be particularly helpful in moments where your first instinct might be to correct, advise, or fix.



Sentence starters to use when students are struggling

Use these sentence starters to support emotionally intelligent responses. You don't need to agree with the behaviour or solve it, just recognise the feeling behind it.

Feelings-focused:



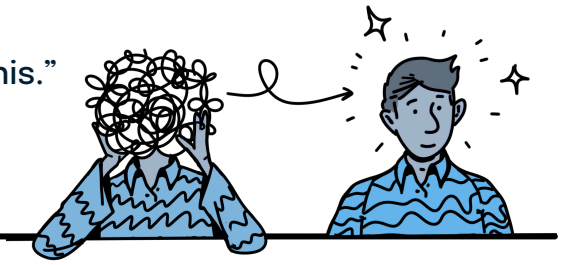
- "It sounds like you're feeling..."
- "You're really upset because..."
- "It makes sense that you feel..."
- "You've been dealing with a lot, and that's a lot to carry."
- "Of course this feels [hard/scary/unfair] to you."

Situation-based validation:

- "After what happened, I can see why you're feeling this way."
- "Anyone in your shoes would feel [frustrated/hurt/confused]."
- "You're reacting this way for a reason - we just might need to understand it more."

Normalising:

- "A lot of people feel like that in situations like this."
- "You're not alone - others find this hard too."
- "This is a completely human reaction."



Holding space without fixing:

- "I hear you."
- "Thank you for sharing that with me."
- "You don't have to have it all figured out right now."
- "Let's just sit with this for a moment before we try to solve it."

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Validation cheatsheet for schools

What is validation

Validation is the process of acknowledging a person's feelings, thoughts, or behaviour as understandable, meaningful, or legitimate in their context - even if you don't agree or approve.

Validation is not: fixing, agreeing, or excusing.
Validation is: recognising the internal experience and showing "I get it" (or I'm trying to)

Why use it?

- Builds trust and connection
- Helps regulate big emotions
- Increases student openness and engagement
- De-escalates conflict and shutdown
- Supports trauma-informed and neuroaffirming practice

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4 Practical levels of validation (simplified from DBT)

Level	What it means	Examples
1. Listening attentively	Being fully present, showing interest.	Nodding, eye contact, "I'm here."
2. Reflecting back	Repeat or paraphrase what they've said. Find the emotive words they are using.	"You're feeling overwhelmed by this class."
3. Validating feelings	Acknowledge that their emotion makes sense in context.	"It makes sense you're angry - you were left out."
4. Normalising emotional experience	Help them feel less alone or normalise the experience, showing this is not a sign of weakness or flaw.	"Lots of people feel this way when they're under pressure."

Validation sentence structures

- “It makes sense that you feel…”
- “I can see why that would be…”
- “Of course you feel that way after what happened.”
- “That must be really hard for you.”
- “I might not know exactly what it’s like, and I want to understand.”
- “You’re not the only one who feels like this.”

What to avoid

Don’t say	Why it’s invalidating	Try instead
“It’s not that bad.”	Minimises the feeling.	“It sounds like you’re finding this really hard right now.”
“Just calm down.”	Over-simplifies.	“This feels really big, huh? Let’s slow it down together.”
“You’ll be fine.”	Dismisses fear or emotional distress.	“It’s okay to feel worried. It makes sense you feel that way. Lets talk about it.”

Embedding validation in school culture

Validation isn’t just a strategy for de-escalation - it is a mindset that shapes how we respond to student emotion, behaviour, and need. By embedding validating language across school systems, we create a culture where students feel seen, safe, and supported. From the classroom to the staffroom, small shifts in language and mindset can build trust and promote regulation.

- Replace "but" with "and" to validate feelings while maintaining boundaries.
- Incorporate validating language in behaviour flowcharts and classroom resources.
- Encourage staff to pause and acknowledge emotions before responding.
- Use validation alongside clear boundaries to ensure safety while respecting emotions.

When students feel emotionally understood, they are more likely to engage and thrive.