

Validating children's feelings: Why it's important, and how to do it with Dr. Caroline Fleck

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SUMMARY

In this episode of the Your Parenting Mojo podcast, host Jen Lumanlan discusses the concept of validation with Dr. Caroline Fleck, author of the book "Validation." While the first two parts of the book provide valuable insights into the importance of validation in relationships, the third part introduces behavioral change strategies that Jen critiques, advocating for a deeper understanding of children's needs rather than simply modifying their behavior.

- *Validation is defined as a way of communicating understanding and empathy, crucial for authentic relationships.*
- *The conversation emphasizes the importance of mindfulness, understanding, and empathy in validating others, particularly children.*
- *Dr. Fleck introduces a "validation ladder" with skills that range from basic mindfulness to deeper emotional connection.*
- *Contextualizing a child's emotions helps parents understand their reactions and avoid invalidating comparisons to others.*
- *The discussion critiques behaviorist approaches to parenting that focus on changing behavior without addressing underlying needs, arguing that this can lead to emotional invalidation.*
- *Jen advocates for understanding children's needs as a priority over behavioral modification, suggesting that true connection comes from meeting those needs collaboratively.*
- *The episode highlights the ethical implications of using validation techniques to manipulate behavior without consent, especially in parent-child dynamics.*
- *Overall, while the first two parts of Dr. Fleck's book are praised, the third part's focus on behavioral change is questioned in terms of its alignment with values of consent and emotional well-being.*

[Music] hello and welcome to the your parenting Mojo podcast I have to say I'm really excited about this episode which is on the topic of validation and I'm here with Dr Caroline Fleck who has recently published a book called validation and I want to say right here at the outset that I found the book both incredibly useful and extraordinary really

frustrating Dr Flex publicist reached out to me about the book a couple of months ago and I gave my usual response which is that I'm cautiously interested perhaps it won't surprise you to know that I don't invite guests on the podcast if their message isn't reasonably well aligned with my ideas there doesn't have to be 100% alignment but I don't want to accidentally say yes to someone who wants to discuss ways to reward and punish

our kids into changing

their behavior for example so I was in the middle of several things at the time and I got about halfway through the book and I folded down the corners on a lot of pages because I was finding the book so useful in terms of helping me to understand why validation helps us and more specifically how to do it I reached back out to the publicist and I said please go ahead and set up an interview and then I kept reading the book and a

few days later I got to the third of the three parts of the book only to find out that it's about how to use validation to essentially reward people including our partners and children into changing their behavior to do what we want them to do so I reached out to Dr Fleck and her publicist and explained my dilemma and I did use quite a few of my new validation skills in that message and I acknowledge that she might not want to come on the

show when I can't unequivocally recommend the book while she's still in the excitement of the release period especially she also mentions in the book that she has some pretty severe health challenges and I thought she might want to protect her energy as well but she graciously responded and said she'd be happy to come on and either discuss the challenge I have with part three of the book or have me append a conclusion of my own and the first two parts of the

book really are so useful so we're going to focus on that in our conversation and then I will wrap up with a conclusion on why I don't think the third part is as helpful you'll get all the tools from the book from just our conversation so feel free to skip the conclusion if these additional ideas won't be helpful to you so let me go ahead and introduce Dr Fleck she is a licensed psychologist corporate consultant and adjunct

clinical instructor at Stanford University she received a BA in psychology and English from the University of Michigan followed by an Ma and PhD from the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience at Duke University she served as a supervisor and consultant for some of the most rigorous clinical training programs in the country including Dr Marsha Linehan's brtc at the University of Washington the department of Psychiatry at Stanford Medical Center and the VA paloalto she's a respected voice psychology and has been featured in

National media Outlets including the New York Times Good Morning America and the Huffington Post welcome Dr Fleck it's so great to have you here oh it's a pleasure to be here thank you for having me awesome and so I wonder if we can start with the basics would you be willing to Define what you mean by validation yeah so by validation we we're talking about a way of communicating that you are mindful you understand and you empathize with some

part of a person's experience thereby accepting it as valid that is a mouthful so I like to truncate that to just validation shows that you're there you get it and you care right it's that feeling of being seen and heard okay and so why is that important in our relationships I believe that it is the most important quality in our relationships in fact I would argue that it's really hard to have authentic relationships in the absence of that

because when we don't feel seen what who is that who is the other person having a relationship with if it's not us it could be a facade it could be some version of us that they're holding on to but when we don't feel seen in who we are it's hard to feel loved I think for who we are yeah and it seems as though then what you're saying particularly the mindfulness piece is very different from

I'm waiting for you to stop talking so I can say what's on my mind that I've been thinking about while you're talking oh my gosh I'm so glad you flagged that because I think that is how many of us myself included a lot of the time listen but like as I describe in my book validation really is a skill and the first part of strengthening that skill is developing the ability to listen without your own um agenda to talk and

that's kind of the first step is to make almost a a mindfulness practice out of the conversation itself and you can do that at any moment you can do it in the middle of a conflict you can do it just when you're driving to the store but that is that is kind of the most fundamental level is are you engaging in participating in that way yeah okay and so I I want to sort of make sure that

we're getting the the Nuance of the three pieces the mindfulness was the first piece the understanding was the second piece and um I remember talking with Dr Lisa felin Barrett on her work on how emotions are made and her idea that we sort of think we know what other people are thinking and feeling based on the arrangement of their facial features when actually most of us are not very good at this yeah it's really surprising well

and not only are we not great at it but most of us are pretty good at masking our actual emotions right so even if we do read whatever the facade is projecting that is a very blurry representation of what the other person is actually experiencing so to be able to see past that is again it takes some skill yeah okay and then the empathy is the piece that you emphasized on on really connecting with another person's

person's emotions which is so important to us yeah that's right so the understanding I think of more as like a logical understanding you know like um I don't this is a very weird reference but like Spock from Star Trek almost like a very like you know given x y makes sense and then empathy is more of like the I don't know Yoda kind of it's this emotional intuition that incorporates The Logical but has this higher level of emotional

understanding as well yeah okay okay and so we're gonna talk about a model in your book that I find incredibly helpful in terms of the validation ladder and before we get there I just want to lay a little bit of ground in terms of uh sort of how we validate people and what we validate and one of your Cardinal rules is to only validate the valid and then you say that thoughts are considered valid when they are logical based on

facts and grounded in reality and the example you give is of a skit renic patient going off his meds who then thought that you were colluding with the government to get him killed which obviously is not a valid thought because it wasn't true and so uh so this plays out in a variety of ways in our lives right right now we are in a political environment where the government has declared there are only two genders which scientific research tells us is

not fact so you know what is logical fact-based and grounded in reality seems highly contestable how does that fit in with your validation framework you know that really surfaced I can like vividly remember um watching I don't remember I I can't remember who it was but just that that those words are like you know the idea that facts are um debatable and when that first started to Bubble Up into kind of our culture and

our rhetoric the first thing I thought is exactly what you're describing which is what does this mean for our ability to determine what is valid in terms of a thought process because validity is based on fact and Science and data and logic and once you suggest that those things are debatable you have fundamentally uprooted our basis for determining validity and so it's a very good point it's something

I've run into so much and increasingly it seems every year for probably the last five or six years and what I do with that when I'm really struggling to understand how can somebody believe um X Y or Z given what we know like you said given the science on this and when I can't understand and I can't get on board with their logic I can at the very least kind of zoom out and look

at the context and see okay if a trusted Authority was telling me that there are only two genders and I I I was told that this was news that this was factual information I might believe that too so I can see the logic so to speak in their logic even though I don't believe that it is logical that is the most confusing sentence that was ever said out loud much less on air but here we

are yes it's a confusing world we live in so that fits in with with one of the items on the ladder right contextualizing given given what you uh are surrounded by it makes sense that you would believe this so okay so that that helps me thank you and then I guess in a way kind of pushing back on it from the other side what I am hearing is sort of this very logical rational perspective um typically associated with

men over right this this sort of feminine approach of feminine air quotes of of knowing and intuiting and you do say that all emotions are valid which I totally agree with but I think sometimes we make decisions by intuiting by just sort of a deep knowing rather than a rational logical process how does that fit in with validating the valid yeah so so in a lot of this work comes from dialectical behavior therapy or DBT and

you know we have this concept of wise mind in DBT which is we want to make decisions based not just on logic but also on that intuition and so it's about the balance but a truly and validating a deeply validating response is one that includes both that logical understanding and the emotional understanding so I would argue that if you're only ever able to validate like The Logical again there can be this like

spock-like quality to that communication it misses it fails to see some of the intuition and the emotional logic so to speak in a person's reaction and so that's where again through these skills and this model I hope to help people use that logic to take it one step further into the emotional understanding and I do believe for everyone out there who struggles with this I absolutely know

that this is a skill set this is something you can develop right so if you really struggle to get that other piece this can this will help you do so yeah yeah and so so let's make this super practical for parents right like your kid down because their cracker breaks yeah and want their cracker to be whole again and it was the last cracker in the bag that's so frustrating yeah I'm wondering if I can answer my own

question is it the same as sort of the first part of this you know given the context that you're in and you're a three and this is a big deal to you it makes sense that you would be frustrated over the cracker breaking is that where you would go with validating the valid on the cracker I would I I might also again kind of Zoom back and see all right kiddo did they skip a nap have

they not eaten in a while because I remember when my daughter was younger it's going to make me sound like a horrible parent we had this rectangular dining table that had a really sharp corners and no no Jen we didn't cover the corners like rational parents would do for some reason we just thought she'd stop running into it but no she kept running into it and if that kid had slept and eaten and she hit the corner

she was like ha money mommy I'm so silly you know she'd be okay it might owe a little bit if she hadn't it was like a complete meltdown right same quote unquote trigger like that table she could have even hit it with the same intensity but it was really about The Hunger the exhaustion all these other vulnerability factors that were coming into play so with a kiddo who's maybe crying over a a

broken cracker and they don't usually cry over such a thing if their behavior if their reaction seems outside the norm for them I might zoom out and say okay you know I think we should probably take it are you feeling a little tired yeah I would still validate the motion because they're still upset yeah it is frustrating when that happens let's take a break but I also need to attend to the other factors at play and ultimately

help Orient the kiddo to those factors so that they can make sense and understand their reactions yeah okay and so seeing that not really about the cracker yeah yeah yeah yeah that's right and that there are broad even broader contexts than the cracker that that this this Behavior makes sense within okay cool um all right and so so why should we validate other people right how does it help us oh boy again it's and I'm so

entrenched in this honestly sometimes it's hard for me to think outside of it but it's like it to me that's as as as as though you were to ask why should we show love or why should we have compassion um because it is absolutely essential because we as human beings are distinct from other animals in our need for acceptance and belonging and it is I I think it helps to see that as a fundamental need when we want to I mean

not want to when we choose to torture people in this country one of the forms we use is solitary confinement and taking people away from other people is what deeply traumatically hurts them and I can't underline that enough the need that we have to feel seen and heard the more you can bring that into your relationships the more you can provide that the healthier those relationships will be

the less conflict you have and the more effective you will be in those relationships and actually getting your needs met yeah which we can all agree is something that we want Do It um and also it helps other people and and I think that a reason why parents can struggle to validate their kids feelings is that they worry that they're creating something out of nothing right they're creating something their child is going to worry about that

they were a little bit worried about before and now it's going to turn into a big thing or their child has hurt themselves and it's not really bad but if they validate them they're going to have a huge meltdown on their hands because their kid is going to cry more you I know you looked at some of the research on that topic can you tell us how you see the role of validating our kids feelings in these kinds of

situations fit yes so let's take the one where the kid is starting to get kiddo starting to get worked up right and in that moment I'm I'm as focused on the power of attention what we know is that attention can be pretty reinforcing but my daughter was was younger she used to do this thing when she was starting to like cry or get upset she would go and look in a mirror I don't know if anyone else's kids do

this she' go and look in a mirror and then she would like get increasingly worked up there was this this really I don't know why she did it but in those moments absolutely layering on attention would not be effective in the sense that it would escalate things for her it would deregulate her further and in those moments what I would do actually is more of a smooth and move like let's oh okay let's go let's go over here

let's take a walk let's go outside let's put that down let's not play with it kind of take her out of the situation until she's regulated because as a psychologist I know that her system is flooded she's in a state of sympathetic arousal she's flipped her top like she's not thinking clearly and so me trying to rationalize with her or even validate her it's just we're not operating at that level she's not operating at that level now what I will do and what I

think is critical to do is after she's calmed down then I I will go in and validate the valid which might be yeah you were you were really frustrated by how uncomfortable that shirt tag was I don't like having things on me that are uncomfortable either that's that's oh I hate it like if someone moves my eyebrows in that weird way oh I just can't stand that feeling like that makes total sense so I can validate her

emotion the ickiness the discomfort now I don't necessarily need to validate the behavior of let's say tantruming and throwing things okay because I don't see validity in that I don't think that's an effective way to deal with a shirt that hurts um or even an effective way to regulate those emotions sometimes it could be depending on the circumstances but oftentimes it's not and so if I don't see it as valid I wouldn't validate that okay I mean if it got your

attention uh when previously she hadn't been able to communicate that the shirt was irritating her then we could argue that it was actually a fairly effective strategy and in fact that's what a lot of kids from highly invalidating environments learn they learn to escalate to a point that they get the attention they should be getting at lower levels right so if a child says to you my shirt is really uncomfortable it hurts it's it's stressing me out that's

something to take seriously we shouldn't wait for them to melt down before we respond to something that's bothering them right now there there may only be a certain number of things we can do but we absolutely don't want our kids to have to tantrum to have their needs be heard and for them to be taken seriously yeah yeah and of course when you're thinking about this with a two-year-old or a three-year-old who may not have the

capacity to be able to even say it's my shirt tag yeah yeah yeah that's right that's right so you know but we have to look at what's developmentally appropriate there as well right yeah okay cool um I'm curious about gender differences in how this shows up and and I know that one of the studies you cite in your book talk about how fathers have been shown to respond to their children's emotions including distressing emotions in less supportive

ways than mothers and when I looked at the the studies you cited that talked about how people learn validation pretty often the researchers are saying Okay who wants to learn about validation and all the women are like yep and all the men are like H I don't know and what what do you see in terms of ability to validate and willingness to learn about validating oh that's interesting uh to speak to what you were saying also about the research I I'm so

excited to be able to talk with someone about this but I was really frankly disheartened I'd done a lot of research on validation and when I really started to dig into it especially the effects on children and parent Dynamics so much of the research was just looking at Mom's validation the effects of Mom's validation on children and I didn't I frankly didn't always see good explanations as to why I can hypothesize or whatever but I I was disappointed by

that I think that puts a tremendous amount of pressure on women first of all second of all I think it invalidates the E the effects that fathers can have on their children and the significance of their role particularly when it comes to modeling and validating emotion now in terms of learning or developing these skills I'd been teaching validation forever with my clients and and therapy um with couples parents and I at some point was asked by

Google to come and develop this interpersonal Effectiveness class for a group of like a hundred folks who were this group was really team was really struggling to communicate effectively and this was a group of pretty much uh almost all men uh most L engineers and those who weren't Engineers were hard science researchers and I thought this is not going to go over well I was like frankly I was so intimidated me going in there with my my

soft skills you know and what surprised me was how quickly these folks not only developed these skills but the interest they showed in them and that is part of why I wrote this book it was after that experience of seeing like oh no this really resonates what I found in that situation was an appreciation for the method like oh this is almost like an algorithm I can use this this validation

ladder this framework I created I can plug into this I know what to do when the person does responds negatively I can just go back here it was really sweet to see that the desire actually was there I think a lot of the resistance was coming from a sense of hopelessness or inability to achieve or or actually succeed in validating

people but once I gave them that path it was like oh give me more yeah okay and

that's that now you phrase it in that way that's a big part of what I got out of it as well was oh this makes sense okay I can I'm doing these already here's one where I'm not you know not doing as well here's where I can focus to improve my skill yes yes so that makes perfect sense yeah cool cool okay so we're about to get there before we get there the one last thing I want to

address is you know what happens if we don't receive these messages that that our experience and our thoughts and our feelings are is valid oh so when we when we're not validated Tim often what happens is what we receive instead is invalidation what we when we don't feel heard we're often internal izing the message that your voice doesn't matter your emotions don't matter you shouldn't be thinking that way you shouldn't be

acting that way you certainly shouldn't be feeling that way and this is one of the single greatest contributors to mental health problems that we know of this isn't a maybe invalidation is problematic this is no it is absolutely problematic it is exponentially uh folks who are exposed to pervasive invalidation are exponentially more likely to self harm to Suicide to develop serious problems

like major depressive disorder borderline personality disorder psychopathy I mean it really is it's like the root of all evil in in a lot of ways so I cannot emphasize how important it is and I say in the like even if you don't develop the ability to validate please please at least work on decreasing invalidation because it is so toxic yeah and that brings to mind a theory that I have which is that you

know I think a lot of things we call mental illness are actually uh their root and absence of validation and that we're essentially saying you know our culture is like this and you can't cope with that and therefore the problem is with you you need to go and fix what's wrong with you which is the opposite of validation because a validation culture culture would say something like oh my goodness you're having a hard time what is it about our culture our environment

that you're in that is hard for you and how can we all work together to support you in a way that you need to be supported and uh do do you see it in a similar way would you push back against elements of no no I would underline that highlight that that is truth um there is no way that you can learn to trust your emotions and navigate your environment if you are consistently told that what you are thinking and feeling

is wrong H how can you feel seen if you don't even trust who you are uh that that is a confusing and hopeless way to experience life and in the context of that hopelessness that loneliness that sense of Shame most people will resort to desperate attempts to cope or avoid that real quote unquote reality right yeah and so this is why it's both so

important and so hard I think because we were trying to build the plane as we're flying it right to use an overused metaphor which is to say that our parents didn't validate us and so somehow we have to learn from an

awesome book there's no how to how to receive and give something that we never received when we were little and do this for our kids in moments when they're looking for validation and there's this part of us dreaming inside ourselves but

nobody did this for me when I was a kid it's true it's true my my only other kind of hopeful note there is that you also it's absolutely possible to develop a self-validation practice wherein you develop the skills to validate yourself and your own experiences that takes time because as you said for most of us it wasn't modeled frequently we are a very critical culture we're very focused on

solving problems we're not as focused on accepting people's reactions to problems or their reactions to their environments and so you can develop it it takes a lot of work and intention it's possible you know I talk about how to do it but another promising note there is that in my experience the better you get at validating others the more easy it is for you to validate yourself those two things just go hand in hand and once you

start working that muscle and seeing people through that lens it does turn inward as well okay that's helpful and hopeful yeah yeah okay so so I want this episode to be super practical for parents and so I wanted to kind of work through the validation ladder so can you start by just I mean obviously we know we can picture a ladder but it has a specific you know tripartite structure so can you describe that to us so we can have that

image in our minds as we move through the steps sure sure so as I said at the at the top of the hour validation I'm sorry yeah validation is composed of kind of mindfulness understanding and empathy and we broke that down so the validation ladder has eight skills that map on to one or more of those qualities so at the bottom of the ladder the most basic skills we talk about are these two kind of mindfulness subsets sub skills and using

these two skills will help you show that you are engaged you are Mindful and most importantly that you are not being judgmental okay so that's the aim of those two skills so it doesn't matter whether or not I like or agree with a person across for me I should at the bare minimum always be able to remain Mindful and to project that in some way again validation is communication so we're focused on the communication of that awareness or that attentiveness

okay and we've got two skills there a step up from there is understanding we have three ways of communicating understanding in a way that actually also projects mindfulness so if you're able to access those skills great now if you really get it if you're present you understand and you feel you empathize then you can use our top three kind of empathist skills that not only communicate mindfulness and understanding but show that you care you

feel it you're there it's as though the other person is looking at themselves in a mirror when they look at you that is the ultimate kind of experience and so that's the structure of the ladder and again it kind of moves from very accessible to you've got to really feel it uh to be able to communicate these skills and also they get trickier um yeah yeah okay so so thank you for that description and we're going

to talk about what are each of the skills within that ladder and so a couple things that you emphasize in the book that I want to make sure come out here are there the subskills within each of the three uh segments are interchangeable in terms of their placement on the ladder so it's not that you know the the skill number one in mindfulness is more diff is easier than skill number two in mindfulness it's within mindfulness which is the easier

of the skills so that the the levels refer to the the categories rather than the individual skills themselves and then the second point that I think is important is the higher you go the harder you fall and so if you fail if we fail what should we do so uh fortunately there's not much at stake with the mindfulness skills like you're not likely to strike out terribly by attending non-judgmentally to someone so if you fail in your attempts to try

maybe one of the higher validation skills if you really wipe out in the person is like no that's not what's going on for me you can always go back to those mindfulness skills that is what we do that is the process of developing these skills it is this this series of wipeouts and then returning and resetting and trying again and that is how you hone it yeah okay okay great all right so let's start at the bottom of

the ladder then with our mindfulness skills and there are two of those attend and copying so what what is attending hopefully some of this through our conversation yeah yeah so attending is uh just again paying attention non judgmentally and projecting that in some way to communicate that quality you've got two ways to a couple of ways to go about it I'll focus on two the first is to play this little game in your head uh where you're trying to solve as someone

is speaking to you you're trying to figure out what is this person's point like what are they trying to say why does it matter to them what's going on here and then crucially how could I do a better job of making that point now that sounds judgmental and that's not what I mean to get that's not where we're going here instead it's almost if you've ever seen like a late night host or like an Oprah Winfrey these folks interviewing

people they are completely focused on the guest and trying to pull out the most consist prise interesting version of this person's story that they can they're kind of helping them in that way that is how to attend you want to you're trying to join the person in creating their message rather than just sitting back and going like this is how I'm going to react to this this is what I'm going to

say instead here's my rebuttal so rather than fixating on what you're going to say you focus on what they're trying to say you don't have to to even communicate that it's just a game you're playing in your head it's like a little solitaire uh and you're just kind of ping ponging as you're listening between like what's their point how can I sharpen it what's the point here why does this matter let me sharpen it let me sharpen it and that if you do that

you will naturally find yourself asking questions doing mhm things like this naturally that again demonstrate that engagement okay so that's the first part it a well plac mhm for you appreciate it the the the other important quality to attending is nonverbals and nowhere did this become more obvious to me like the the importance of nonverbals as when we went into lockdown and all of a sudden so

much of our communication was limited to zoom video conferencing everything else and this was before we all had good cameras and like stuff like that right this was a really crude days yeah right right it was really crude and we lost you could feel the loss in connection and part of what we were responding to in those moments was the lack of this very critical way of communicating and that is through body language nodding

eye contact eye contact is so tricky over BC because you're often not looking at the person you're looking slightly down um even hand gestures right just little ways of showing momentum or enthusiasm leaning forward all of that is compromised and yet we know that those simple nonverbals um nodding ey contact gestures proximity kind of being closer to all of that functions to increase a sense of

connection um so that's attending yeah it's that combination of nonverbals and asking yourself those questions right and and so as we're asking ourselves that question right how could I make this person's point for them I think it we we may end up asking them questions to further understand them and I think that's the part that's really important right because when we're in a sort of typical disagreement with somebody we might ask a question but it's sort of a

it's not really a question for looking to understand an answer it's a question for to make a point right well have could you possibly think X when I actually said why right that's not a question that's going to further our understanding of this person's position so that is absolutely right that's right that's right yeah okay so um okay so that's that's attending and then the next rung of the ladder still within our initial mindfulness space is uh copying

so tell us about copying copying is one of my favorite little skills because it's so freaking easy and it also sounds really bizarre but once you start practicing it intentionally uh you will see the power in it so copying is what it sounds like I want you to repeat the words somebody uses or just kind of echo back or mirror what somebody has said that is a version of copying you're copying their words and or you can copy their ways you

can if they cross their arms you cross their arms they bring a hand to the chin you bring a hand to the chin I know what you're thinking that sounds incredibly mechanical and weird and uh here's the thing guys we all do this naturally so we are hardwired to copy as babies little babies copy their caregivers facial expressions and in so doing copying

activates what's known as mirror neurons uh we are actually able to mirror or experience some of what the other person is feeling through that mimicry this is critical because as I said before working those basic validation skills like these two mindfulness skills helps you develop the understanding and empathy you might need to validate at a higher level and this is one of the way a very obvious way in

which to do so and I just I could geek out on the research on this all day like it's so fun all the different experiments they've done of having you know uh researchers copy or not copy participants without them knowing and yeah so I I will make the point that you naturally copy people that you are attracted to that you want to impress that you find interesting we do that by by Design we're less likely to do it

when we dislike disagree are angry with the other person and in these moment or we experience them as other outside these are the moments when copying will serve you best uh because those are the moments when connection is often not there and most needed yeah yeah and and I I want to sort of dig in just a tiny bit on the sort of copying the words if you're saying uh you know I'm feeling really

tired and I say oh you're feeling really tired that that sort of rote copying of the exact words you said is probably not getting you to where where you want to go right so how should we what should we be doing instead of the actual you know repeating of the words that other person right so just there at the end of your sentence you said um you said this type of wrote copying is probably now we're

going for right and then I said right right back at you okay so I'm plucking out a single word that you said and I am repeating it I'm not going verbatim you know repeating exactly what you said I'm also not doing the infamous I hear you saying you're frustrated which for some reason like that really gained steam in like the 80s or something I don't know and now I work with couples and one partner will say to the other well I

hear you saying you know you're you feel overwhelmed and there's just something about it that's like I don't there's something invalidating about it it's not that well there's also I mean if it's coming out in that tone there's also some attending skills missing there right because the person has not actually been attending they've been listening and thinking how how dare they say that they're feeling overwhelmed or whatever the thing is right that's right that's right but the point with copying

isn't to make a huge production out or draw attention away from the other person I'm just trying to Signal Attunement and I do that by like I said plucking out a word especially if it's like a rich adjective that the other person used or an emotional adjective frustration disappointment those are the like the real power PowerPoints no I'm G to not PowerPoint but you know what I mean power words power words yes yeah okay okay cool all right so so

that's within our our sort of Bottom Rung of our validation letter so let's move into the middle set set of skills on the ladder right the understanding skill set and we already touched on contextualize a bit when we talked about yeah given where you know the people that you listen to the news media that you that you uh get your information from I can see why you would think this thing that scientific research says is is potentially uh not the truth um given

all the things that are happening near life child and you you know you didn't get a nap this morning and you're hungry and all the other things that were happening it makes sense that you would be frustrated feel frustrated that the cracker broke so um so see we've had those examples of contextualizing what else do we need to know about contextualizing yeah contextualizing is really helpful so by contextualizing I mean you're seeing someone's reaction in the moment and it doesn't immediately

make sense to you all right so I given the example of if I am at a PTA meeting and we're sitting in a classroom and then a door slams down the hall and 2third of the parents duck under their chairs as though a bomb had

gone off that doesn't make a lot of sense to me I would have a hard time validating why they I mean it was a loud noise but we're in like California it was clearly

a door what's going on now when 2third of a group did that exact same thing when I was teaching at the VA a group for veterans who had just returned from active duty that behavior made total sense to me for those folks even though they I think were embarrassed and there was just a sense of disappointment almost palpably in that room for those folks of

course their behavior made sense because I I understood the larger context and that's where contextualizing is helping ful it's helpful in making sense of a reaction that doesn't immediately make sense in the moment given just what you have now yeah is that is that clear enough I should I should ask before I go on to yes no I think it is um and there are a couple things that that I thought were particularly helpful about contextualizing in viewing it as it's

the opposite of you should be able to right you are old enough to be able to do X you should be able to do X which Compares our child to another child which Compares a child to a theoretical child who can do this right and and your VA example you're a grown man you can hear that this is a door slamming why are you under the table right this comparing our the these people to somebody who has healed or who who

doesn't have a hard time hearing a door slam it doesn't help the person yes I'm I'm I'm really glad you mentioned that point because it gives me just a a split second here to make another point that I really think is so important for parents which is that we need to drop the you're too old you know you're you're 8 years old you're too old to be having Tantrums you're too old for this you're too old

for that uh so and so doesn't do that does your friend you know Mikey punch people when they're and that message is invalidating and it's shaming right as an adult I would be so hurt if someone said to me Caroline you're 40-some years old you're not exercising every day I mean what's wrong with you you've been hearing this you know all the research I mean all your friends do it what's wrong with you right when we think about it in those

terms it's very hurtful so yes the behavior might not be effective in the moment and you can speak to that that's fine to Target I Can Say Yeah Mikey punching people doesn't work uh I can understand why you do it I can understand that you're frustrated I think that's a valid emotion uh it may have even been modeled for you I your brother punches you all the time I can see why that would be a natural response to this situation the

problem is it doesn't work here let's talk about what you can do instead so I can validate the valid which is the emotion and where that behavior comes from that there is a context in which it made sense but that is not now yeah um and I think we we you and I have some slight differences in our perspective on go with this information um which we we're we will get to uh possibly after

our conversation ends and so I think you know where where you see you know this isn't the moment for this Behavior I see what is the need that is driving this and how can I help you to meet that need yes we can't so that you don't you know you're you don't want to hit because your need is met because by and large we don't hit when our needs are met that's that's exactly what what what I'm

looking for so there's a bit of what we call functional analysis that is inherent in contextualizing I'm looking at like where is this coming from and what function does it serve okay so if you want this person to understand that they hurt you how can you deliver that message more effectively because the behavior of punching them doesn't get that need met now it's a valid need and I'm going to validate that however I'm not going to say it's it's cool for you

to punch him or um or even that's okay I get it no it's it's not okay I I get it and it's not okay but it is you do need to get that need met so let's find something that is okay and that scratches that itch and that gets your need met right yeah very nuanced right we're really into it but I think this is important because this is where this stuff gets so tricky uh in parenting I I

think yeah yeah absolutely and as a tool to help us get there it reminded me of Alie con's words always assume the best possible intention consistent with the observed Behavior which sounds like a mouthful right but essentially doing is is we're contextualizing that's what he's encouraging us to do yeah that's exactly that's exactly right yeah okay all right cool so uh so that's the first of the understanding the second of the understanding skills is equalizing which

is the idea that anyone in your shoes would do the same thing which is a core element of Dr Kristen nef's work on self-compassion I think so yes um so I I'm sort of curious I I I don't know what you're going to say about this is it right to say that we should contextualize or equalize but not both yeah you typically don't need both so equalizing is just the the person's reaction their response makes perfect

sense in that moment given what you have right right or given what know about the situation you don't really need to abstract anything so a parent raising concerns about the fact that the class the teaching is all going to be remote this year at a PTA meeting that that makes perfect sense to me I I don't need to extract anything it's not like they hit under their chair or I'm like that doesn't fit here so when a person's

reaction just is understandable and immediately so to me I can do that beautiful of course anyone in your shoes would feel that way I want to clarify that equalizing isn't any better or stronger than contextualizing as you had mentioned before these are all just understanding skills it kind of just depends on the situation which one you can pull from to convey understanding so equalizing you would use when you just immediately get it it makes sense yeah okay great and

then the third idea within the uh understanding skill set is proposing right sharing an idea about what you think the other person is thinking or feeling or wanting to do based on what they've said already in the conversation and what you know about their situation and I think this is where we start to get into some of the like I don't

know if I can do this what if I get it wrong kind of skills so um so what what do you

want us to know about proposing okay so first of all I want yall to know that this is like a Jedi mind trick when you get good at proposing you all of a sudden have a this seamless way of connecting deeply with people and ly with people and it is just so beautiful I want to like wrap this in a gift and give it to everybody because it is it's so it's so powerful to be able to say

what somebody else might have been thinking or feeling and articulate that before they even did right can you give us an example how how can parents think oh yeah now I know what proposing is yeah so let me think of a good um okay this is this is a heavy example but I'll I'll I'll use it um I was treated for uh breast cancer uh just shortly before publishing this book and I lost my hair

and uh my daughter has struggled a lot with the change in my appearance and obviously with the whole experience and to her I feel very different than I was before for I feel like a different person to her um and she attributes that change to me losing my hair and so she'll say things like Mommy can you just go back to being the mom that you were oh which hits me very deeply and is

painful and to be honest it's something I really I find myself at times pushing back against or wanting to push back against and say no I am your mom I still love you the same nothing's changed and I have said that at times ineffectively and corrected afterward but if I propose here and say because nobody else sees what she sees and this is kind of mading for her like everyone acts like nothing has changed but it's

changed and if I say things are different in a way it it's like your and she understands the concept of mourning but it's like your mourning somebody and nobody else sees it and in that situation she hasn't said that uh as a child I imagine she hasn't even conceptualized it in those terms but if I am able to see that and

if it's accurate if it it kind of fits with what she's experiencing that is a profound moment of like you get it uh you are able to put words to something and describe something that I was struggling not only do you not judge me for it or um feel criticized you know or hurt by what I'm saying you see me better as a result and that so that that is an extreme example but I I think it kind of

shows what we're going for or or the potential there proposing doesn't have to always be this huge you know insight could you know if someone's yawning you could say oh you must be tired like on some level that's proposing yeah but that's kind of the potential of that skill yeah and I wonder if it for you is so like because it really seems like it is is something that hits you right when she says that I'm wondering if it's a well there's

part of me that hasn't changed and I still love you and I still want to show up as your mom and also there's part of me that really has changed and some of those things I see as learning and growth and I like it and some of it like I kind of just wish I could go back to how I was before Oh My Gosh absolutely especially with like the physical stuff right like yeah this is not how I'm used

to looking or feeling or any number of things like it's weird it's totally weird yeah yeah okay yeah heavy sorry no please don't apologize I'm than I'm I'm grateful for the gift of of sharing that with us um and so I one thing I want to touch on is sometimes our proposals fall flat right and we and you have this idea in your book of a dial where there's at one end of the dial there's an idea and

at the other end of the dial there's like a fact like I'm I'm going to State this as if it is actually true and we can use that dial right and just now I I kind of made a proposal to you right I I proposed how you might be feeling and I began with I wonder if because I we don't know each other that well and I don't know if that's true for you right so dialed that down pretty far and so so

I think that can help us to not fall flat what do we do if we do fall flat proposing is one of the skills that you have to be prepared to strike out on because if you are going to get good at this it takes a lot of trial and error and the error can feel we feel unseen in the moment right if I was to respond negatively to that to be like no that's not accurate like Jen what are you

talking about like you're going to feel like judged and you know everything else and so our inclination when we get it wrong is to pull back we tell our self things like I I don't want to make it worse I've screwed this up or they don't get me right we just get defensive and we shut down worst thing you can do what you need to do instead is go back to those attending skills and just start

playing that game in your head again of what's this person's point how could I do a better job of making that point because if you get it wrong then you clearly don't actually understand and that is what you know the understanding skills are intended to communicate so if you missed it you you got to work on your understanding here's the thing most people nine out of 10 times welcome the the opportunity to be understood they appreciate you putting in that La work

and not disengaging and so as painful as it can feel in the moment it's just stay in the game stay in the game and you can then propose again later once you get more information yeah okay all right awesome we are getting close on time and we've got our to run so I'm going to set the stage here and then I'm G to kind of let you pick how you want to go into this right so within the MPC skill set we've

got taking action which is taking action on other people's behalf we've got emoting sharing how you're feeling about what the other person is sharing um and then finally disclosing so validating the other person's worth by demonstrating that you get their experience by sharing something similar that may have happened to you so what do you want to emphasize that you think is really important especially for parents in their relationship with their kids as well as with their co-parents yeah I

think probably one of the strong of those three the most effective with children and teens is often disclosure so if especially I mean and so now with young kids they idolize you right and so if you're able to say like when I was your age I had a similar reaction or and did I ever tell you about the time I didn't make the soccer team and X Y and Z so if

you can do that in a way that doesn't Trump their experience yes that's really important really important and that doesn't minimize it because for some reason as parents we really and I was so disappointed to realize this as a parent I did have the urge to have the like back in my day back in my day we didn't have computers you had to use a phone like and and my only one person could talk at once yeah yeah and there was a

busy signal and like and and when I disclose in those ways I'm not actually showing that I understand what my my agenda there is to kind of like grieve or say you've got it so well you've got it so good I should say um similarly I don't want the conversation to become about me so these are this is a I I very much see validation as an exercise in mindfulness you are attending to the other person if it becomes all about you

you've lost your focus so this is a very effective skill but just again the higher we go up the ladder you know that the harder it hurts when you fall and if you screw this one up you know you lose the connection for a moment you can regain gain it by attending but that's a possibility um emoting is also a really uh important one I just want to do a shout out to my dad's out there I think

expressing vulnerable emotions is okay uh you need to obviously not be leaning on your children for emotional support by any means but young boys seeing real vulnerable emotion expressed in adult men helps them feel seen and safe in their own emotions okay this is very important and I we just we know that

validation from fathers um on their sons in particular their sons emotions is very important and can be preventative in terms of mental health problems all right so thank you so much for being here Dr fle it's really been an honor to hear more about your work and I know uh you and I have some differing opinions and I've shared with you that I'm going to record a conclusion for after this episode um and so that will sort of share some of

the ways in which our approaches to using this information that I think is so so helpful um are going to to support parents and so I wonder just can you wrap up by telling us where can we find the book where can we find more information about you if we want to learn more absolutely so my book is available wherever you get books uh Amazon audibles Barnes & Noble you name it you'll find it my website has bonus

material from behind the book that I'm I'm just publishing I think today so that's exciting you can find me at DRC caroline.com I'm on Instagram and Tik Tok again uh Dr caroline.com yeah that should be it right thank you so much it to dig into that I appreciate it it really was thank you so much and thank you for reading and have a great day you too bye so as I mentioned at the beginning of the episode I found

tremendous value in Dr flex's explanations of validation in the first two parts of her book I'd like to share some thoughts about the third part which focuses on behavioral change and why I take a different approach so Dr Fleck is a therapist who works with a therapeutic approach called dialectical behavior therapy and this helps clients learn how to manage their emotions improve relationships and tolerate difficult situations by helping them to identify problematic behaviors and replace them

with more effective ones tools like DBT serve an important purpose in clinical settings where adults have specifically sought help for behaviors that are causing them distress the question that I'd like to explore is whether these same approaches are appropriate as firstline strategies with children I know that from an outside perspective therapeutic approaches can seem a bit like a menu where all of the options are equally valid but I see them as tools that each have a role in

helping us depend depending on what we're struggling with as you probably know from listening to the podcast I believe that understanding our needs should always be the first strategy we try most of the time we engage in Behavior because we're trying to meet our needs and our kids are doing that too if we jump right to trying to change anyone's Behavior whether it's ours or our children's without considering our needs we're missing something important an example I often use is a child

jumping on the couch in my view we have to understand why the child is jumping on the couch if they're jumping because they have needs for joy and play and movement and we're feeling worried the couch might break we can ask if they'd be willing to jump on the bed if that's more structurally sound or maybe run up and down outside but if they're jumping on the couch because we've told them not to do it before because they have a need

for connection and they know that jumping on the couch is a reliable way to get our attention then asking them to jump on the bed won't work if we have a need for mental space and ease we might see if they'd like a hug or for us to read a story to them and then both of our needs get met and neither one of us has to have our Behavior changed to meet the other ones needs tools like DBT

absolutely have a place in supporting adults mental health there are times when we can see what our need is and we can't meet it using the tools we have available to us we might know that we want our child to learn how to explore risk on their own but when it actually comes down to seeing them climb a tree we can't take it there's a mismatch between our values and goals for our children and our ability to live in

alignment with those values because of our thoughts and beliefs DBT is really useful in those kinds of situations because it helps us to change the way we think about them but here's the thing when you sign up to do DBT you know what you're getting into you're consenting to have your thoughts Changed by someone else because you've tried to meet your needs first and it hasn't helped I think this gets much more problematic when we're thinking about using these tools

with our kids who for the most part have not consented to having these tools used on them I think it's especially misplaced to use these tools as a firstline strategy to deal with children's Behavior because we're essentially saying the only thing I care about is that your behavior changes DBT is a behaviorist approach which means the behavior is the only thing that matters when the behavior changes the therapy has been successful Dr Fleck explains that she

believes this herself she says of course there needs to be consequences for problematic Behavior I could refer to

all of the parenting research that substantiates this point but I don't need to because if you spend any time around kids then you know that they're like little Jurassic Park dinosaurs who will destroy the park and probably kill you when they realize the fence is off consequences punishments contingencies whatever you call them are important period the question isn't about whether

or not you use them it's how you use them end quote and when I read this I almost went cross ey right how did a book on validation end up here there is one form of punishment that Dr Fleck won't ever consider giving a child and that is emotional invalidation you should always validate their emotions but not their problematic Behavior as an example she says we shouldn't say to our child this isn't something to cry about we should say

it's okay to be sad and upset it's not okay to scream to me this is another version of I love you I just don't like your behavior that sounds so logical from the parents perspective and so maddeningly patronizing from the child's perspective and I noticed an interesting contradiction here when we talked Dr Fleck wisely pointed out that telling a child you should be able to do whatever task we've decided they should be able to do which Compares them to a

theoretical child who can do the thing we're asking creates shame and is invalidating yet in the book she uses an example about her daughter Havana's hair brushing essentially saying you're old enough to brush your own hair because Havana has arms and a brush this approach seems to contradict her point about contextualization sometimes a child might be physically able to do something but still needs support because they had a tough day at school or need connection it's similar to how we would appreciate

our partner taking out the trash for us after a difficult day at work even though we're physically capable of doing it ourselves and it's a task we normally do when we make ourselves the judge of whether the child's behavior is acceptable or not we put ourselves in a position of power over them Dr Fleck was trained in Dr Alan kasen's method he was the director of the yell Parenting Center and child conduct clinic and he

uses you guessed it behaviorist based ideas to shape children's Behavior excessively excited praise when the child does what the parent says rewarding small steps toward the behavior you want to see with tokens that they can cash in for a treat timeouts it's all in kasen's method and Dr Fleck is right there with him as long as we don't invalidate children's emotions all the other behaviorist based tools are fair game now I'm not debating that there isn't Decades of research out

there that speaks to the effectiveness of these methods there is but we have to ask effectiveness at what is changing our children's Behavior our only goal if so Behavior based tools are the ones to use but if we care about our children's inner experience then we're kind of on Shaky Ground here because behaviorism does doesn't take this into account behaviorism is about changing Behavior although we might see this as manipulation Dr Fleck addresses this directly but by saying that quote these

days I think most of us see Technologies like artificial intelligence as a greater threat to the enslavement of the human race but I still want to address the behaviorism equals manipulation concern as it pertains to validation

because it comes up from time to time when it does I reiterate that validation is the authentic communication of acceptance I agree with this point I think Dr fleck's work to explain how to authentically communicate acceptance is masterful but is it really then

acceptance if we use the connection we've built through validation to try to change the child's Behavior so let's take an example right let's imagine that you yell at your kid after you've already promised them that you're not going to yell at them anymore and you and I get on the phone so that you can tell me about it I could pay close attention to you as you explain what happened happened and they and then say something like oh my goodness you

were sleep deprived and your partner worked the baby up early and your older child had a cold and you yelled at them for not getting dressed fast enough of course you did and so I'm copying you right think back to the the skills that we learned in the conversation any parent would have lost it in that situation equalizing skill you aren't a crappy parent you're an awesome parent having a crappy day do you worry that you won't ever be able to stop yelling

so there's a tentative proposal about what might be going on for you and maybe I wait for your answer and then I might say I once yelled at my daughter in a situation like that where I didn't get enough sleep and she did something really small and I just lost it does it happen often when you don't get enough sleep and so I'm disclosing something about myself and then returning the conversation to you as I'm supposed to

using these validation tools and then I could go on to say now are you feeling good about our connection I know I am so how about we discuss the reward system I'm going to set up to get you to stop yelling at your kids each hour that you don't yell at them you can put a cotton ball in a jar and at the end of the week you can exchange 50 cotton balls for a trip to

Starbucks how are you feeling about our connection now maybe you're wondering what on Earth gives me the right to decide how your behavior should change maybe you're feeling pissed off that I use the connection to get close to you and then set up the reward system which now puts me in a position of judging your behavior are you likely to want to share how you're feeling with me again in this method it doesn't matter why you're yelling it doesn't matter if your

child's Behavior reminded you of a traumatic experience you had in childhood or that you're completely overwhelmed at work or that you're neurodivergent all that matters after we've validated you is that your behavior changes to meet my standard when we look at it from the perspective of two adults in the interaction it doesn't look so great does it it only seems acceptable when we're talking about children's Behavior because we're so used to using our power over them

and let's not forget why it's appropriate to use our power over them if I annoyed you by using our connection and to then try and shape your behavior as I coached you you could just decide hey no more coaching from Jen for me and you might regret that things have turned out the way they did between us but it's not like you and I

are in a super close relationship but with your kids it's another story remember from the episodes

on time out that those researchers say it's because our children look to us for love and care as well as privileges like screen time and being taken to activities they enjoy that we can and should use that relationship to shape their behavior if you decide you don't like my coaching you go find another coach or talk to a friend or just try and figure it out yourself you're in a consent-based relationship with me and if you don't consent to work with me the

work doesn't happen if you go to a DBT therapist you know what you're signing up for you consent to the treatment plan your kid can't go and find themselves another parent your kid has to figure out how to still get love and care from you and most often they do that by hiding the parts of themselves that you don't like and you don't want to see and showing more of the parts of themselves that you do which is the what the

behaviorists say is a good thing but I work with thousands of parents who have been profoundly hurt by that shaping and it's one thing to use those tools not knowing how much they can hurt which is mostly what our parents did right it's entirely another thing to know that and to use them anyway most likely if we're thinking about using these tools with our kids we don't have their consent and if we do tell them what we're doing

we're probably explaining the parts about rewards they're going to like but probably not the part about how we want them to hide the parts of themselves we don't want to see anymore because if we did that would they consent to participate so what should we do once we've created All That Good Will in the relationship through validation because this is the part three of the book book that I wanted to see the book helps us to build this amazing connection through

validation and I was hoping we could then use that connection to understand each other's needs because that's where we actually get to the root of why the child is behaving in the way they are they're doing it to meet a need whatever it is we're wishing they wouldn't do they're doing it to meet a need so when we see that behavior and we wish it wasn't happening we can make a choice do I use behaviorist based tools to just

get them to stop doing it or do I try to understand why they're doing it what need they're trying to meet and then help them to meet that need in a way that also meets my need and if that answer isn't fully clear to us what would we hope that other adults would do with us Dr Fleck says that quote I for one wish more people would try to manipulate me with acceptance and validation but I for one do not wish

that there's also a chapter in the book on how to shape your partner's Behavior to increase the amount of work they do around around the house and if your partner has already flat out refused to help you then I don't really see an ethical problem with using these tools to try to get them to collaborate a bit more but what if your partner finds the book on your nightstand and decides to shape your behavior to be better aligned

with what they want without your consent would you want that to happen if the answer is that you wouldn't

want your partner to do it to you then you might want to think twice about doing it to your partner or your child I highly recommend the first two parts of Dr Dr Flex book I'm already using what I learned in it in my personal relationships as well as my coaching the third part contains techniques that may be helpful in

specific situations but I really do encourage you to consider how these approaches align with your values about parent child relationships and consent before you apply them thanks so much for being here with me in this episode today and don't forget that Dr Flex book on validation as she mentioned can be bought where all books are sold [Music]