

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Family Communication

Active Listening

Session Length: 2 hours

Objectives

Participants will:

- Understand the child's need for parental acceptance
- Explore applications of active listening skills
- Practice skills through role play and discussion

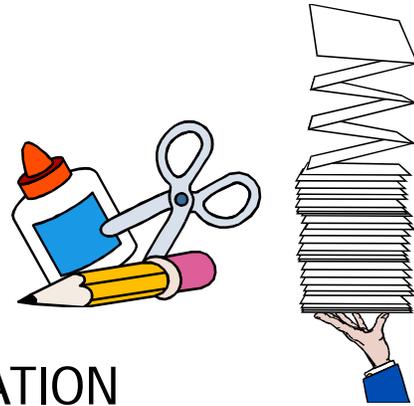
Synopsis

Since many family problems center on communication difficulties, this session introduces participants to the utility of using good communication techniques. The importance of conveying acceptance and emotional support through active listening skills is emphasized and parents are introduced to response styles that may impede effective communication (Gordon, 1973). How active listening might be used with children of different ages is demonstrated and participants are encouraged to rehearse active listening and explore its application to their parenting situations.

Session Outline



Procedure	Time
Welcome	05 minutes
Session overview	05 minutes
Homework review	15 minutes
Acceptance	15 minutes
Your response style	20 minutes
Active listening	20 minutes
Practice and discussion	30 minutes
Concluding discussion	05 minutes
Homework	05 minutes
Total Time for Session 3	120 minutes



MATERIALS AND PREPARATION

- ▶ Here's what you will need to have ready for the group:
 - **SELF-STUDY** – The Appendix (pp. 197–) contains short articles on child development and parenting issues for additional reading. Likewise, the Resources (pp. 187-190) and References (p. 191) sections can direct you to other materials for self-study.
 - **COPIES OF MATERIALS** – Make copies of the following hand-outs, located at the end of the session:
 - *Your Response Style* (p. 68)
 - *Communication Roadblocks* (pp. 69-70)
 - *Listening from the Heart* (p. 71)
 - *Door Openers* (p. 72)
 - *Session Three Evaluation* (p. 73)
 - **SUPPORT MATERIALS** – Equip meeting room with a flipchart and easel, eraser board, or chalkboard. If you are using a flipchart, have masking tape or push pins available to hang completed pages for easy reference. Have extra pens, pencils, and paper available in case participants need them.

PROCEDURE



10 Minutes

WELCOME / SESSION OVERVIEW

- 1 Welcome participants as they arrive.
- 2 Introduce the session topic.
 - Today's session and the session after that will focus on communicating with children. Effective communication involves not only talking and listening but also understanding.
 - As parents, one of the most important things we can do is teach our children that talking to us is safe and helpful. If we want our children to believe that talking to us is safe and helpful, then we must make sure that it is.
 - Today we'll explore how a special listening technique can be used to help children feel accepted for who they are and feel comfortable talking with their parents. We'll also explore how using this technique can contribute to problem solving and emotional maturity in children.
 - Before we jump in, let's review the homework assignment.



15 Minutes

HOMEWORK REVIEW

- 3 Review homework suggestion. Encourage a brief discussion using some of the following questions:
 - One part of the home assignment was to pay attention to things that your child does or says that are "typical" of children in his/her age group. This is based on some of the developmental issues we covered at the last meeting. Let's hear some examples.
 - ? *How is what you are describing "typical" for a child of that age?*
 - ? *How did your knowledge about child development influence your reaction what your child did?*

- You also were asked to give yourself a point every time you noticed your child behaving in a way you liked (even if only briefly). You were encouraged to immediately praise the child's behavior or otherwise tell him how pleased you were.
- You were encouraged to pay attention to how you felt after noticing the child and giving praise, and how you sensed your child felt. I also suggested that you might want to pay attention to any other positive changes in your relationship with your child. Let's talk about it.
 - ? *Was noticing your child being good easier or more difficult than you thought it would be?*
 - ? *What strategies did you use in your quest?*
 - ? *How did your child react at first? Did this change over the week?*
 - ? *How did you feel when you noticed your child behaving in a way you liked and gave some praise?*
 - ? *What differences in your relationship with your child did you notice over the week?*
 - ? *What did you learn from this "experiment?" What do you think your child learned?*

- 4** Thank participants for their willingness to give the assignment a try. Reiterate that praising or otherwise recognizing good behavior is important for children. We all like to hear a good word when we've done well, and children are no exception. Positive feedback helps children learn about social cooperation.



15 Minutes

ACCEPTANCE

- 5** Introduce the topic of acceptance by referring back to the group goals from the first session. Use a flip chart or chalkboard to write out points of emphasis as discussion unfolds.
- Many of our goals from the first session centered on the bigger idea of wanting to do the best for our children. Parents want to be effec-

tive at helping their kids prepare for adult life. We want to help them be happy, secure, competent, and to feel good about themselves.

- Communication is a very important part of doing the best we can for our children. Acceptance is the starting point.

? *What is acceptance?*

? *When we say we accept our children for who they are, what do we mean? What is involved?*

6 Discuss issues raised by participants about the nature of acceptance. If necessary, help clarify the difference between acceptance of a person (e.g., unconditional positive regard) and acceptance of behavior (which has its limits). Summarize with the following points:

- If we want to teach our kids that talking to us is safe and helpful, then we must learn and practice the language of acceptance.
- When we are able to feel and communicate genuine acceptance to our child, we provide that child with the foundation of good mental health.
- Acceptance fosters self-esteem, competence, and willingness to try.
- Acceptance must be communicated. Acceptance must be demonstrated.

7 Lead a discussion with the following question. Record participants' answers on flip chart or chalkboard.

? *How do we show another person that we accept them?*

? *How do we demonstrate acceptance?*

8 Discuss answers and make sure the following points are brought up and discussed:

- We can let children know they are accepted nonverbally as well as verbally.

- Acceptance is conveyed through eye contact, gestures, tone of voice, and touch.
- “Letting go” conveys acceptance. This means not intruding when a child is occupied with an activity, permitting the child to make and learn from “mistakes,” and allowing separateness.
- Many parents don’t realize that they may be nonverbally communicating nonacceptance by interfering, intruding, moving in, checking up, or joining in. For example, Mary is happily coloring in her book, pressing down hard on the crayon, and going out of the lines. Mother jumps in and says “It will be prettier if you don’t press so hard and stay inside the lines. Here, let me show you.” Although well-intended, this intrusion may convey to Mary that her way of coloring is unacceptable.
- Listening conveys acceptance and is especially effective in helping us convey to our children that we accept their feelings, their concerns, and their struggles.
- When our children feel genuinely accepted by us, they learn that we are safe and helpful, and they see us as people they can talk with.



20 Minutes



Worksheet,
p. 68

YOUR RESPONSE STYLE

9 Distribute *Your Response Style* worksheets, and ask parents to complete them based on how they would realistically respond. Introduce the exercise using some of the following points:

- We’ll spend the rest of today discussing skills for conveying acceptance to our children. To get us started, we’ll use this short exercise. Look at the situations on the page and you’ll see that they are fairly common for children of different ages.
- For the five situations described on your worksheet, write down how you might normally respond, or, if you have faced a similar situation, write down how you responded in the past.
- There are no “right” or “wrong” answers. Write a short sentence about how you might respond based on your first reaction to the situation described. Remember, this is not about “right” or “wrong” responses – we’ll be using this exercise as a springboard to continue today’s discussion.

10 When participants have completed their worksheets, ask for volunteers to share their responses and discuss them using some of the following questions:

- ? *How familiar were the situations on your worksheet?*
- ? *Which situation was the easiest for you to respond to? Which one did you find most difficult?*
- ? *If these had been "real life" situations, how do you think you would have felt as you responded to your child?*
- ? *How might your child have felt?*



Handout,
pp. 69-70

11 Distribute *Communication Roadblocks* handout. Without further explanation, ask parents to read over the descriptions of "roadblocks."

12 Ask participants to determine if any of their worksheet responses might be roadblocks or contain elements of roadblocks. Allow time for discussion, stressing some of the following points:

- Remember, there truly are no "wrong" or "bad" responses to the situations in the exercise. *We label these responses as "roadblocks" because they are roadblocks to listening. Remember that the focus of this session is to work on listening skills.*
- Most parents are surprised at how many "roadblocks" to good listening they sometimes use. In the example situations on the worksheet, simply listening might be an effective response to use.
- Remember, listening to children helps them feel accepted. If we can learn to hold back and simply listen, we can help children learn to express themselves and solve their own problems. Like adults, sometimes children like to "think out loud" or just "vent" about things. At these times, it feels good to know that someone is there just to listen, without judging or trying to make us feel better.
- In many of these examples, the child is coming to the parent because he has a problem he needs to solve or talk about. In other examples, the child is coming to the parent with feelings he needs to express or ventilate. In particular, the child is looking for a safe and helpful place to bring his troubles.

- Remember, no one is saying these so-called roadblocks are “bad” or “terrible mistakes.” Some of them may be appropriate responses in other situations, and most of them come from the parent’s good intentions.
- However well-intentioned, when your child needs to talk through a problem or feeling, these types of responses will tend to reduce your effectiveness in getting the child to open up and feel accepted.
- In many ways, it’s like you, as parent, are your child’s “counselor” or best friend. When we have problems to think through or emotions with which we want to come to terms, it’s good to have a counselor or best friend with whom it is safe and helpful to talk. Kids need this kind of person, too, and most parents want to be this person for their children.
- Many parents feel some frustration about this idea of “roadblocks.” They say: “If it’s not a good idea to offer suggestions or reassurance when my child comes to me with a problem or hurt feelings, then what the heck am I supposed to do??!”
- The alternative is listening. Listening without giving advice, without giving opinions, without intentions of responding in any other way except listening. Plain old listening is important and so is a more sophisticated style of listening called “active listening.”
- For the rest of the session, we’ll explore listening as one of the most powerful tools a parent can use to strengthen her relationship with her child. We’ll talk about when to use active listening, when not to use it, and how to use it with children of different ages. We’ll also practice with each other so we can later practice with our kids.



20 Minutes



Handout,
p. 71

ACTIVE LISTENING

13 Distribute *Listening From the Heart* handout. Model the three types of listening and discuss how they convey acceptance and encourage children to open up. Include some of the following points:

- It’s hard to imagine any single thing that does a better job of conveying “I care about you,” “I respect you,” and “I love you” than really listening to your child.

- To sense that we've been heard and understood makes us feel good, and children are no exception. Among the many things children need from their parents is a sense of being cared about and understood.
- It's often helpful to understand what listening is not. This helps reduce anxiety and opens the way to a better understanding of listening as a skill.
 - Listening is not the same as agreeing. Often parents will stop listening and jump in "correcting" the second they hear their child say something with which they don't agree. They may fear that listening without interrupting will convey that they agree with the child's "misguided" notions.
 - Listening is not "second-nature." The sense of hearing that most people are born with is not the same as listening. Listening is something we have to learn how to do. Children learn how to listen by observing adults.
 - Listening is not easy. Our feelings, moods, health, or levels of tiredness, stress, or preoccupation can interfere with listening. Many parents find they have to be aware of these influences and work to manage them in order to be able to listen when their children really need it.
- There are three listening techniques that help children feel cared about and understood. We'll call them "door openers" because they can help open the doors of communication. These door openers work wonders with other adults as well.
 - Neutral responses are simple responses that you are familiar with and probably use a lot. They are short and don't communicate judgments, feelings, or opinions, but do let the child know you are listening. For example:
 - "I see."
 - "Oh."
 - "Really."
 - "How about that."
 - "You did, huh."

- Invitations to say more are phrases that encourage your child (or anyone else, for that matter) to keep talking. For example:
 - "Tell me more about that."
 - "I'm interested in hearing all about it."
 - "Keep talking – this is fascinating."
 - "Would you like to talk about it?"
 - "Tell me the whole story."
 - "Sounds like you had a heck of a day."
 - "For real? Tell me more."
- Active listening is the most effective door opener, in that it not only opens the door, but also helps keep the door open.
 - In active listening, the parent tries to understand what the child is feeling and what he is trying to communicate.
 - The parent then puts his understanding into words and feeds it back to the child for verification.
 - If need be, the parent "bites his tongue" in order to beat down the urge to use "roadblock" responses.



Handout,
p. 72

14 Distribute *Door Openers* handout and review points. Encourage brief discussion. Summarize with some of the following points:

- One of the most important duties of parenting involves helping children understand, manage, and communicate about their feelings and emotions.
- Listening, especially active listening, is a key skill for helping children learn to name feelings and to work through problems.
- When parents are able to listen compassionately as children deal with their feelings and troubles, they help children learn that feelings are manageable, that talking helps, and that parents trust them.
- Like all skills we want to master well, listening takes practice.
- Often, parents must show their children that they are willing and ready to listen. Making it a point to spend a bit of time each day giving your child your undivided attention can open the door to

communication. Simple statements like “Tell me about your day” can serve as icebreakers and let children know you are available to listen.



30 Minutes

PRACTICE AND DISCUSSION

15 Introduce the practice session by establishing guidelines for role-play and giving constructive feedback. Include some of the following points:

- One benefit of this group is that we can practice skills and “experiment” with each other to get a feel for new techniques.
- The purpose of role-play is to help each other learn and “get the hang” of skills that may feel awkward or even silly at first. We’ll work at a pace that is comfortable for everyone.
- We’ll use “real life” situations. This will give everyone a chance to apply new skills to recurring parenting problems and get some feedback.
- After each person practices, the rest of us will provide feedback on what we observed and offer suggestions, when appropriate, about how effectiveness might be improved.
- As group leader(s), my job will be to provide you with several role-played examples of how a skill is used and what it looks and sounds like before we get started.

16 Discuss the use of listening skills with preverbal children. Model the use of active listening with children under 3 or 4 years of age and answer questions. Discuss the following points:

- In terms of developmental stages, active listening is most effective with children who are verbal, that is, able to talk and understand words. From about age 3 onward, children respond favorably to active listening.
- Active listening with children under 3 might include paying attention to the child while he is playing and providing a “running commentary” as he interacts with his toys. In this way the parent can “reflect” back feelings and interactions as the child experiences them. For

example, watching Jimmy playing with his train, his mother might say: "You really like that train. It makes you happy to push it on the floor. Oops, it got stuck. You really don't like it when it gets stuck, it makes you mad," etc. This type of parent/child interaction, even with children who can't yet talk, provides a foundation for communication in the future.

- This type of active listening can be practiced with infants, as well. Although they may not be able to use words, they can sense when parents are "listening" to them and they love the attention.

17 Set the stage for participant role plays with some of the following points:

- Listening and active listening skills are used to help children deal with their feelings and problems. Listening is a foundation skill that we will build on during this workshop.
- For today, let's narrow our focus to just the skill of listening. Later on we'll see how it fits in to other issues like discipline, limit setting, and gaining compliance.
- When it's your turn to practice, here are some things to remember:
 - Really tune in and listen. Use door openers and repeat back to the "child" what you understand about her feelings or concerns.
 - Avoid responding with roadblocks. If you feel the urge to respond with a roadblock, choose a neutral response instead (e.g., "I see," "Tell me more," or "Umm, really.") or use active listening (e.g., "You're really angry about not being able to play outside right now.")
 - The words you choose to indicate that you are listening are less important than how you say them. Pay attention to your nonverbal signals:
 - Look at your child when she is speaking.
 - Keep your expression pleasant and open. Use your face to communicate caring, interest, and concern.
 - Avoid allowing your voice to sound sarcastic, mocking, impatient, bored, or uninterested.

- Take pride in what you're doing when you listen to your child. You're giving your child something valuable – your time and your acceptance.

- Active listening helps children learn it's okay to talk about their feelings. Parents can help children learn words that describe feelings by offering suggestions or using "feeling" words themselves. For example, after watching Johnny sigh and frown because he can't make a puzzle fit together, the parent might say: "Looks like you are feeling really frustrated about that puzzle."

18 Model several examples of how to use active listening with different age children based on realistic parent-child encounters. Encourage questions.



Worksheet,
p. 68
Handout,
pp. 69-70

19 Lead participants in a role play session to practice listening skills. Use example situations from *Your Response Style* worksheet or ask participants to volunteer real situations. Suggest that participants keep their *Communication Roadblocks* list handy for reference.

20 Discuss the practice session using some of the following questions:

- ? *How did it feel to practice active listening?*
- ? *What benefits do you see in learning to listen to your child?*
- ? *In which types of situations do you think active listening will be most helpful?*
- ? *What's going to be the most difficult challenge for you in using active listening?*
- ? *How might you use active listening in your adult relationships? What benefits might there be?*

21 Thank participants for their work. Reassure them that active listening takes time and practice to master, but many parents have found it to be one of the most useful parenting "tricks" they can draw upon.



5 Minutes

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

22 Provide wrap-up and closure for the session. Highlight the following points:

- As with any good thing, active listening can be overdone. Remember that its purpose is to encourage children to talk about their feelings and concerns. Here are some examples of times to not use active listening:
 - When your child asks you specifically for help or information, don't switch to active listening. For example, if your child asks "What time will you be home from work today, mom?," you probably want to just give a straight answer rather than "You're puzzled about when I'll be home." Here's another example. If your child says "Can you give me a ride to school this morning?," don't respond with "You're concerned about getting to school today."
 - Timing is a critical issue. Sometimes children don't want to talk about their feelings, no matter how many doors you open. Respect their rights, and let them know you're ready to listen when they are ready to talk.
 - For your part, don't begin active listening with your child unless you have the time to hear all the feelings that might come up. Opening the door then slamming it shut is not helpful for either of you.
- Keep the roles straight. It's the parent's job to be the active listener, not the child's. Naturally, it's important for you to talk about your feelings with your child (next week we'll cover ways to do that); however, when you have difficult problems or feelings, call on another adult to help you talk them through.
- In order to use active listening effectively, you must want to listen and understand your child. You must genuinely want to be helpful. You must be willing to take the time.
- In order to make active listening work, you must be able to accept your child's feelings – even when those feelings are different than what you think the child "should" feel, even when they are different than what you feel.

- It helps many parents to remind themselves that feelings are “transitory.” Feelings states come and go. There’s no such thing as “good” feelings or “bad” feelings. A child expressing his anger is not going to get “stuck” in anger. Quite the contrary – talking about feelings helps them pass more quickly. When we listen, we help children learn to talk through their feelings rather than act out on them.
- Finally, it’s helpful to work on accepting your child as his/her own person, and as a person who is separate from you. Respecting this separateness allows you to let your child experience his own feelings, thoughts, and ideas.



5 Minutes

HOMEWORK

23 Give the following homework suggestion:

- Practice active listening with your child. Make it a point to use active listening at least once every day during the coming week. This will help you make it a daily habit. Pay attention to how you feel and how your child responds when you use the technique.
- The second part of the experiment is to make a purposeful effort to avoid using roadblocks – especially the more negative ones like blaming, ridiculing, lecturing, and name-calling. Pay attention to the kinds of strategies you are able to devise to avoid using roadblocks. Pay attention to how you feel when you successfully avoid using a roadblock.

24 Thank group members for coming and for their participation. Invite them to return to the next session.



Session
Evaluation,
p. 73

25 Ask participants to complete a *Session Evaluation* form before leaving.





YOUR RESPONSE STYLE

If you were the parent, how would you respond to the following messages from your child? Write in your responses.

CHILD: I hate my teacher. She's old and stupid and bossy. I never want to go back to her class again!!

How you would respond: _____

CHILD: I want to sleep in your room. I don't like my room anymore. Your room makes me feel better at night.

How you would respond: _____

CHILD: (Crying) I never get to go anywhere. Why can't I go to the movies with Mary and her friends. She always gets to go everywhere.

How you would respond: _____

CHILD: No carrots. No. No. No eat carrots.

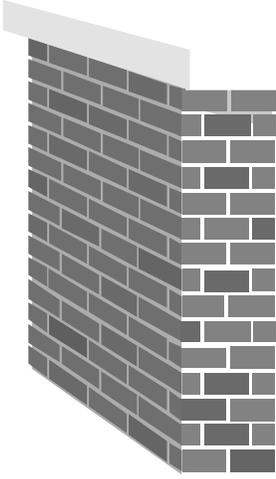
How you would respond: _____

CHILD: I'm not too young to wear makeup. All the girls are wearing it. You just want to make me look stupid with my friends!!

How you would respond: _____

Communication Roadblocks

(Things that get in the way of listening)



Giving orders (Telling the child what to do)

- "Get back in your own bed!"
- "Eat those carrots right now."
- "You stop talking about your teacher like that."

Using threats (Warning the child of consequences)

- "If you don't stop whining, I'll ground you!"
- "I better not catch you wearing makeup again."
- "You'll sit there all night if you don't eat those carrots."

Preaching (Telling the child what he "should" or "ought" to do)

- "You shouldn't talk about your teacher like that."
- "You ought to be nicer to your sister."
- "You shouldn't be so vain about your looks at your age."

Lecturing (Trying to influence the child with facts or logic)

- "You need to respect your teachers in order to get ahead in school."
- "Your sister is older and wants to spend time with her friends."
- "A girl your age doesn't need to wear makeup."

Giving advice (Telling the child how to solve a problem)

- "Try being nicer to your teacher and see what happens."
- "If you turn on the night light you'll feel better in your room."
- "Go play outside. It will help you forget about the movies."

Blaming or criticizing (Making negative comments)

- "It's your own fault your sister never lets you tag along."
- "If you weren't so mean, maybe your teacher would be nicer."
- "You are driving me nuts with this carrot business!!"

Ridiculing, shaming (Making fun of the child)

"You're acting like a such a baby!"

"You never think of anyone but yourself, do you?!!"

"You look like a silly clown with all that paint on your face."

Analyzing (Assuming you know the child's reasons or motives)

"You're just mad at your teacher because you failed her test."

"I think you are jealous of your sister's friends."

"You want to wear makeup just to make me angry."

Consoling, reassuring (Trying to make the child feel better)

"Now. Now. Mrs. Smith isn't all that bad of a teacher."

"Your sister doesn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"I felt the same way when my mother wouldn't let me wear makeup."

Asking questions (Trying to find causes or motives)

"Why is Mrs. Smith angry with you? What did you do?"

"Why is it so important for you to do what your sister does?"

"What's wrong with the carrots?"

Humoring, placating (Trying to distract the child)

"Yes, dear. I know. You'll feel better tomorrow."

"Try not to think about it."

"When you are older, you'll understand my reasons."



LISTENING FROM THE HEART



Neutral responses are simple responses that signal you are listening but don't communicate judgments or opinions. For example:

- ***"I see."***
- ***"Oh."***
- ***"Really."***
- ***"How about that."***
- ***"You did, huh."***

Invitations to say more are phrases that encourage your child (or anyone else, for that matter) to keep talking. For example:

- ***"Tell me more."***
- ***"I'm interested in hearing all about it."***
- ***"Keep talking – this is fascinating."***
- ***"Would you like to talk about it?"***
- ***"Sounds like you had a heck of a day."***

Active listening opens the door and helps keep it open. In active listening, the parent tries to understand what the child is feeling and trying to communicate. The parent then puts his understanding into words and repeats it back to the child. The parent **avoids** all "roadblock" responses. For example:

Johnny: ***"I'm bored. I don't have anyone to play with."***

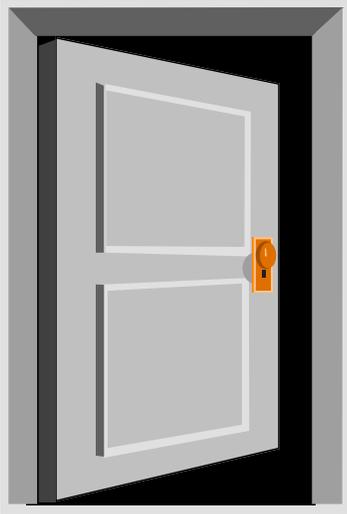
Dad: ***"You're not happy about the fact that your friends are out of town."***

Johnny: ***"Yeah. I don't know what to do around here for fun."***

Dad: ***"You're having a hard time figuring out what you'd like to do this afternoon."***

Johnny: ***"Uh, Huh. Maybe I'll go down to the gym and see if I can get in a basketball game."***

Dad: ***"Good idea. Want a ride down there?"***



DOOR OPENERS ...
say more than just what the words say.

When you listen with love and use door openers, your child “hears” more than the words you use. Here are some of the things that listening “says” to your child:

- *You have a right to express how you feel.*
- *I respect you as a person with ideas and feelings.*
- *I can learn things from you.*
- *I really do want to hear your point of view.*
- *Your ideas are important to me.*
- *I am interested in you.*
- *I want to understand you better.*
- *I’m here for you.*
- *I’m glad you want to share your life with me.*
- *Your feelings are important and valid.*

