



# RAISING AN ASSERTIVE CHILD

BY DR. KATE AUBREY, REGISTERED PSYCHOLOGIST

## WHAT IS ASSERTIVENESS?

Experts believe that assertiveness is, in part, inherited. And we all know from our own experience that some children are simply born comfortable with saying what they want while others are inherently more shy or passive. While it might come naturally to some people, it's largely a skill — and an important one at that for both adults and kids. Assertiveness is really a communication style, it's about how we have our needs met. Assertiveness involves recognizing and standing up for our own rights, while at the same time recognizing and respecting the rights of others.

Being assertive helps in virtually every relationship. In the classroom, it puts a child at an advantage because he's comfortable raising his hand and asking for extra help. He'll also have an easier time making friends, since he won't hesitate to say, "Hey, can I play too?"

So what does assertiveness look like? Take the example of a child who receives a poor grade on a test. A passive child might keep his grade to himself or complain to his friends or talk badly about the teacher. An aggressive child might make a rude comment to the teacher or write something offensive on the bathroom wall. An assertive child, however, requests to speak to the teacher after class, and might say "I feel confused and upset because I studied really hard for this test. Could you let me know what I could have done differently, or give me a chance to make corrections?"

## STYLES OF COMMUNICATION

### AGGRESSIVE

Trying to get your own way or stand up for yourself by putting someone else down or violating that person's rights. Taking what you want. Threatening or forcing a person to give you something.

**Speech:** "loaded" words (such as "always" and "never"), "you" messages (such as, "You are so..."), put-down words, sarcasm, saying nothing while you take what you want.

**Voice:** tense and loud or cold and quiet

**Eyes:** cold, staring, narrowed, angry

**Posture:** hands on hips, stiff, rigid

**Hands:** clenched, pointing finger, pounding fist, violent (shoving, grabbing, poking, etc.)

**Result: You seem to get what you want, but you may lose more in the end. You stand the chance of losing friends and self-respect.**

### MANIPULATIVE

Getting what you want through dishonesty. Saying one thing when you mean another. Tricking or conning people into giving you what you want.

**Speech:** baby talk, "poor me," making excuses, giving insincere compliments.

**Voice:** sweet or "con" tone, soft

**Eyes:** downcast or looking away

**Posture:** leaning back, arms crossed, "too cool" stance, stooped.

**Hands:** fidgety

**Result: You seem to get what you want, but you may lose more in the end. You stand the chance of losing friends and self-respect. People may not trust you.**

### PASSIVE

Giving in and saying "yes" when you don't really want to. Not speaking up when you want something. Acting this way in order to be liked, to be nice, or to not hurt the other person's feelings.

**Speech:** lots of apologies and "ums" and "ers," not coming to the point, saying nothing at all.

**Voice:** soft, whining

**Eyes:** downcast or looking away.

**Posture:** shoulders and head down, leaning for support, holding onto self.

**Hands:** fidgety

**Result: You usually don't get what you want and you feel like you've been used.**

### ASSERTIVE

Asking straightforwardly for things you want, without putting anyone down. Giving people an honest "no" to things you don't want. Willing to take "no" for an answer. Not using other people and not letting yourself be used. Compromising!

**Speech:** honest, direct and to the point, giving sincere compliments. Able to listen.

**Voice:** smooth, flowing, firm, relaxed, loud enough to hear (but not too loud).

**Eyes:** direct eye contact (without staring).

**Posture:** balanced, sitting or standing tall (but relaxed)

**Hands:** relaxed motions

**Result: You may not get what you want, but you keep your self-respect. You compromise, which means you get something. You may not have control over how people react to your assertiveness, but it's not your intent to hurt anyone else's feelings.**



## HOW TO HELP KIDS BE ASSERTIVE

**Modelling Assertive Behaviour.** Parents can model assertiveness when interacting with family members, friends, colleagues etc. Acting in aggressive or passive ways yourself will almost guarantee your children will behave the same way.

**Coach your kids directly** by helping them figure out situations as they come up. If your child comes home from school crying because another child teased her on the bus, tell her how to handle the situation assertively. If your child is being excluded from a game, coach him on how to speak up and stand up for himself.

**Don't tell them how to feel.** Quite often we say things like, "Isn't this fun?" "Aren't you excited about this?" Instead, express how you feel and ask them how they might be feeling. Ask them genuine questions to help them develop their own opinions and not to be afraid of stating them.

**Teach them the confidence stance.** Head up, shoulders back, walk tall, make eye contact. Shy and anxious children often slouch. Play games to teach your children the confidence stance.

**Role-play scenarios** that will help your children respond in confidence. Teach them to say no if they don't feel comfortable doing something others may be asking them to do.

**Be a democratic household.** Hold debates. Use family meetings. Listen to each child (it doesn't mean you agree with them). When kids know their opinions count they are more likely to speak out and feel comfortable doing it.

**Acknowledge assertiveness.** Let your child know you value people who speak their mind. Reinforce your child's assertiveness. "I like how you spoke up!" Encourage those confident, assertive behaviours in your child.

**Find less domineering friends.** If your child is a bit more timid and always hangs around a bossy playmate, provide him the opportunity to find a less domineering pal. Watch out for domineering siblings as well. Always encourage your more passive child speak.

**Talk about rights.** Children need to know that their opinions are valued and that they have the right to speak their mind. Visual cues are always useful when helping kids work on difficult social interaction skills. Sit with your child and create a list of rights for kids. Start with the basics: You have the right to say no and you have the right to feel and express anger. (These are a great place to start.) Encourage your child to add to the list and create a poster for his room.

**Teaching "I" statements** to communicate how your child feels, what they think, and what they want or need. Using "you" statements can sound argumentative. For example, telling a parent, "You always remind me about my chores on Wednesdays when you know I have a lot of homework" has a very different tone from "I'm feeling pressured because I have a lot of homework tonight. Can I do those chores tomorrow?"

**Avoid shutting them down.** Children ask so much of us. Sometimes it can be difficult to not say "no" as soon as they make a request. Whenever possible, praise your child for coming to make a request and provide an explanation for your answer. Sometimes, they just need to know it is OK to ask.

**Support healthy risks.** Encourage your child to try new activities and take up new hobbies. Cheer them on and resist the urge to rescue them at the first sign of distress. Kids need to learn that skill acquisition takes time.

**Provide early leadership opportunities.** Provide opportunities for your child to be a member of a team, take charge of a project or lead others. You might enrol your child in public speaking or theatre to build confidence in speaking in front of others!