

Improving Your Child’s Respectful Communication: Building Assertiveness [Intermediate]

Does your child have difficulty expressing their feelings respectfully? Maybe they struggle with accepting others’ thoughts and ideas, especially when they are different than their own. Learning **assertiveness** strategies can help your child express their emotions appropriately and learn to empathize with others.

Definition: **Assertiveness** is expressing your wants, needs, and thoughts, even when it’s difficult, while respecting others (Noonan and Gaumer Erickson, 2017).

Students use **assertiveness** strategies to communicate respectfully and understand others.

Student Impacts: Teachers providing **assertiveness** instruction and classroom practice observe student growth, including:

- Improved communication
- Openness to constructive feedback
- Increased ability to express themselves
- Improved confidence in their own abilities
- Improved conflict management skills

Research in **elementary** and **secondary** education identifies proven student impacts from teaching **assertiveness**.

Students who have received instruction in **assertiveness** improved their ability to seek assistance and supports (Buell & Snyder, 1981; Lane et al., 2006; Wolfe et al., 2012).

Assertiveness training improves students’ self-image and their ability to express themselves (Mohagheghi et al., 2022).

Adolescents who are **assertive** have improved understanding and knowledge of academic content (Salari Koohfini & Ghasemali Kheirabadi, 2020).

Students who are **assertive** have higher self-esteem, assert their rights, and self-regulate their emotional reactions (Parray et al., 2020).

A student’s level of **assertiveness** is a good predictor of their adjustment to university (Parmaksiz, 2019).

Assertiveness training reduces instances of bullying (Buell & Snyder, 1981; Hall, 2006).

Assertiveness Strategies

To communicate **respectfully**, I can...

1. Identify communication types 
-  2. Find my feelings
3. Show empathy 
-  4. Voice my feelings
5. Listen and summarize 
-  6. Show respect without words
7. Speak my mind and be kind 
-  8. Respect my boundaries
9. Do my part 
-  10. Predict outcomes





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Learning assertiveness helps children understand how to describe their feelings respectfully. Assertiveness also supports children in learning how to find and show empathy towards others. When children practice assertiveness strategies, they learn to communicate their feelings and ideas respectfully. They can also stop and think about another person's feelings or consider another person's ideas as they are interacting with others.

Watch the one-minute video [What Is Assertiveness?](#) with your child to learn more about what it means to be assertive and why it is important. Afterward, share examples of a time when you found it difficult to express your feelings or ideas. Ask your child to describe situations when it's hard for them to express themselves, using these questions:

- When have you had difficulty explaining how you feel to someone?
- Describe a time when it was easy for you to explain how you felt or to share your ideas.
- Why is it difficult to communicate our feelings and ideas sometimes?

Explain that you are going to help them learn assertiveness strategies so they can respectfully express their feelings and ideas and accept others' feelings and ideas, even when they are different than their own.

These four assertiveness strategies will help your child communicate respectfully: **identify communication types**, **listen and summarize**, **show respect without words**, and **speak my mind and be kind**. Additional strategies are explained on the [primary](#) and [secondary](#) parent guidance pages.



Identify Communication Types

Children need to understand the difference between passive, assertive, and aggressive communication and how each type impacts the outcome of a situation. When they can **identify communication types**, they can choose to communicate in a way that is most effective for that situation.

Show your child the video [Identify Communication Types](#) to help them understand different types of communication and the characteristics of each. Use these questions to help guide your discussion about the different communication types:

- What is passive communication? What might you do or say when using passive communication?
- What is assertive communication? What might you do or say when using assertive communication?
- What is aggressive communication? What might you do or say when using aggressive communication?

Explain that how we communicate is a choice and that our communication type will affect the situation. Tell your child about a time when you didn't communicate well and it made a situation worse. For example, tell them about a time when you had strong emotions and didn't express them appropriately, or share a story about when you forgot to think about another person's feelings and how it impacted your ability to do something.

You can support your child in understanding and identifying communication types by discussing the chart [Behaviors for Each Communication Type](#). Review the characteristics for each behavior and discuss when your child has used each communication type.

Behaviors for Each Communication Type

Passive behaviors	Assertive behaviors	Aggressive behaviors
Being afraid to speak up	Speaking openly but without interrupting or disrespecting others	Interrupting others
Speaking softly	Speaking at a conversational tone	Speaking loudly
Looking down	Making eye contact	Glaring and staring at others
Showing expressions that match how others feel	Showing expressions that match how you feel	Grimacing
Slouching and turning away from others	Focusing on what others say	Crossing arms and standing too close
Avoiding others	Participating in groups	Controlling groups
Agreeing with others no matter what they say	Expressing your wants, needs, and thoughts respectfully while considering others' wants, needs, and thoughts	Considering only your own feelings and making demands of others
Valuing yourself less than others	Valuing yourself and others	Valuing yourself more than others

Adapted from "Tell the Difference Between Assertive, Passive and Aggressive Behavior," by Jacqueline Spence, 2012, Counselling Service in France

Once your child understands the different communication types, it is important they think about how each type can affect the outcome of a situation. Show your child [Behaviors for Each Communication Type](#) and ask them to cut the table into rectangles, each containing one behavior. Then tell them to classify each of the behaviors under the correct communication type. Discuss any behaviors that your child didn't understand where to classify.

Ask your child to consider how communicating passively, assertively, and aggressively would impact the outcome of these scenarios:

- You really need help with your homework.
- Your friend made up a rumor about you.
- You are working on a group project in science class.

Support your child as they practice **identifying communication types** by asking them to name the communication type in books, videos, or their interactions at school. This will improve their understanding of each type and how the type they choose impacts the outcome of a situation.



Listen and Summarize

Another important aspect to developing assertiveness is learning how to listen closely to what others are saying without offering advice or telling them your opinion. **Listen and summarize** will help your child improve their ability to understand others. When we **listen and summarize** what others have said, it

shows respect and help us develop empathy for them. Watch the video [Listen and Summarize & Show Respect Without Words](#) with your child. After the video, ask:

- Why is **listening and summarizing** important?
- Describe how you would summarize what another person has told you.
- When could you use the strategy **listen and summarize**?

One way to help your child learn to **listen and summarize** is to use these sentence stems to help guide their summary:

- You just told me that _____.
- You said you felt _____.
- Is there more you would like to tell me?

Ask your child to tell you about something difficult or challenging that they have recently experienced, such as something at school. Model **listening and summarizing** by using the sentence stems to summarize what your child has just told you. Then ask your child to practice **listening and summarizing** as you tell them about a challenge that you are facing, and prompt them to use the sentence stems to summarize what you have said.

Emphasize that **listening and summarizing** what another person has said shows respect and helps you understand the other person. You can help your child brainstorm opportunities they might have to practice the strategy **listen and summarize**—for example, **listening and summarizing** after a friend has had a bad day or **listening and summarizing** when their sibling is trying to decide which sport to play.



Show Respect Without Words

Communicating respect for others goes beyond **listening and summarizing**; it also includes our body language. Learning to **show respect without words** helps your child communicate acceptance for others' ideas and feelings without verbally acknowledging them. **Showing respect without words** will allow your child to engage in more meaningful interactions with peers and adults.

Explain to your child that we can communicate respect for others through the words we use and through our body language. Facing the person, putting your hands to your side when they are speaking, making eye contact, and nodding your head while they are talking are all ways we can **show respect without words**.

Watch the video [Listen and Summarize & Show Respect Without Words](#) again. As your child is watching the video this time, ask them to listen for ways they can show respect through their body language. After the video, ask:

- When have you experienced someone being disrespectful even though they weren't using words?
- How did it make you feel? What did you do?
- Why is **showing respect without words** important?

Ask your child to describe how they would **show respect without words** in each of these scenarios:

- If a sibling is telling you a story and it is taking a long time.
- If a parent is explaining why you must do your homework before you can go to a friend's house.
- If your coach is giving you feedback about how to improve after you made a mistake in the basketball game.

You can help your child practice the strategy **show respect without words** by reminding them that when someone is speaking, they should make eye contact and focus on what the other person is saying. When your child is reprimanded at school or experiences a conflict with another child, ask them to describe how they **showed respect without words**.



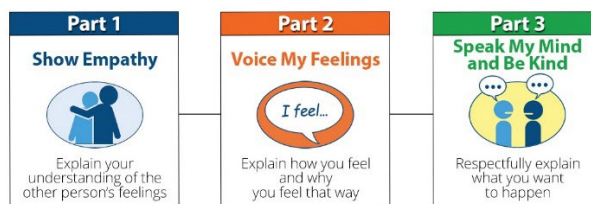
Speak My Mind and Be Kind

Supporting your child in learning to **speak their mind and be kind** is another strategy that they can use to improve their communication. When they learn to share their thoughts or feelings clearly while respecting the thoughts and feelings of others, they are being assertive.

Children can learn to express their wants, needs, and thoughts respectfully by using the strategy **speak my mind and be kind** and creating an assertive statement. The three parts are:

- **Part 1:** An empathy statement, or indication that you understand the perspective and feelings of another person. To develop this statement, use the strategy **show empathy**.
- **Part 2:** The rationale behind your action or request. Provide some reasons and explain your feelings to support your opinion. Do not blame others (e.g., don't say "you make me feel angry"), but do share feelings (e.g., do say "I feel frustrated"). To think about what they feel and the reasons for these feelings, use the strategy **voice my feelings**.
- **Part 3:** A coherent, direct statement of what you want to happen, using the strategy **speak my mind and be kind**. This should be clear and detailed.

Assertive Statements



Example: It is time for recess and it's your friend's turn to be captain of the soccer team. He has already grabbed the soccer ball and decided who is on his team. When you ask if you could be on his team, he says, 'We already have enough players. You can't be on my team today.'

You think about your feelings and later tell your friend:

I understand that you were excited to start the soccer game, but I felt sad when I couldn't be in the game. Could you please save me a place on your team next time?

[Download this image as a PDF](#)

An example of a three-part assertive statement you might use with your child who wants to stay at a friend's house longer than you agreed is:

I know you enjoy spending time with your friend (Part 1: **Show empathy**), but I feel worried when you are out past dark (Part 2: **Voice your feelings**). Please be home before sunset (Part 3: **Speak your mind and be kind**).

Explain to your child that it's sometimes difficult to share your thoughts, feelings, or ideas but that finding the courage to explain your thoughts and feelings is an important part of being assertive. Watch the video [Speak My Mind and Be Kind](#) with your child. Tell them to listen for how they can **speak their mind and be kind**. After the video, ask:

- When have you found it difficult to express your feelings or ideas?
- How would you explain the strategy **speak my mind and be kind**?
- What are the three things you need to do to **speak your mind and be kind**?

Provide a personal example of a time when it was difficult for you to communicate your thoughts or feelings. Maybe it was speaking out at work or sharing an opinion that you knew not everyone would agree with. Include details about how you **showed empathy** for the other person, **voiced your feelings**, and were able to be brave and **speak your mind and be kind**.

Ask your child to describe a recent situation when they found it difficult to **speak their mind and be kind**. Then help them construct a three-part assertive statement for that situation. Explain that everyone has times when it is difficult to share their feelings or ideas but that using a three-part assertive statement can help them communicate effectively even in difficult situations.

You can help your child practice by brainstorming situations where they think it will be difficult to **speak their mind and be kind**, like sharing their ideas during group work, asking for help on a math problem, or asking someone to stop calling them names. Then help your child plan how to **speak their mind and be kind** for each of the situations by creating a three-part assertive statement where they **show empathy** for the other person, **voice their feelings** by describing how they feel in the situation, and explaining what they want to happen by **speaking their mind and being kind**.

Next Steps

- Practice **identifying communication types** by referring to characters in books or videos. Talk about how different characters react and how their **communication type** impacts the situation.
- When situations arise, discuss what passive, assertive, and aggressive communication would look like and how each type may impact the outcome.
- Model the strategy **listen and summarize** each time your child describes a challenging experience they are having. When you notice them using the strategy, provide them with feedback on how they are improving their ability to **listen and summarize** what others are saying.

- Remind your child to use the strategy ***show respect without words*** anytime they are interacting with other people—for example, as they listen to someone tell a story, describe the specials at a restaurant, or explain how to do something.
- Ask your child to provide examples of times when they were able to ***speak their mind and be kind*** and how it impacted the situation. Help them plan how to ***speak their mind and be kind*** as they prepare for situations when they know it will be difficult to share their thoughts and ideas.
- Remind your child that they can use a three-part assertive statement anytime they find it difficult to express their feelings or ideas. Encourage them to use assertive statements during group work, when they are discussing issues with their peers, or when they need to ask for help.