

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

Is it hard for your child to ask for help when they need or want something? Maybe they struggle to express their emotions appropriately when they feel frustrated. Learning **assertiveness** strategies can help your child communicate respectfully and express their emotions appropriately.

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 from an early age helps children who have difficulty asking for help or expressing their ideas learn to voice their wants, needs, and thoughts respectfully. Assertiveness also helps children who are aggressive reframe their behaviors so they are more appropriate and respectful toward 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 ideas or feelings. Ask your child to describe situations when it's hard for them to express themselves, using these questions:

- When have you had difficulty asking for help or telling your friends how you feel about something?
- Describe a time when it was easy for you to ask for help or tell your friends how you felt about something.
- Why are we afraid to share ideas or explain our feelings?

Explain that you are going to help them learn assertiveness strategies so they can respectfully ask for what they need and tell others how they feel.

These four assertiveness strategies will help your child communicate respectfully: **identify communication types**, **find my feelings**, **find empathy**, and **voice my feelings**. Additional strategies are explained on the [intermediate](#) and [secondary](#) parent guidance pages.



Identify Communication Types

Children need to understand the difference between passive, aggressive, and assertive 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 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 aggressive communication? What might you do or say when using aggressive communication?
- What is assertive communication? What might you do or say when using assertive communication?

Explain that how we communicate is a choice and 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 were afraid to ask for help and how it impacted your ability to do something.

Passive, assertive, and aggressive behaviors can also be related to the behaviors of dogs. Passive communication is acting like a scared dog: being afraid, avoiding eye contact, and going

along with what others want. Assertive communication is acting like a confident dog: making eye contact and using a calm, firm voice. Aggressive communication is acting like a scary dog: rolling your eyes, being bossy, and using forceful words. Consider printing the chart below and talking about each type of communication. Emphasize that communication includes the words we say and our body language.

When you are ...	You do these things:	You say these things:
 Passive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look down • Stay quiet • Shrug your shoulders • Try to hide from others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Whatever you want is fine.” • “That’s OK. I don’t want to be any trouble.” • “Maybe next time.”
 Assertive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stand up tall • Make eye contact • Use a calm, firm voice • Think about other people’s thoughts and feelings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I don’t want to play soccer. Can we play basketball instead?” • “I feel sad when you don’t play with me.” • “Please don’t yell at my friend.”
 Aggressive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roll your eyes • Point your fingers • Boss everyone around • Yell 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “We’re doing this. If you don’t like it, tough.” • “Do it like this.” • “You never do anything right.”

Once your child understands the different types of communication, it is important they think about how each type can affect the outcome of a situation. Ask your child to demonstrate each communication type for these scenarios and discuss how each impacts the outcome:

- You really need help with your homework.
- You are very hungry.
- Your friend said she didn’t want to play with you.

Help your child understand how to **identify communication types** by discussing characters in books or on TV. Talk about how they react and how their **communication type** affects the situation.

Emphasize that **identifying communication types** and thinking about what can happen when we use each type will help us know when we need to change our actions and behaviors.



Find My Feelings

The second strategy you can use to help children learn assertiveness is **find my feelings**. By identifying what they are feeling, kids improve their ability to express their emotions clearly and appropriately.

Tell your child that you will help them understand their emotions and practice explaining them. Watch the video [Find My Feelings & Voice My Feelings](#) and then use these questions to discuss a time when your child had big feelings:

- Tell me about a time when you had big feelings.
- What did it feel like?
- What did you do and say?

Explain that when we have big feelings, our bodies will send us signals. We may feel butterflies in our stomach, have shaky hands, or feel our heart racing. Share an example of a time you experienced big feelings and the signals your body sent you. Describe how you were able to **find your feelings** by thinking about what you were feeling and why you were feeling that way.

Emphasize that feelings are not good or bad, they are normal, but sometimes we don't communicate them appropriately. Sometimes we end up yelling or using disrespectful body language, like rolling our eyes. Tell your child when they experience these things, that means they need to stop and **find their feelings**.

Print and display the [Feelings Chart](#). Talk about common emotions represented and ask your child to tell you about a time when they felt each. Then watch the video [The Way I Feel](#), by Janan Cain. As the video explains different emotions, pause it, and ask your child to tell you about a time when they felt the same way.

Afterward, reinforce your child's understanding of feelings by referring back to the [Feelings Chart](#). Point to different feelings as you discuss what they could do or say for each, using this prompt:

- If you felt _____ (name an emotion), what might you do? What might you say?

Explain that it is important to think about your feelings and understand them so you can tell other people what you are feeling. Your child can practice **finding their feelings** by using the [Feelings Chart](#) each time they experience big feelings.



Show Empathy

Showing empathy helps children think about how others are feeling by remembering a time when they experienced similar emotions. Empathy helps children build stronger relationships because they better understand others and feel more connected to them.

Teaching your child to **show empathy** will improve their ability to consider another person's thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Explain that empathy means trying to understand how someone is feeling even if we aren't in the same situation.

Watch the video [Find Empathy](#) together. Afterward, explain that **showing empathy** means we stop and think about how another person is feeling. We can also ask questions to try and understand them. Provide a few examples of when they would need to **show empathy**. For example, you may have a friend who had to move to a new town and was scared to go to a new school. Even though you aren't moving to a new town, you had to go to a new school last year, so you can think about how your friend may be feeling.

With your child, watch the video [The Empathy Game](#), where they get to determine if a response shows empathy or not. Afterward, ask them to think about when they have been in situations like the ones in the video:

- How did it feel when others **showed empathy** toward you?
- How did it feel when others didn't try to understand you?
- Why do you think it is important to **show empathy**?

Your child can practice **showing empathy** when they tell you about experiences at school, sports, or extracurriculars. Ask them:

- How do you think _____ felt in that situation?
- When have you had the same feelings as your friend?
- How could you **show empathy** toward _____? What would you say?



Voice My Feelings

Supporting children to **voice their feelings** allows them to express themselves better and solve problems on their own. Children who have been taught how to **voice their feelings** do better in school and are less likely to give up when they experience challenges or setbacks.

Replay the video [Find My Feelings & Voice My Feelings](#), from Strategy 2, and ask your child to listen carefully for how they should **voice their feelings**. Afterward, use these questions to discuss the concepts:

- When has it been hard for you to **voice your feelings**?
- How could you **voice your feelings** in similar situations?

Emphasize that it is normal to have times when telling others how we feel is difficult. Sometimes when we experience big feelings, it's hard to explain them. Remind your child that before they **voice their feelings**, they should stop and **find their feelings** by thinking about *what* they are feeling and possible reasons *why* they are feeling that way.

Explain that they can use the prompt "I feel _____ when _____" to help them **voice their feelings**. Tell them they can use this prompt anytime they need to explain how they feel.

Use the prompt to play a game. Close your eyes and let your finger land on an emotion from the [Feelings Chart](#). With the prompt, describe when you feel that emotion. For example, "I feel excited when I get to watch you play soccer." Take turns closing your eyes, pointing to an emotion, and explaining when you feel that emotion.

You can help your child practice **voicing their feelings** by posting the [Feelings Chart](#) in your home. Anytime your child experiences big feelings, help them **find their feelings** using the chart

and **voice their feelings** using the prompt “I feel _____ when _____.” Remind your child that learning to be assertive will help them **voice their feelings** respectfully. When they learn to **voice their feelings** respectfully, they can explain what they want or need, and the outcome of a situation will be more positive.

Next Steps

- Practice **identifying communication types** by referring to characters in books or on TV. Talk about how different characters react and how their **communication type** impacts the situation.
- When situations arise, discuss what passive, aggressive, and assertive communication (i.e., turtle, tiger, or owl) would look like and how each type may impact the outcome.
- Post the [Feelings Chart](#) in your home. Anytime your child experiences big feelings, remind them to use the chart to **find their feelings**.
- Practice **showing empathy** when they tell you about experiences at school, sports, extracurriculars, and at home. Ask them:
 - How do you think _____ felt in that situation?
 - When have you had the same feelings as your friend?
 - How could you **show empathy** toward _____? What would you say?
- Support your child in **voicing their feelings** by reminding them to use the prompt “I feel _____ when _____” to explain their big feelings.