

Research Guide (Grades PreK–6)

College and Career Competency: *Assertiveness*

Definition

Assertiveness is the ability to express one’s beliefs, wants, or feelings in a self-assured and direct manner. Assertiveness is a marker of **self-efficacy** and a key component of self-advocacy (Test et al., 2005). Researchers and educators consider assertiveness to be an essential skill for children and youth, as it helps them engage in effective interpersonal behaviors that contribute to their academic success and social development (Buell & Snyder, 1981; Lane et al., 2006). To be assertive, you must express your wants, needs, and thoughts while respecting others—even when it’s difficult (Noonan & Gaumer Erickson, 2018c).

Essential Components for Students

1. Even when it’s difficult, express my wants, needs, and thoughts.
2. Even when it’s difficult, respect what others want, need, and think.

Strategies for Students

These strategies help students communicate their ideas respectfully, ask for what they need, and understand others’ perspectives in various situations. The strategies are taught through instructional activities within the *Assertiveness Lessons [Primary, Intermediate, and Secondary]* (Noonan, Gaumer Erickson, & Heger, 2024).

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

Competency Sequence for Students

These targets provide a developmental sequence (Noonan & Gaumer Erickson, 2018b). As described in the Assessments section, these targets can be used to determine students’ growth over time through a performance-based observation process.

Assertiveness	
Developing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates how to ask for help. • Expresses basic feelings and preferences. • Demonstrates refusal skills and the ability to say, “No.” • Communicates a need or want to peers and adults in a respectful manner. • Asks for help from an adult for a challenging situation. • Demonstrates respectful refusal skills. • Makes assertive statements paired with body language and tone of voice that match the statement.

Emerging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describes assertive, passive, and aggressive behaviors. • Demonstrates verbal and nonverbal communication for assertiveness. • Defines assertiveness (the ability to express wants, needs, and thoughts while respecting what others want, need, and think) and provides examples • Demonstrates assertive statements during collaborative learning. • Explains how assertiveness is important for current and future life. • Demonstrates the ability to express feelings in a respectful manner.
Demonstrating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rephrases aggressive and passive statements into assertive statements (with prompts). • Determines personal boundaries and generates assertive statements to apply if boundaries are compromised. • Demonstrates the ability to respond to different points of view respectfully.
Generalizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates verbal and written assertive statements. • Predicts how increased assertiveness would affect outcomes of various situations. • Explains how assertiveness relates to conflict management and empathy. • Demonstrates assertiveness in various situations (e.g., teaming, social interactions, seeking support).

Research

- Parray et al. (2020) found a correlation between assertiveness and self-esteem. When students assert their rights, it motivates them to be self-responsible and accept themselves.
- Assertiveness is part of a complex set of social skills that allow children to engage in effective interpersonal **communication**. When those skills are lacking, children can become withdrawn, resulting in school maladjustment and high unemployment as adults (Buell & Snyder, 1981; Michelson et al., 1983). In contrast, when assertive behaviors are present as early as preschool, there is a positive association with school readiness and later intellectual achievement (Michelson et al., 1983).
- Assertiveness in friendship is associated with less conflict and more **conflict management** (Dryburgh et al., 2022). When children are assertive, they have more stable friendships. The more stable a friendship, the more able friends are to express their thoughts because they know they will be supported.
- Researchers (Walk et al., 2015) who studied 500 preschoolers in several states found that children who possess social skills like assertiveness were more likely to have higher language scores in kindergarten. They note that these social skills were important for both mono- and bilingual children.
- After-school assertiveness training provided to students in Grades 2, 5, and 6 was successful at helping students acquire assertive behaviors, thus reducing the likelihood of being bullied by peers (Avşar & Alkaya, 2017).
- Gadari et al. (2023) found that explicit resilience training in girls aged 9–10, even when done virtually, effectively increased the girls' assertiveness. This training took the form of video and audio clips (including film and animation), child-based scenarios, text messages, storytelling, and questions and answers. The girls' level of assertiveness lasted at least a month after intervention.
- Researchers have found that elementary and middle school teachers, as well as teachers at high-risk high schools, view assertiveness as important for school success because this skill helps students seek assistance or look for educational opportunities (Lane et al., 2006). Programs oriented toward social and emotional learning (SEL) help students develop assertiveness and

other competencies that are found to be important for success in the workplace. SEL programs with school-based curriculum have proven most effective when they are comprehensive and span multiple years (Opengart, 2007).

- In a study of preschool children who were disadvantaged (Wall & Holden, 1994), researchers were able to differentiate between aggression, assertiveness, and submissiveness using a Behavior Checklist (Deluty, 1985, as cited in Wall & Holden, 1994, p. 384). Characteristics of assertiveness included:
 - Making requests
 - Giving or accepting compliments
 - Resisting unfair demands in a nonhostile way
- Preschool students who exhibited low usage of social skills or were targets of peer rejection benefited from social skills training that included assertiveness strategies (Mize & Ladd, 1990). After participating in training sessions that included hand puppets and small toys, these children were able to increase the use of social skills in the classroom when interacting with peers.
- Emotional competence of preschoolers, as rated by teachers on dimensions that included assertiveness, was found to contribute to social competence in kindergarten (Denham et al., 2003). The researchers concluded that young children who are considered by teachers to be friendly and assertive were also seen as more likable by peers.
- Researchers (Hegland & Rix, 1990) found positive correlations between assertive behaviors and positive social behavior. They also found that assertive behavior may be interpreted as aggressive by teachers who value obedience or submission.
- An assertiveness program originally developed for adults was successfully adapted to teach assertiveness skills to girls in Grade 4 (Bower et al., 1976). Among the findings from the study was that the support the girls received for applying the training and trying assertive responses was a factor in increasing levels of assertive behavior. The researchers noted, “Parental and teacher responsiveness to the children’s assertiveness greatly increased the child’s feeling of success” (p. 244).
- Sari et al. (2018) found that collaboration interventions between school counselors and parents are more effective than interventions with counselors alone in developing students’ assertiveness. While a counselor likely has only a short time with which to work with students, parents can continue working with students at home, with the result that the school and parents are working toward the same goal and using the same framework. The collaborations also help parents improve their communication with their children and become aware of their children’s needs.

Assessments

- The assertiveness formative questionnaires are self-report measures that ask students to rate behaviors on Likert-type scales. Accommodations should be provided when appropriate and may include reading the items aloud, explaining the items, or having a scribe fill in the response options. These questionnaires should not be used as a pre/post measure. As students learn more about assertiveness, their internal frame of reference may shift, causing them to become more critical in their self-assessment; this phenomenon is called response shift bias (Bray et al., 1984; Drennan & Hyde, 2008). Two assertiveness questionnaires promote students’ reflection in kindergarten through Grade 2 and Grades 3–6.
 - The *Assertiveness Questionnaire K–2* (Noonan et al., 2024) asks students to respond to ten items using emojis for *Like Me*, *Not Sure*, and *Not Like Me*. In most instances, this questionnaire should be read aloud to students. Two example items follow:

- When I work with a partner, I am comfortable sharing my thoughts and feelings.
- When I work with a partner, I listen to their thoughts.
- The *Assertiveness Questionnaire 3–6* (Noonan et al., 2024) asks students to respond to 17 items on a 5-point Likert scale from *Not Very Like Me* to *Very Like Me*. Two example items follow:
 - I tell others what I think or feel even when they disagree with me.
 - I try to understand how others feel even when they feel different than me.

Results are immediately available for reflection. Teachers can access the questionnaires by setting up an account at www.cccstudent.org and following the instructions to create an assessment and administer it to students. Students (and teachers) can use individual questionnaire results to identify Assertiveness Strategies that students can focus on cultivating or strengthening.

- The *Assertiveness Knowledge Test 3–6* (Noonan et al., 2024) includes 19 items. It is a curriculum-based measure that assesses students' knowledge of assertiveness constructs and judgement of the most effective course of action when applying these constructs. The test includes multiple-choice, true/false, situational judgement, and short-answer items. The following are a few example items:
 - Choose the best definition of assertiveness.
 - a. Respecting what others want, need, or think, even when it's difficult.
 - b. Expressing your wants, needs, and thoughts while respecting others, even when it's difficult
 - c. Expressing your ideas and thoughts respectfully, except when it might cause an argument
 - True or false: When you disagree with someone, you are being aggressive.
 - Write a three-part assertive statement to a friend who wants you to let him copy your math homework.

The knowledge test is directly aligned with [Self-Efficacy Lessons \[Intermediate\]](#) (Noonan et al., 2024; see the first item under Instructional Practices, below), available for purchase at www.cccframework.org/competency-lessons-and-student-workbooks. The test can be used as pre/post measures prior to and after teaching the assertiveness lessons. Accommodations should be provided when appropriate and may include reading the items aloud, explaining the items, and having a scribe fill in the response option. Once students have completed the knowledge test on www.cccstudent.org, teachers can view graphed results for individual students and aggregate results for all their students. Teachers can also download a raw data file.

- The *Assertiveness Performance-Based Observation* (Noonan & Gaumer Erickson, 2018a) is designed to be embedded within authentic situations, such as academic courses and extracurricular activities. The *Assertiveness Performance-Based Observation* can be used at purposeful intervals to monitor the development of each student. Based on observations across time or in specific situations, the educator rates each student's assertive behaviors on the following scale:
 - *Beginning*: Not yet able to demonstrate without scaffolding;
 - *Emerging*: Minimal or superficial demonstration, prompting likely required;
 - *Proficient*: Sufficient demonstration, including self-appraisal and detailed, personalized application;
 - *Advanced*: Independent and consistent demonstration, teaches/prompts others; or
 - *Not Observed*: Documented if there has not been the opportunity to observe the behavior performed by an individual student.

Example observed behaviors include the following:

- Expresses basic feelings and preferences.
- Determines personal boundaries and generates assertive statements to apply if boundaries are compromised.
- Demonstrates the ability to respond to different points of view respectfully.

Summary reports are automatically generated on www.cccstudent.org.

- The *Assertiveness Performance-Based Reflection* (Noonan, Gaumer Erickson, & Maclean, 2021), directly aligned with the performance-based observation, promotes students' reflection on their demonstration of assertive behaviors within authentic situations. This four-item rubric guides students to determine their use of Assertiveness Strategies. Triangulating students' ratings with the performance-based observation results in a more comprehensive analysis of performance. The *Assertiveness Performance-Based Reflection* can be used at purposeful intervals to monitor the development of each student. Using rubric descriptions, students reflect on the quality of each of the three parts of an assertive statement:
 - showing empathy,
 - providing a rationale, and
 - articulating a request.

The [Assertiveness Assessment Suite: Technical Report](#) (Gaumer Erickson & Noonan, 2024) includes further background on assertiveness constructs, administration procedures, validity and reliability evidence, recommended uses of the results, and descriptions of the assessment items.

Instructional Practices

- [Assertiveness Lessons \[Primary and Intermediate\]](#) (Noonan et al., 2024) outline more than 25 instructional activities across eight lessons:
 - Unit 1: Introducing Assertiveness
 - Unit 2: Using Assertiveness to Express Emotions
 - Unit 3: Understanding Myself
 - Unit 4: Understanding Others
 - Unit 5: Showing Respect for Others
 - Unit 6: Communicating Assertively
 - Unit 7: Making Communication Choices
 - Unit 8: Assertiveness—Putting It All Together

The lessons include explicit instruction and application elements that teachers can modify based on students' experiences and needs. The lessons, accompanied by PDF student workbooks with worksheets that can be reproduced to facilitate learning, are available for purchase at www.cccframework.org/competency-lessons-and-student-workbooks.

- [Assertiveness Training for Children](#) provides tips for teaching several important assertiveness concepts to younger children (ages 5–9), including the difference between aggressive, assertive, and submissive (passive), and using “I” statements (Davies, n.d.). There are activities for helping students use [refusal skills](#) when they are dealing with bullies and for helping students understand that they have a [choice](#) of how to respond in specific situations.
- [Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility](#) (2011) provides two assertiveness lessons focused on helping students in Grades 3–5 learn to think flexibly and understand that it's important to come up with an approach that fits the specific situation. Specifically, the lessons provide a potential bullying scenario and then have students role-play different options and

consider what the assertive approach would be and what the best approach is based on the specific details of that situation.

- Kolb and Griffith (2009) emphasize the importance of teaching students to use assertive communication, focusing specifically on methods of protective assertiveness that students can use when they encounter bullying or when their personal boundaries are crossed. They share several assertive techniques that can be taught to students:
 - Repeat, Repeat—student gives the same response over and over again.
 - Refuse to Discuss—student uses words and body language to indicate they do not want to engage in a discussion. This could include walking away.
 - Fogging—coming up with an excuse or white lie to avoid an inappropriate or unsafe situation.
 - Compromise—offering a suggestion that meets the needs of both individuals.
- It's important for students to understand that protective assertion is necessary in specific instances but may not be appropriate for all situations—they need to be able to evaluate a situation and determine the best approach based on the specific context.
- Remote learning creates an environment that some students find hard to self-advocate in. Kesty (2021) has written about methods for teachers to gauge students' understanding of online lessons and to guide students when asking for help, including:
 - focusing questions on thought process instead of content—for example, asking “What clues do you see that help you make a prediction?” instead of “What do you predict the character will do next?”;
 - teaching students to recognize the physicality of being confused—faster heart rate, tension—and encouraging them to take breaks; and
 - giving verbal frames to students ahead of time for when they have questions—“Excuse me, Ms. Chen. I don't understand. Could you please go over _____ again?”—and setting clear boundaries when they may interrupt with a question.

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