

Research Guide (Grades PreK–6)

College and Career Competency: *Assertiveness*

Definition:

Assertiveness may be defined as 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 adolescents, as it can help them engage in effective interpersonal behaviors that contribute to their academic success and social development (Buell & Snyder, 1981; Lane et al., 2006). In short, assertiveness can be defined as expressing your wants, needs, and thoughts while respecting others—even when it’s difficult (Gaumer Erickson & Noonan, 2016).

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.

Competency Sequence for Students:

These targets describe how students demonstrate competency knowledge (Noonan & Gaumer Erickson, 2018b). As outlined in the Assessments section, these targets can be used to determine students’ growth over time through a performance-based observation process.

	Assertiveness
Beginning	<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.”
Emerging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicates a need or want to peers and adults in a respectful manner. • Asks for help from an adult for a challenging situation. • Demonstrates refusal skills and the ability to say, “No.” • Makes assertive statements paired with body language and tone of voice that match the statement.
Proficient	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defines assertive, passive, and aggressive. • Identifies verbal and nonverbal communication for assertiveness. • Explains that assertiveness is 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.

Research:

- 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 When those skills are lacking, children can become withdrawn, resulting in school maladjustment and high unemployment as adults (Buell & Snyder, 1981; Michelson et al., 1983).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). Assertive children may have more stable friendships, which includes more intimacy and mutual disclosure. Assertiveness may be not only a means of maintaining friendship but also an outcome: the more stable a friendship, the more able friends are to express their thoughts because they know they will be supported.
- In a study on the perceived importance of social skills in the classroom (Meier et al., 2006), researchers found that elementary school teachers (grades 1–6) valued assertiveness skills as significantly more important than high school teachers did. Overall, though, teachers viewed self-control as the most important skill, followed closely by cooperation. The researchers suggest that because assertiveness skills may be associated with independence, teachers may view those skills as a challenge to classroom management.
- 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 for behavior
 - 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 (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.
- In younger children, assertiveness can take the form of defending possessions or ignoring the requests of others (Hegland & Rix, 1990). Researchers examining differences in social behaviors of kindergarten students with and without previous day care experience found positive correlations between assertive behaviors and positive social behavior. They also found that assertive behavior can be interpreted as aggressive by teachers who value obedience or submission.

- 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. (2021) 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.
- An assertiveness program originally developed for adults was successfully adapted to teach assertiveness skills to fourth-grade girls (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 Questionnaire (Gaumer Erickson et al., 2016) is a self-report measure that asks students to respond to 20 items on a 5-point Likert-type scale from *Not Very Like Me* to *Very Like Me*. This questionnaire was designed for students in middle and high school. 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. This questionnaire 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). The following example items represent each of the two essential components:
 - I express my opinions, even if others disagree with me. (Express themselves)
 - I listen to other people’s opinions, even if I disagree with them. (Respect others)
 Results are immediately available for reflection. Teachers can access the questionnaire by setting up an account at <https://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 assertive behaviors that students can focus on cultivating or strengthening.
- The Assertiveness Knowledge Test (Gaumer Erickson et al., 2019) 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. Expressing your wants, needs, and thoughts while respecting others—even when it’s difficult.
 - b. Ensuring that you respect others’ wants, needs, and thoughts—even when it’s difficult.
 - c. Expressing your wants, needs, and thoughts.
 - d. Expressing yourself while respecting others, except in tense situations.
- True or false: When you lack assertiveness, you have a higher chance of becoming withdrawn and isolated or experiencing depression and anxiety.
- Write a three-part assertive statement to a teacher who falsely accused you of turning in your homework late.

The knowledge test is directly aligned with [Teaching Assertiveness in Middle and High School Classrooms](#) (Noonan et al., 2022; see the first item under Instructional Practices, below), available for purchase at <https://www.cccframework.org/competency-lessons-and-student-workbooks/>. The test can be used as a pre/post measure 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 <https://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 each student’s development. 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 <https://www.cccstudent.org/>.

- The Assertiveness Performance-Based Reflection (Noonan et al., 2021), directly aligned with the Performance-Based Observation, promotes students’ reflection on their demonstration of assertive behaviors within authentic situations. 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:

- empathy,
- rationale, and
- request.

The Assertiveness Assessment Suite: Technical Report (Gaumer Erickson & Noonan, 2022) 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:

- [Teaching Assertiveness in Middle and High School Classrooms](#) (Noonan et al., 2022) outlines more than 25 instructional activities across eight lessons:
 - Lesson 1: Defining Assertiveness
 - Lesson 2: Understanding Your Ability to Be Assertive
 - Lesson 3: Understanding Yourself
 - Lesson 4: Understanding Others
 - Lesson 5: Showing That You Understand Others
 - Lesson 6: Developing Assertive Statements
 - Lesson 7: Is It Assertive?
 - Lesson 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 a PDF student workbook with worksheets that can be reproduced to facilitate learning, are available for purchase at <https://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 for grades 3–5, focused on helping students 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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