

Improving Your Child's Respectful Communication: Building Assertiveness [Secondary]

Is standing up to peer pressure difficult for your child? Do they find it challenging to collaborate with others or work in groups? Maybe your child doesn't understand that the communication type they use is a choice and it affects the outcome of a situation. Learning **assertiveness** strategies can help your child resist peer pressure, learn how to work with others, and choose appropriate ways to communicate their wants, needs, and thoughts.

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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For children who find it challenging to say no to their friends, assertiveness helps them learn instead to respectfully decline activities when they aren't comfortable or don't want to do something. Learning assertiveness also supports children in developing their ability to collaborate with others by learning to consider the perspectives and ideas of others while sharing their own thoughts and ideas. When children practice assertiveness strategies, they develop their ability to think about how they communicate, which can lead to more favorable outcomes.

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 tell others your thoughts and ideas. Using the following questions, ask your child to describe situations when they have had difficulty expressing their thoughts and ideas:

- When have you had difficulty explaining what you think or how you feel to someone?
- What are some situations where it is easy for you to explain how you feel even if you know someone will disagree?
- 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 improve their ability to work with others, respectfully decline activities that make them feel uncomfortable, and think about the best way to communicate in situations where they have strong feelings.

These four assertiveness strategies will help your child communicate respectfully: **identify communication types**, **respect my boundaries**, **do my part**, and **predict outcomes**. Additional strategies are explained on the [primary](#) and [intermediate](#) parent guidance pages.



Identify Communication Types

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

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

- What might you say or do when using passive communication? When have you experienced someone using passive communication?
- What might you say or do when using aggressive communication? When have you experienced someone using aggressive communication?
- What might you say or do when using assertive communication? When have you experienced someone 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 forgot to think about another person’s feelings and how it impacted the situation.

You can support your child in understanding the different communication types by reviewing the chart [Being Assertive](#) with them. Emphasize that communication can be verbal and nonverbal. It includes what we say, what we do, and our body language.

Being Assertive

Passive	Assertive	Aggressive
Goals		
You hope to please everyone and therefore be liked. You hope that others will guess what you want.	You aim to get what you want while respecting others.	You try only to get what you want.
Verbal Behaviors		
You avoid expressing your wants, needs, and thoughts, or you talk about them as though they weren’t important.	You express what you want, need, and think in direct ways. You use “I” statements and have tough conversations when they’re needed.	You say whatever comes to mind without regard for others’ feelings. You judge, label, blame, threaten, and accuse others.
Nonverbal Behaviors		
You speak softly, avoid making eye contact, and are overly agreeable.	You listen to others closely while making eye contact. You’re calm, relaxed, and assured.	You’re loud, cold, and demanding. You stare and grimace.
Your Feelings		
You feel anxious, hurt, disappointed, and resentful.	You feel confident while paying attention to the feelings and values of others.	You feel self-righteous and superior.
Effects on Others		
Others pity and disrespect you, taking you for granted.	Others respect, trust, and value you.	Others feel humiliated, hurt, and disrespected.
Your Emotional Payoff		
You avoid unpleasantness, conflict, short-term tensions, and confrontations. You take no responsibility.	You are respected, self-confident. You make your own choices and have healthy relationships.	You express some anger and feel in control and superior.

Probable Outcomes		
You don't get what you want. You lose while someone else wins.	You get what you want without hurting others. Everybody involved wins.	You get what you want, but nobody else does. You win, but everybody else involved loses.

Adapted from "Crucial Conversations: Getting Started," June 2011, Learning and Development Conference, Briarcliff Manor, New York, United States.

Tell your child to identify a time when they reacted passively, a time when they reacted assertively, and a time when they reacted aggressively. For each situation, ask them to describe their reactions for each section of the chart. For example, as they describe a passive reaction, they should explain their goals, verbal and nonverbal behaviors, feelings, effects on others, emotional payoffs, and the outcome. You can support your child in **identifying communication types** and their effects on outcomes by providing your own examples of times you were passive, assertive, and aggressive and using the chart to describe your goals, verbal and nonverbal behaviors, feelings, effects, emotional payoffs, and outcomes.

You can also help your child practice **identifying communication types** by asking them to name the communication type in books, on TV, or in their interactions at school. This will improve their understanding of each type and its effects on the outcomes of situations.



Respect My Boundaries

Another important aspect to developing assertiveness is identifying personal boundaries and learning how to respect them if they're crossed. When children learn how to respect and maintain their boundaries, they are less likely to be bullied or yield to peer pressure. They have healthier relationships and stronger self-awareness.

Explain to your child that you are going to help them learn about personal boundaries and what to do when their boundaries aren't respected. Tell them personal boundaries are guidelines, or rules, we set for ourselves related to how we want to be treated. An example of a personal boundary is *I won't let someone cheat off of my math homework.*

Watch the video [Respect My Boundaries](#) with your child. Afterward, ask:

- How would you explain personal boundaries?
- What are some examples of your boundaries?
- Why is it important to **respect our boundaries**?

Tell your child about a time when one of your boundaries was crossed and explain what happened. Include details about how it made you feel. Explain that identifying your personal boundaries will help you plan how to respect them and that when you **respect your boundaries**, other people will too. Emphasize that they can maintain their boundaries by planning ahead of time what they'll say or do if someone crosses those boundaries.

Ask your child to think about a time when they felt guilty or offended. Tell them that when they experience those feelings, it is because they aren't **respecting their boundaries**. Help your child

brainstorm a list of personal boundaries. Some examples might include *I won't gossip about other people, I won't let other people cheat off me, and I won't make fun of people for being different than me.*

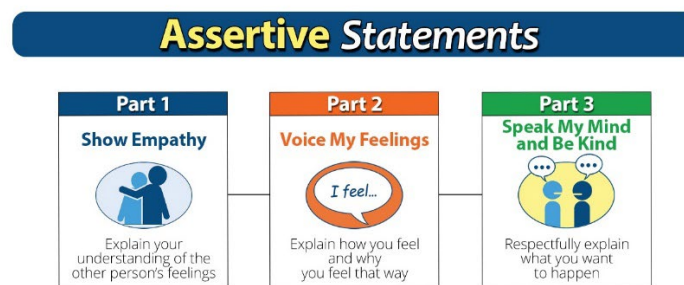
After your child has brainstormed a list of boundaries, explain that you are going to help them learn to use a three-part assertive statement so they can **respect their boundaries**. Using a three-part assertive statement helps them express their feelings and explain what they want to happen.

- **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**, or let the other person know you understand how their thoughts or feelings.
- **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 explain your feelings to another person respectfully, use the strategy **voice my feelings**.
- **Part 3:** A coherent, direct statement where you **speak your mind and be kind** by explaining what you want to happen. Be clear and detailed.

This following is an example three-part assertive statement your child might use if their friend asked them to cheat during a math quiz but they didn't want to allow it:

I understand that math has been really hard this year and doing well on this quiz would improve your grade [Part 1: **show empathy**], but letting you look at my answers makes me feel guilty and nervous [Part 2: **voice your feelings**]. I won't let you cheat off my paper during the math quiz [Part 3: **speak your mind and be kind**].

They can use a three-part assertive statement to respectfully explain what they will or will not do. Use the [Assertive Statements Visual](#) to guide your child as they create a few more three-part assertive statements for their list of boundaries. Remind them that they can use the three-part assertive statement anytime they need to explain to others how they feel and what they want to happen.



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](#)



Do My Part

Respecting others goes beyond what we say to them and includes our tone of voice and body language. It also means that we collaborate with them and respect their ideas. **Do my part** is a strategy that will help your child effectively work with others. Learning to work with others is a skill they will need to use in school, extracurricular activities, and future work environments. When children learn to **do their part**, they work together to complete a task or address an expectation, like accepting all people or maintaining positive interactions with each other.

Explain that working with others is an important part of school and life. Emphasize that working with others includes treating everyone in the group with respect and encouraging each member to actively participate. **Doing your part** also means that when someone is dominating the conversation or workload, you should respectfully call attention to the action.

Watch the video [Do My Part](#) with your child. Tell them that as they are watching, they should try and identify the different aspects to **doing their part**. Afterward, ask:

- What does it mean to **do your part**?
- When have you experienced someone not **doing their part**? What happened?
- When have you had difficulty **doing your part**?
- Why is learning to **do your part** important?

Explain that three-part assertive statements can also help you **do your part**. An assertive statement can help your group work together more effectively and help you communicate that you understand the actions or feelings of other people in the group. It also helps you provide your ideas in a respectful manner for keeping the group on task.

Discuss each of the following scenarios and help your child develop an assertive statement for each.

- Your teacher asked you to work in a group to finish a math assignment. Your friend Daniel is not saying or doing anything, your friend Paige is telling everyone what to do, and you are worried that your group won't get the assignment finished on time.
 - Who is not **doing their part**? Why?
 - What could you say and do to help each person **do their part**?
 - How could you use a three-part assertive statement to help your group work together?

Example statement: "Paige, I understand that you are excited to finish the assignment and you are good at math, but everyone needs to do their share of the problems. Let's divide them up evenly and then check our answers."

- You and your friends decided to play basketball after school, but nobody is dividing up the teams so you can start the game. You don't have much time to play.
 - Who is not **doing their part**? Why?
 - What could you say or do to help each person **do their part**?
 - How could you use a three-part assertive statement to help get the game started?

Example statement: “Okay, everyone, I know it’s hard to decide what to do first, but I want to play basketball as long as possible, so let’s get the game started by numbering off for teams.”



Predict Outcomes

Another strategy that will help your child learn to be assertive is **predict outcomes**: learning to stop and think about the different communication types and ways that they affect the outcome of a situation. Choosing the most appropriate communication type for a situation helps your child choose to communicate in a way that will result in a more favorable outcome. By thinking about the impacts of passive, assertive, and aggressive communication before responding, children can communicate more effectively.

Explain that you are going to help them stop and think about how they communicate so that they can express their feelings and ideas in the most effective manner. Tell them that they can use the strategy **predict outcomes** to help them think about what could happen if they used passive, assertive, or aggressive communication. Remind them that they have probably **predicted outcomes** based on what they know about people in sporting events or books. **Predicting outcomes** based on communication types used in situations is similar. Your child can use what they know about each communication type to think about what could happen.

Watch the video [Predict Outcomes](#). Afterward, ask:

- When have you said or done something you wished you hadn’t during an interaction with another person?
- How could **predicting outcomes** help you the next time you need to explain your feelings or ideas?
- Why is it important to **predict outcomes**?

Discuss each of the following scenarios and predict the outcomes for each based on the communication type used.

- You are really confused about your algebra homework after missing school for two days. You need to ask the teacher for help.
 - **Predict the outcome** if you reacted passively and avoided asking for help.
 - **Predict the outcome** if you reacted assertively and politely asked the teacher to schedule a time to meet with you.
 - **Predict the outcome** if you reacted aggressively, raised your voice at the teacher, and blamed them for assigning too much homework.
- Your friend canceled plans to go to the game with you and decided to go to the movies instead. You are disappointed that you can’t spend time with him and that he chose to do something else.
 - **Predict the outcome** if you reacted passively, shrugged your shoulders, and walked away from your friend.
 - **Predict the outcome** if you reacted assertively and said, “I understand that you want to go to the movies. I am disappointed we can’t spend time together.”

- **Predict the outcome** if you reacted aggressively, became angry, and yelled, “You always cancel plans with me!”

You can support your child in practicing the strategy **predict outcomes** by reminding them that they don’t have to react to situations immediately. Taking the time to think about the best option for communicating could lead to a better outcome for them.

Next Steps

- Your child can practice **identifying communication types** by keeping a journal. Encourage them to write brief reflections about their daily interactions and ways that **identifying communication types** has helped them be more assertive. After a few days, discuss their observations, using these questions:
 - What do you notice about the way you communicate?
 - In which situations do you choose passive communication?
 - In which situations do you choose aggressive communication?
 - How has the communication type impacted the outcome of situations you have experienced?
- You can help your child practice the strategy **respect my boundaries** by printing the [Assertive Statement Visual](#) and keeping it posted where they can refer to it. Point out situations in movies or on TV when you notice a boundary being crossed, and develop a three-part assertive statement for the situation.
- Remind your child that working with others is a skill that will help them throughout school and life. Ask them to discuss how they are **doing their part** as they work on different projects at school. When other people aren’t **doing their part**, help your child develop a three-part assertive statement to address the issue.
- Support your child in practicing the strategy **do my part** by making a list of chores and deciding who will do them. Or ask them to cook dinner a couple of times a week as you collaborate on what each person will do to help prepare the meal. Anytime your child experiences group work, remind them that **doing their part** is more than doing their share of the work. It is supporting others in sharing their ideas and helping others understand when they need to allow others to participate in making decisions.
- Help your child remember to **predict outcomes** based on the communication type they choose by talking to them about their experiences in school, with friends, and in extracurricular settings. Ask them to identify times when they **predicted outcomes** and changed the communication type they used based on their ability to predict what could happen. You can also ask them to discuss situations when they didn’t use this strategy and how the communication type they used affected the outcome. Have your child identify situations when they tend to choose an inappropriate communication type, and plan their response for those situations by **predicting outcomes**.