

Research Guide (Grades 7–12)

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, Fowler, Wood, 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).

- Parray et al. (2020) have 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 a means of “ethical behavior rehearsal” (p. 172), with oneself included in ethical treatment.
- 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). Research shows that teachers’ perceptions were accurate concerning which students needed work on assertiveness and other competencies (Johnson et al., 2021).
- A student’s level of assertiveness is a good predictor of their adjustment to university (Parmaksız, 2019). One of the biggest barriers to university adjustment is not being understood. Students who have learned in high school to be assertive are more likely to overcome those barriers. Additionally, they know or can ascertain the services they require and the means to find them, including social activities, economic resources, and psychological counseling. They are also comfortable with seeking these services without feeling shame.
- Assertiveness is an important and sought-after personal attribute for an array of professions, including nursing, education, and law enforcement. Grove et al. (2011) demonstrate that assertiveness, particularly in the context of a business environment, often has a direct bearing on an individual’s professional achievements and rate of pay.
- Hu et al. (2019) write that assertiveness and warmth are “the most relevant extraversion facets ... of leadership emergence in teams” (p. 1370). In self-managed teams, those who are perceived as assertive and warm tend to become informal leaders: “high assertiveness potentially promotes members’ perceived influence in the task interactions and encourages peers to seek more task-related advice from them” (p. 1371). Peers are more likely to seek advice from someone who is assertive but not aggressive.
- Paglia and Room’s (1999) review of literature on adolescent substance abuse programs and interventions shows that protective assertiveness—an individual’s ability to say no—is one of the most important tools for avoiding drug abuse and addiction. Assertiveness training videos have been shown to help high school students resist peer pressure to use drugs, and respond to provocation using assertive, as opposed to aggressive, behaviors (Brenner et al., 2003; Hecht et al., 1993; Polansky et al., 1999).
- When adolescents lack **self-efficacy** (i.e., belief in one’s capabilities), the ability to establish appropriate boundaries, and the willingness to act in a resolute fashion, they run an increased risk of engaging in unhealthy sexual behavior. Numerous studies demonstrate that assertiveness matters when it comes to issues like condom use and the prevention of unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases among adolescents (Schmid et al., 2015; Tschann et al., 2010).
- Research indicates that assertiveness training and related problem-based learning can reduce instances of bullying and feelings of anxiety and anger among those adolescents who have been targeted by bullies (Buell & Snyder, 1981; Hall, 2006). Assertiveness training can also reduce the likelihood of sexual coercion or assault. For example, *My Voice, My Choice*, a 90-minute virtual reality training that teaches assertive resistance, has proven effective in building participants’ capacity to resist sexual and psychological victimization (Rowe et al., 2015). According to Thompson et al. (1996), the most effective assertiveness training programs include both

instruction and practice in applying assertiveness in the context of specific social situations that students may encounter.

- Research shows that improving high school students' understanding of assertiveness through guided practice helps them seek assistance and supports as well as future educational and career opportunities (Buell & Snyder, 1981; Lane et al., 2006; Wolfe et al., 2012).
- Teaching students to be assertive prepares them to advocate for themselves and their dreams, resist peer pressure, and work to resolve interpersonal conflicts (Paglia & Room, 1999; Wolfe et al., 2012).
- Holzberg et al. (2019) argue that instruction in assertiveness and **conflict management** works, can be done easily, and helps students as they transition from high school to college. In high schools, the Individuals With Disabilities Act requires schools to evaluate students suspected of having disabilities. However, students in college must provide documentation to receive accommodation. Students often do not seek out accommodation until later in college or until their disabilities have impacted their achievement.
- Students with physical and mental disabilities benefitted from using theater to learn assertiveness, including self-advocation (Cook, 2020). With input from her students, Cook wrote a play in which they portrayed characters with the same disabilities they had. By acting in the play, students could simultaneously address personal issues and maintain a reflective distance from those issues. Embodying someone who self-advocates helped participants see what could happen if they advocated for themselves. After acting in the play, students' scores on an assertiveness questionnaire improved.

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 through <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/>.

- The Arizona Department of Education (2003) website provides a lesson for teaching assertiveness as part of their Mini Merging Two Worlds Curriculum. The curriculum is part of the department's transition and career planning resources. Other lessons include "The Power of Goals" and "[Be Connected / Be Assertive](#)."
- The Centre for Clinical Interventions (n.d.) has created a comprehensive series of modules related to learning assertive behaviors (Michel, 2008). Broken into 10 parts, the series contains modules designed for adults, "How to Think More Assertively" and "How to Deal Assertively With Criticism," among other topics. The series is [available for free](#).
- Fiedler and Danneker (2007) describe several curricula and instructional strategies for teaching self-advocacy skills, including assertiveness, designed for students with disabilities.
 - [Next S.T.E.P.: Student Transition and Educational Planning](#) (Halpern et al., 2000) consists of 16 lessons that are grouped into four units: 1. Getting Started, 2. Self-Exploration and Self-Evaluation, 3. Developing Goals and Activities, 4. Putting a Plan in Place. The lessons include materials for students and teachers as well as suggestions for family involvement.
 - TAKE CHARGE for the Future (Powers et al., 1998) uses skill facilitation, mentoring, peer support, and parent support to build adolescents' self-determination and transition planning skills. The program includes biweekly 50-minute coaching sessions and monthly 2-hour community-based workshops for students, parents, and mentors over a 4-month period (Test, Fowler, Brewer, & Wood, 2005).
 - The Self-Advocacy & Conflict Resolution Training (SACR) has been successfully applied as an intervention for African American high school students with disabilities (Walker & Test, 2011). The SACR training can be administered individually or in a group and includes lessons on teaching students how to request accommodations in their courses that can be reinforced with role-play.

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