



ASSERTIVENESS



Assertiveness: The Apex of Communication

Of all the C.A.R.E.S. competencies, assertiveness might be the most difficult to clearly articulate. What one person considers assertive communication another may consider aggressive communication, and one style can slip into another depending on the situation. Tone of voice or word choice can impact whether or not someone is viewed as passive, assertive, or aggressive, and these factors can impact the trajectory of a conflict or conversation. Although assertiveness is nuanced and complex, it encompasses an important set of skills for both adults and students.

Whether educators and students are transitioning from at-home to in-person learning, experiencing prolonged distance learning, or navigating a semblance of both, assertiveness skills help individuals work through challenges, nurture resilience, and advocate for their needs. These are crucial skills for success in the face of ongoing challenges.







The Impact of Assertiveness

Assertiveness characterizes how someone responds when their ideas or interests are or may come to be at odds with someone else's (Ames, 2009). Assertiveness skills are associated with success in responding to criticism, solving conflicts, and asking for help or favors (Vagos & Pereira, 2016). It is fundamental for establishing positive relationships, and developing assertiveness allows individuals to stand up for their rights and interests without denying the rights and interests of others (Speed et al., 2018).



Assertive individuals are associated with stronger self-esteem (Eslami et al., 2016), which helps them learn to say “no” respectfully. Finally, assertiveness fosters the skills necessary for talking openly and honestly about one's positive and negative feelings (Peneva & Mavrodiev, 2013), making it useful in lowering anxiety and depression and giving individuals a greater sense of agency (Malkin, 2011; Mohebi et al., 2012). With its positive influence on social and emotional growth, there's no question that assertiveness deserves a prominent place in a student's education.



Assertiveness in Fly Five

In the Fly Five curriculum, assertiveness is defined as “the ability to take initiative, to stand up for one’s ideas without hurting or negating others, to seek help, to persevere with a challenging task, and to recognize one’s individual self as separate from the environment, circumstances, or conditions one is in.” The Fly Five assertiveness standards are:

01

Expresses strong emotions and opinions effectively

03

Shows openness and honesty

02

Able to seek help

04

Persists through challenging events



Developing assertiveness not only helps students practice a constructive and positive communication style, it also can foster deeper learning. When students can effectively ask for help and make positive choices, they can communicate their struggles effectively, decreasing the likelihood of derailing an entire classroom. Increased assertiveness is associated with decreased aggression and increased self-efficacy; stronger self-efficacy skills allow students to enjoy better academic outcomes (Mofrad & Mehrabi, 2015).

Strategies for Fostering Assertiveness

Assertiveness is not an innate quality, but rather a learned skill that is contingent upon factors such as social class, family life, gender, and environment (Hinde, 2018), among others. Adults can foster assertiveness skills with the following strategies:

- **Use role-playing and/or mirror work.** Role-playing and rehearsing in the mirror helps students work on assertive language and body postures in low-stakes situations. Demonstrate assertive body postures and an assertive tone of voice; offer a list of respectful, assertive vocabulary words to use. Then, have students practice in small groups or on their own. Seeing assertiveness in themselves and their peers helps students understand what assertive communication looks like so they can match the messages their body language and voices to the message they want to send (UWA, 2018).
- **Explore different communication styles with students.** Help students understand that there are four different types of communication: Aggressive, Passive Aggressive, Passive, and Assertive. For students in grades K–2, encourage them to draw four different faces that express these styles, then discuss their understanding of each. As students enter grades 3–5 and 6–8, explore situations in books and movies. When are students' favorite characters being assertive? When are they being passive or aggressive? When students are able to recognize and name different communication styles in others, they will be better able to do the same in themselves.



- **Teach students about boundaries.** Students in grades K–2 can consider real boundaries they’ve encountered in life, such as a fence, a moat around a castle, or the walls of their home. What purpose do these boundaries serve? What are the characteristics of a constructive boundary? Students can also think about how they can be respectful of what’s inside the boundary. Students in grades 3–5 and 6–8 can practice setting their own boundaries. Offer sentence stems such as “Thank you for asking, but I can’t help you with that right now.” These sentence stems guide students to saying no in an assertive way.
- **Practice mindfulness.** Students can use various mindfulness strategies to develop a resilient, open attitude and strengthen their ability to communicate effectively (Jacobs, 2015). Mindful meditations with affirmations, such as “I can do this” or “I am capable” can build the self-esteem needed to communicate assertively.



Assertiveness can be challenging for adults and students alike. However, assertiveness can be reliably taught and assessed (Elliott et al., 2015), and with consistent practice, everyone can acquire the skills needed to demonstrate this valuable competency. As individuals are increasingly able to be clear and direct about their needs and communicate constructively, they are positioned to live healthy, constructive lives well beyond the classroom.

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