

Teaching Assertive Communication

Assertive communication has everything to do with healthy sexuality. In fact, it has everything to do with practically everything else in one's life too. Sure, it may make your life a lot easier to have a complacent, obedient child, but that child may never be able to stand up to a sexual predator or an abusive boyfriend or girlfriend. Might as well start teaching your child a little disobedience today!

Will this be confusing for your child? Will they disobey you all of the time if you teach them to disobey you some of the time? No. Children with developmental disabilities can make the distinction between things they know they have to do and things that just don't feel right.

Before you get started on the activities, familiarize yourself with the following information sheet on styles of communication. It may help your discussions go better. We do not expect you to share this information sheet with your child.

Styles of Communication

PASSIVE

Giving in and saying “yes” when you don’t really want to. Not speaking up when you want something. Acting this way in order to be liked, to be nice, or to not hurt the other person’s feelings.

Speech: lots of apologies and “ums” and “ers,” not coming to the point, saying nothing at all

Voice: soft, whining

Eyes: downcast or looking away

Posture: shoulders and head down, leaning for support, holding onto self

Hands: fidgety

Result: You usually don’t get what you want and you feel like you’ve been used.

AGGRESSIVE

Trying to get your own way or stand up for yourself by putting someone else down or violating that person’s rights. Taking what you want. Threatening or forcing a person to give you something.

Speech: “loaded” words (such as “always” and “never”), “you” messages (such as, “You are so...”), put-down words, sarcasm, saying nothing while you take what you want

Voice: tense and loud or cold and quiet

Eyes: cold, staring, narrowed, angry

Posture: hands on hips, stiff, rigid

Hands: clenched, pointing finger, pounding fist, violent (shoving, grabbing, poking, etc.)

Result: You seem to get what you want, but you may lose more in the end. You stand the chance of losing friends and self-respect.

MANIPULATIVE

Getting what you want through dishonesty. Saying one thing when you mean another. Tricking or conning people into giving you what you want.

Speech: baby talk, “poor me,” making excuses, giving insincere compliments

Voice: sweet or “con” tone, soft

Eyes: downcast or looking away

Posture: leaning back, arms crossed, “too cool” stance, stooped, holding onto self

Hands: fidgety

Result: You seem to get what you want, but you may lose more in the end. You stand the chance of losing friends and self-respect.

ASSERTIVE

Asking straightforwardly for things you want, without putting anyone down. Giving people an honest “no” to things you don’t want. Willing to take “no” for an answer. Not using other people and not letting yourself be used.

Speech: honest, direct and to the point, giving sincere compliments

Voice: smooth, flowing, firm, relaxed, loud enough to hear (but not too loud)

Eyes: direct eye contact (without staring), although in some cultures it is rude to look right at a person

Posture: balanced, sitting or standing tall (but relaxed)

Hands: relaxed motions

Result: You may not get what you want, but you keep your self-respect. You may not have control over how people react to your assertiveness, but it’s not your intent to hurt anyone else’s feelings.

Note: It will take more than one session to complete all of the following steps. And you probably won't do these activities just once. Be prepared to repeat them as the need arises.

Step One: Defining Assertive Communication

Prepare a small gift-wrapped present ahead of time. It doesn't have to be anything expensive – just something your child would like.

Hold up the present and tell your child that you're going to play a game in which you'll make a list of all the possible ways to ask for the present. Your child should come up with the list, but you can help out if necessary. On a piece of paper, write down each of the different ways. It's okay if your child doesn't read – it's more for your benefit to write these things down since you will be returning to the list shortly.

Try to come up with as extensive a list as possible, and be sure that it includes at least one passive, one aggressive, one manipulative, and one assertive request. If you get stuck, here are some suggestions:

Passive:

“It's okay, I don't really need the present. You can give it to someone else.”

Aggressive:

“Give me the present or I'll hit you.”

Just grab the present.

Manipulative:

“You look really nice today. May I have the present?” [Said in an insincere tone.]

“If you give me the present, I'll give you one.” [Said with no intention of giving a gift in return.]

“I've had such a horrible day. This present would make me feel much better.” [Said dishonestly.]

Assertive:

“May I please have the present?”

“I would really like the present. May I please have it?”

After all responses have been listed, categorize and label each response as **shy** (instead of using the word “passive”), **bossy** (instead of using the word “aggressive”), **dishonest** (instead of using the word “manipulative”), or **assertive**.

Note: Some responses are harder to categorize than others. If you're stumped by a response, ask yourself if your child actually asked for the present. If they didn't, then they were probably being shy.

Write “Assertive Communication” at the top of a blank sheet of paper. Discuss characteristics of assertive communication, writing the bulleted points below on the paper. Provide examples, if necessary. If your child doesn't read, you can decide whether or not to write these things down.

Assertive Communication

- You ask exactly for what you want.
- You don't lie.
- You don't give excuses.
- You don't call the other person names.
- You don't threaten.
- You don't force someone else to do something.

Underneath the bulleted items, write the following:

When you are assertive, you don't always get the things you want, but a lot of times you do. You also don't hurt anyone else's feelings on purpose and you keep your self-respect.

Conclude this step by telling your child to ask one last time for the present by using one of the assertive responses. After they do so, congratulate them for asking assertively and then give them the present.

Step Two: Recognizing Assertive Communication

Read each of the following situations (or create situations more appropriate for your child). Ask your child if the person is being assertive. If they're not being assertive, ask your child if they're being shy, bossy, or dishonest.

1. Sarah wants to invite a classmate over to her house to play. She walks up to him and asks, "Would you like to come over to my house sometime and play?" Was Sarah assertive? [Yes.] Does this mean the classmate will say "yes"? [No.] Even if the classmate says "no," how should Sarah feel about herself?
2. On a first date, Megan tries to kiss Brian. Brian says, "I really like you, but I'm not ready for kissing yet." Was Brian assertive? [Yes.]
3. Steve says to his girlfriend, "Kiss me or I won't go out with you anymore." Was Steve assertive? [No, he was bossy.]
4. Tom wants to kiss Katie so he says, "Please kiss me. I love you." Tom says this even though he doesn't really love Katie. Was Tom assertive? [No, he was dishonest.]
5. Kathy asks Ryan to play Frisbee with him. Ryan says "yes," even though he doesn't really want to play with Kathy. Was Ryan assertive? [No, he was shy.]

Step Three: Showing Assertiveness

Tell your child that when a person is assertive, they don't just ask for what they want; they also show it in the way they stand or sit, in the way they use their eyes, and in the sound of their voice. If you're going to be assertive, then... [Add the following points to the "Assertive Communication" list that you created in Step One:]

- Stand tall or sit up straight.
- Face the person you are talking to.
- Look right into the eyes of the person you are talking to (but don't stare). [Demonstrate what happens when you stare.]
- Speak in a clear, firm voice. No yelling.

Step Four: Practicing Assertive Communication

Read the first **bolded** situation below and ask your child, “What do you say?” Have them respond assertively to you. Then ask your child the follow-up questions listed under the situation. Repeat this procedure with the other five situations (or create situations more appropriate for your child).

1. **You are at a party and someone you don't like asks you to dance.** What do you say? [Something like, “I'm sorry, but I don't want to dance with you.”]

Follow-up questions:

What happens if you give an excuse like “I'm sorry, I just hurt my foot”? [They'll ask you again at the next dance; you won't be able to dance with anyone else; you'll hurt the person's feelings even more when they find out you've been lying to them.]

How does it feel to lie?

2. **A friend keeps pressuring you to steal candy. You don't want to.** What do you say? [Something like, “I don't want to steal candy. Please stop asking me.”]

Follow-up questions:

What happens if you lie and say, “I can't. I'm already late for dinner”? [They'll ask you another time.]

How does it feel to lie?

3. **You had plans to play with a friend at 1:00 pm. They arrive an hour late and they don't apologize or offer an explanation.** What do you say? [Something like, “I'm angry that you're late and that you don't think an explanation is necessary.”]

Follow-up questions:

What happens if you say, “What a jerk you are. Why were you so late”? [Your friend might start yelling back and things could get out of control.]

What happens if you say nothing? [You'll be really angry about it; your friend may continue to be late in the future.]

4. Someone asks you out for a second date, but you're not interested in continuing the relationship. What do you say? [Something like, "I'm sorry, but I don't want to get into a romantic relationship with you."]

Follow-up questions:

What happens if you say you're busy that evening, even though you aren't?
[They'll keep asking you out; you'll hurt the person's feelings even more when they find out you've been lying to them.]

What happens if you accept because you don't want to hurt the person's feelings?
[You'll be wasting your time.]

5. Your boyfriend/girlfriend is always talking or texting on their cell phone when you're out on dates. What do you say? [Something like, "Please stop using your phone. I want you to talk with me."]

Follow-up questions:

What happens if you grab the phone and turn it off? [Your boyfriend/girlfriend might grab it back and things could get out of control.]

What happens if you start talking or texting with your friends? [Your boyfriend/girlfriend won't know there's a problem so the problem won't get fixed.]

What happens if you say nothing? [Your boyfriend/girlfriend will continue to talk or text on their cell phone; you'll be really angry about it.]

6. Your dad tells you to wash the dishes just as you are about to go out for the evening. You're already running late, and you'll miss the movie if you have to stop and wash the dishes. What do you say? [Something like, "I'll be late for the movie if I wash the dishes. Can I do them when I get home or trade for another time?"]

Follow-up questions:

What happens if you yell, "Why do you always have to ruin my plans"? [You might get into a big fight and you won't be allowed to go out at all.]

What happens if you say nothing and sneak out of the house? [You'll get in trouble later.]

What happens if you say nothing and do the dishes? [You'll miss the movie; you'll be really angry about it.]

Step Five: Saying "No"

Tell your child that they also need to practice saying "no." Remind them to stand tall or sit up straight, face you, look you in the eyes, and say "no" in a clear, firm voice. Tell them that every time you ask them for something, they should just keep saying "no." They should not offer any reasons or excuses. When they get tired of you asking, they should just turn around and walk away. Why? [You were not listening to them; you were not respecting their decision.]

First question:

Can you give me ten dollars from your piggy bank?

Ask the same question over and over (or vary it slightly) until your child turns around and walks away.

Repeat the procedure with the following questions:

May I borrow your backpack?

May I squeeze your elbow until it hurts?

Can I cook _____ for you tonight? [Name something your child really hates to eat.]

Note: Remind your child, if necessary, that they may not yell. Role play one or two of the above situations with another adult to show what happens when you do yell – the other person often yells back, which can lead to pushing, shoving, and even fighting.

Step Six: Even More Practice

Tell your child that they're now going to get even more practice being assertive. Do the following role plays (or create role plays more appropriate for your child), using simple props such as chairs and tables. Remind your child, if necessary, that they may not yell.

You order mashed potatoes but the waitress/waiter brings you French fries. [A parent plays the part of the waitress or waiter.]

Your friend is playing a computer game. You want them to go with you to the store. [A parent plays the part of the friend.]

Your parent tells you that you can't have a boyfriend/girlfriend. [A parent plays the part of the parent.]

Your boyfriend/girlfriend tries to hold your hand but you don't want to. [A parent plays the part of the boyfriend or girlfriend.]

You are watching TV. A sibling walks in and changes the channel without asking. [A parent plays the part of the sibling.]

Your parent still treats you like a child. You do not like this, but you also don't want to hurt their feelings. [A parent plays the part of the parent.]

Step Seven: Taking “No” for an Answer

Tell your child that sometimes they can be assertive in asking for what they want, and still the other person says “no.” For example, they could ask someone to go to the movies with them, and that person may say they're not interested. Or they could ask to borrow someone's cell phone and the other person says “no.” Ask your child if they have ever asked for something and gotten a “no” answer? What did they ask for? How did it feel?

Tell your child that when someone says “no” to us, we often get angry. We may even want to hurt that person. But that's not fair. If we can say “no” to people, then people should be able to say “no” to us.

Then show your child how to handle a “no” answer with the following example:

“Let's say you ask someone to go to the movies with you and they say “no.” Your next step should be to ask for a second choice. For example, you could ask the person if they'd like to have ice cream with you. If they say “no” again, be nice about it. You could say “Okay” or “I understand” or “Maybe another time” or “Oh well.” You may be angry or frustrated or disappointed, but don't ask again. This person does not want to hang out with you.”

Go over the two steps again. If appropriate, write “Taking ‘No’ for an Answer” on a piece of paper and then list the following two steps:

Taking “No” for an Answer

1. If you get a “no,” ask for a second choice.
2. If you get another “no,” be nice about it. Say something like...

“Okay.”

“I understand.”

“Maybe next time.”

“Oh well.”

Do another example with your child:

“Let’s say you ask me for \$150 to buy a great pair of basketball shoes. I say “no.” You can then ask for a second choice. What could that second choice be? [Possible answers include asking for \$100 for a cheaper pair of basketball shoes or asking for a loan of \$150.] I say “no” again. Be nice about it. What do you say?”

Do the following role plays to practice taking “no” for an answer (or create role plays more appropriate for your child):

You ask a friend to loan you \$20. [A parent plays the part of the friend. Parent just says “no” to both requests.]

You meet someone you really like, so you ask them out on a date. [A parent plays the part of the person you really like. Parent just says “no” to both requests.]

You ask your parent if you can go to a dance. [A parent plays the part of the parent. Parent just says “no” to both requests.]

Tell your child that if they get a “no” answer, it's okay to be mad, but it's not okay to hit the other person, yell at them, or threaten them. Ask your child what they can do when they get this angry. Supplement, if necessary, with the following suggestions:

Breathe deeply.

Take a walk to cool down.

Go to your room and punch a pillow.

Think about something peaceful or relaxing.

Write down how you're feeling.

Talk with the person and tell them how you feel.

Talk with a parent.

Adapted from Lesson 17 in Sexual Violence in Teenage Lives: A Prevention Curriculum by Judy Cyprian, Katherine McLaughlin, and Glenn Quint, Planned Parenthood of Northern New England, 1995