10 Ways to Raise Assertive Kids and Teens

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For parents (or others who work with children and teens) who are wondering how they can help their kids be more assertive, here are some tips to try.

1. Listen to your child.

When your child has something to tell you, take the time to be truly present and listen. Stop what you are doing, minimize distractions, and look at them. This conveys to your child that what they have to say is important and they deserve to be listened to, which builds self-esteem and assertiveness. Keep in mind the consequences of not stopping to listen to your child – a child that feels ignored or unheard will either escalate until they feel heard (reinforcing aggressiveness) or feel unimportant (leading to poor self-esteem).

2. Reflect and validate your child's feelings.

Reflecting means repeating back the emotion that your child is expressing (e.g., "You're telling me that you're really frustrated" or "You seem to be really sad."), which helps them to know that you are listening to what they are communicating. Validating means taking your response a bit further and conveying that you understand and accept their feelings (e.g., "I could see why you feel that way."). This conveys that their feelings are valid, worth sharing, and will be taken seriously. You don't have to agree with their feelings in order to validate them – it doesn't matter if you think your child should be feeling that way, wish they had a different feeling, or think that you would be feeling something different – your child is the one having the emotion and they deserve to have that accepted.

3. Respect your child's thoughts and opinions.

You are not going to like every thought or opinion that your child has – some opinions will be silly, contrary just for the sake of argument, uninformed, or seem downright mean. However, you can still convey respect by letting them express these thoughts, listening, reflecting, and asking interested questions. If you don't agree with something, you can always share your own opinion in a respectful manner. As adults, we know how awful it feels when someone tells us our ideas are silly, shuts us down and doesn't listen, or immediately starts to argue and tell us why we're wrong. When we don't feel respected, the response is often to become argumentative with the other person or just keep our thought to ourselves in the future.

4. Engage your child in problem solving.

Problem solving is a great process to help your child practice assertive communication, strengthen executive functioning skills, take responsibility, and feel like their ideas are valued. When a problem comes up that needs to be addressed try the following problem solving method:

- Let your child know that you want to talk, name the problem, and ask for their feelings/thoughts (e.g., "I want to talk about school mornings. You seem to be running late a lot. How are you feeling about it?)
- Listen to your child's thoughts/feelings, reflect, and validate. Ask to make sure that you've understood. (e.g., "You're feeling frustrated that I nag you so much to get out of bed and get stressed out when I'm rushing you out the door. Is that right?")
- Share your concerns and feelings (e.g., "I feel frustrated that it's so hard to get you up in the morning and that you usually aren't ready on time. I worry about you being late to school and sometimes I'm late for work because of it, which makes me angry.")
- Brainstorm solutions together, pick one to try, and set a plan for how long you will try it out before re-evaluating.

5. Follow through.

When you've told your child that you're going to do something, especially when it's something important that they've asked for, make sure that you follow through and honor your commitment. Like the other strategies above, this lets your child know that they are important and worthwhile, building self-esteem and trust in others. Sometimes when I ask children why they aren't speaking up at home or school when they need help, they tell me that it doesn't seem to make a difference because their parents say that they'll do something but then don't. If you want to reinforce assertiveness in asking for help and problem-solving, make sure to hold up your end of the agreement.

6. Have your child speak for themselves.

When your kids were very tiny, you necessarily had to speak for them, but as they get older it's important to give them more and more practice speaking for themselves. Think about some of the situations in which you speak for your child but could instead encourage them to do more for themselves. With preschoolers, this might include asking to play with a toy or join a game, saying when someone hurt them, or even ordering at a restaurant. With older children, this could include talking to a teacher about a problem or asking for extra help and resolving conflict with a peer. Teens can be speaking for themselves to resolve problems with teachers and peers, talking to salespeople at the store and checking out at the register, making their own phone calls to ask about employment or college questions, and sharing information with doctors. At any age, it can be very helpful to be (quietly) present and provide some moral support if your child wants this, especially if your child is trying to resolve an issue with an authority figure.

7. Help them find the words to say.

Growing up is all about learning and experimenting, so no child is always going to have the right words to be assertive. Sometimes they will need some help from adults to figure out what they can or should say in a situation. Practicing in advance can be especially helpful if you have a more shy or passive child – it can be easier to be confident when they already know what they will say and have had some practice with using a firm, assertive voice. If you've seen your child be too aggressive or passive with yourself or others, you can take a couple of minutes later to talk about (and practice) how they could have handle things differently. Don't turn it in to a big lecture, just ask if they have an idea what they could have said instead and offer your own suggestion if needed.

8. Model assertiveness in how you speak to your kids and other adults.

You likely already know that your child learns a lot from watching and listening to you. You will be your child's biggest role model for communication, so keep this in mind and model assertiveness in interacting with other adults at home and in the community. All the talk of assertiveness in the world won't be enough if your child sees you frequently yelling at your spouse, being rude to a cashier, or shouting insults at another driver. Your child also learns a lot from the way that you speak to them, so aim for calm, respectful communication as much as possible.

9. Don't be afraid to apologize.

All parents make mistakes sometimes, and it doesn't undermine your authority to admit when you've messed up and apologize. Apologizing to your child reinforces the message that they are worthwhile, valuable people who deserve to be treated with respect – which contributes to assertive children with high self-esteem who will expect respect from everyone around them. And if you've snapped and lost your cool with your child, modeling aggressiveness instead of assertiveness, an apology is a great chance to let them know that type of communication is not ok and then share what you wish you had said or done instead.

10. Teach and role play assertive communication.

If you are really working on assertiveness with your child, you can also look at examples of communication in books, TV shows, and movies. Talk about who is being passive, aggressive, or assertive and why they might be communicating that way. Discuss how the character could be more assertive and how that would have helped the character get what they wanted or needed in the situation. Role play or use stuffed animals, puppets, or other toys to act out different scenarios and ways of responding that would be passive, aggressive, or assertive.

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