

Assertiveness

What Is Assertiveness?

Assertiveness is a healthy way of communicating. **It's the ability to speak up for ourselves in a way that is honest and respectful.** Every day, we're in situations where being assertive can help us — like asking someone on a date, approaching a teacher with a question, or doing well on a job or college interview.

Being assertive doesn't come naturally to everyone. **Some people communicate in a way that is too *passive*. Other people have a style that is too *aggressive*.** An assertive style is the happy medium between these two.

Here's what it means to be assertive:

- You can give an opinion or say how you feel.
- You can ask for what you want or need.
- You can [disagree respectfully](#).
- You can offer your ideas and suggestions.
- You can say no without feeling guilty.
- You can speak up for someone else.

Why Does It Matter?

An assertive communication style can help us do the things we want to do. But it goes further than that: **Being assertive shows we respect ourselves and other people.**

People who speak assertively send the message that they believe in themselves. They're not too timid and they're not too pushy. They know that their feelings and ideas matter. They're confident.

People who are assertive tend to make friends more easily. They communicate in a way that respects other people's needs as well as their own. They tend to be better at working out conflicts and disagreements. People who give respect get respect in return.

Too Passive? Too Aggressive? Or Just Right?

How do you know where you fall on the assertiveness scale? Here are some examples:

Paula has a style that's too passive. If you ask Paula what movie she wants to see, she's most likely to say, "I don't know — what do you want to see?" She usually lets others decide things, but later she regrets not saying what she wanted. It bothers her that her friends do most of the talking. But when Paula tries to break into the conversation, she speaks so softly that others talk over her without realizing.

Janine has a style that's too aggressive. Janine has no trouble speaking her mind. But when she does, she comes across as loud and opinionated. Janine dominates the conversation, often interrupts, and rarely listens. If she disagrees with you, she lets you know — usually with sarcasm or a putdown. She has a reputation for being bossy and insensitive.

Ben has an assertive style. When you ask for Ben's opinion, he gives it honestly. If he disagrees with you, he'll say so — but in a way that doesn't put you down or make you feel wrong. Ben is interested in your opinion, too. He listens to what you have to say. Even when Ben disagrees with you, you still feel he respects your point of view.

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The Problems of Being Too Passive

People who act too passively often end up feeling taken advantage of. They may begin to feel hurt, angry, or resentful.

When you hold back what you think and feel, others don't get to know or understand you as well as they could. The group doesn't benefit from your input or ideas.

If you start to feel like your opinions or feelings don't count, it can lower your confidence and rob you of the chance to get recognition and positive feedback for your good ideas. This can even lead to feeling depressed.

The Trouble With Being Too Aggressive

People who come across as too aggressive can find it difficult to keep friends. They may dominate conversations or give their opinions too boldly and forcefully, leaving others feeling put off or disrespected.

People with an aggressive style may get other people to do things their way, but many times they end up being rejected or disliked. They often lose the respect of others.

Why Isn't Everyone Assertive?

Why do some people have assertive communication styles when others are more passive or aggressive? Part of it's just personality. The habits we develop or the experiences we have are another part. But we also learn to be assertive, passive, or aggressive from watching how others act — especially the people who raise us.

Here are some things that can influence people to act too *passively*:

- a lack of confidence in themselves or the value of their opinions
- worrying too much about pleasing others or being liked
- worrying whether others will disagree with or reject their ideas and opinions

- feeling sensitive to criticism or hurt by past experiences when their ideas were ignored or rejected
- not developing the skills of being assertive

Things that can influence people to act too *aggressively* are:

- being overconfident
- focusing too much on getting their needs met and their opinions across
- not learning to respect or consider other people's views or needs
- not learning listening skills or how to ask for input from others

Things that can lead people to act *assertively* ("just right") are:

- self-confidence
- believing their opinions count, their ideas and feelings matter, and they have the right to express themselves
- being resilient (able to deal with criticism, [rejection](#), and setbacks)
- respecting the preferences and needs of others
- having role models for assertiveness
- knowing their ideas were welcomed or assertiveness rewarded in the past

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How to Be More Assertive

Being assertive is a matter of practicing certain communication skills and having the right inner attitude.

Some people are naturally more skillful when it comes to being assertive. Others need more practice. But everyone can improve.

Here's how:

Start by considering which communication style (assertive, passive, or aggressive) comes closest to yours. Then decide whether you need to work on being less passive, less aggressive, or simply need to build on your naturally assertive style.

To work on being *less passive* and more assertive:

- Pay attention to what you think, feel, want, and prefer. You need to be aware of these things before you can communicate them to others.
- Notice if you say "I don't know," "I don't care," or "it doesn't matter" when someone asks what you want. Stop yourself. Practice saying what you'd prefer, especially on things that hardly matter. For example, if someone asks, "Would you like green or red?" you can say, "I'd prefer the green one — thanks."

- Practice asking for things. For example: "Can you please pass me a spoon?" "I need a pen — does anyone have an extra?" "Can you save me a seat?" This builds your skills and confidence for when you need to ask for something more important.
- Give your opinion. Say whether or not you liked a movie you saw and why.
- Practice using "I" statements such as: "I'd like..." "I prefer..." or "I feel..."
- Find a role model who's good at being assertive — not too passive and not too aggressive. See if you can imitate that person's best qualities.
- Remind yourself that your ideas and opinions are as important as everyone else's. Knowing this helps you be assertive. Assertiveness starts with an inner attitude of valuing yourself as much as you value others.

To work on being *less aggressive* and more assertive:

- Try letting others speak first.
- Notice if you interrupt. Catch yourself, and say: "Oh, sorry — go ahead!" and let the other person finish.
- Ask someone else's opinion, then listen to the answer.
- When you disagree, try to say so without putting down the other person's point of view. For example, instead of saying: "That's a stupid idea," try: "I don't really like that idea." Or instead of saying: "He's such a jerk," try: "I think he's insensitive."
- Find a role model who's good at being assertive — not too passive and not too aggressive. See if you can imitate that person's best qualities.

Even naturally assertive people can build and expand their skills. To work on improving a naturally assertive style:

- Find role models who are good at being assertive — not too passive and not too aggressive. See if you can imitate their best qualities. (You'll notice this is the same tip we give for helping with a style that's too passive or too aggressive. That's because we never stop learning!)
- Notice where you're best at being assertive. People behave differently in different situations. Many people find that it's easy to be assertive in certain situations (like with friends) but more challenging in others (like with teachers or when meeting new people). In tougher situations, try thinking, "What would I say to my close friends?"

When you speak assertively, it shows you believe in yourself. Building assertiveness is one step to becoming your best self, the person you want to be!

Reviewed by: [KidsHealth Behavioral Health Experts](#)

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