

Elementary Research Guide (Grades Pre-K – 5)

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, Brewer, & Eddy, 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, Wehby, & Cooley, 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 at each grade cluster (Noonan & Gaumer Erickson, 2018). By the end of each grade cluster, each student:

	Assertiveness
Pre-K	<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.”
K-2	<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.
3-5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defines assertive, passive, and aggressive. • Identifies verbal and non-verbal 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 When those skills are lacking, children can become withdrawn, resulting in school maladjustment and high unemployment as adults (Buell & Snyder, 1981; Michelson, Sugai, Wood, & Kazdin, 1983). In contrast, when assertive behaviors are present as

early as preschool, there is a positive association with school readiness and later intellectual achievement (Michelson et al., 1983).

- In a study on the perceived importance of social skills in the classroom (Meier, DiPerna, & Oster, 2006), researchers found that elementary school teachers (grades 1-6) valued assertiveness skills as significantly more important than high school teachers did. Overall, though, teachers viewed self-control as the most important skill, followed closely by cooperation. The researchers suggest that because assertiveness skills may be associated with independence, teachers may view those skills as a challenge to classroom management.
- 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).
- In a study of preschool children who were disadvantaged (Wall & Holden, 1994), researchers were able to differentiate between aggression, assertiveness, and submissiveness using a Behavior Checklist (Deluty, 1985, as cited in Wall & Holden, p. 384). Characteristics of assertiveness included:
 - Making requests for behavior
 - Giving or accepting compliments
 - Resisting unfair demands in a nonhostile way
- Preschool students who exhibited low usage of social skills or were targets of peer rejection benefited from social skills training that included assertiveness strategies (Mize & Ladd, 1990). After participating in training sessions that included hand puppets and small toys, these children were able to increase the use of social skills in the classroom when interacting with peers.
- Emotional competence of preschoolers, as rated by teachers on dimensions that included assertiveness, was found to contribute to social competence in kindergarten (Denham et al., 2003). The researchers concluded that young children who are considered by teachers to be friendly and assertive were also seen as more likable by peers.
- Researchers (Walk, Matsuo, & Giovanoni, 2015) who studied 500 preschoolers in several states found that children who possess social skills like assertiveness were more likely to have higher language scores in kindergarten. They note that these social skills were important for both mono- and bilingual children.
- In younger children, assertiveness can take the form of defending possessions, or ignoring the requests of others (Hegland & Rix, 1990). Researchers examining differences in social behaviors of kindergarten students with and without previous day care experience found positive correlations between assertive behaviors and positive social behavior. They also found that assertive behavior can be interpreted as aggressive by teachers who value obedience or submission.
- After-school assertiveness training provided to students in grades 2, 5, and 6 was successful at helping students acquire assertive behaviors, thus reducing the likelihood of being bullied by peers (Avşar & Alkaya, 2017). The training, however, “did not affect the state of being bullies” (p. 186).
- An assertiveness program originally developed for adults was successfully adapted to teach assertiveness skills to fourth grade girls (Bower, Amatea, & Anderson, 1976). Among the findings from the study was that the support the girls received for applying the training and trying

assertive responses was a factor in increasing levels of assertive behavior. The researchers noted that, “Parental and teacher responsiveness to the children’s assertiveness greatly increased the child’s feeling of success” (p. 244).

Assessments:

- The *Assertiveness Formative Questionnaire* (Gaumer Erickson, Noonan, Monroe, & McCall, 2016) is a 20-item instrument that measures students’ proficiency in two essential components of assertiveness: expressing themselves and respecting others. The *Assertiveness Formative Questionnaire* results can be used by both teachers and students to assess relative strengths and areas for improvement. Students are asked to rate themselves on each item using a five-point Likert-type scale (1=not very like me and 5=very like me); results are displayed on a 100-point scale. The results are automatically graphed for students once they complete the questionnaire, enabling them to immediately reflect on their results. Results are also available to the teacher for individual students and in aggregate. The questionnaire is currently being beta-tested with middle and high school students; while it is written at a ninth-grade reading level per the Flesch-Kincaid readability score, it can be adapted for grades 1-5 as necessary. 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)

Teachers can access the questionnaire by setting up an account through

<http://researchcollaborationsurveys.org> and following the instructions to launch a survey 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 *Children’s Action Tendency Scale (CATS)* is a self-report measure of children’s aggressiveness, assertiveness, and submissiveness that takes about 15-20 minutes for students to complete. Students read several scenarios that describe potential conflicts and/or situations where assertiveness might be necessary. For each scenario, there are three potential responses (submissive, assertive, and aggressive). Rather than simply picking the option they are most likely to choose, students are given the options in pairs, so that first they would choose which they are more likely to do between the submissive and the assertive option, which they would choose between the assertive and the aggressive option, and which they would choose between the submissive and aggressive option. Based on each of their answers, their scores are then calculated to identify their current levels of submissiveness, assertiveness, and aggressiveness. In Deluty’s (1979) study with 6-12 year-olds, students’ scores for submissiveness, assertiveness, and aggressiveness based on their self-reported data matched peer and teacher reports of the students’ behavior.

Instructional Practices:

- Assertiveness Training for Children (<http://www.kellybear.com/TeacherArticles/TeacherTip74.html>) provides tips for teaching several important assertiveness concepts to younger children (ages 5-9), including the difference between aggressive, assertive, and submissive (passive), and using “I” statements (Davies, n.d.). There are activities for helping students use refusal skills when they are dealing with bullies (<http://www.kellybear.com/TeacherArticles/TeacherTip21.html>) and for helping students understand that they have a choice of how to respond in specific situations (http://www.kellybear.com/Activity_Choices.html).

- Social skills training can be delivered through interactive online games, like Zoo U (more information about Zoo U is available at <http://www.centervention.com/zoo-u/>). Aimed at grades 2-4, Zoo U offers students the chance to create an avatar, complete six short scenes to determine their baseline in social and emotional skills, and then play up to 30 scenarios to improve and reinforce social and emotional skills. There is also a section, S.S. Grin, designed for grades 3-5. Children who completed the Zoo U game as part of an experimental group were reported by parents to have increased social skills, including assertion, as compared to children in the control group whose parents reported worsening of assertiveness and increased behavior problems (Craig, Brown, Upright, & DeRosier, 2016).
- MorningSide Center for Teaching Social Responsibility (2011) provides two assertiveness lessons for grades 3-5 (<https://www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/lessons/be-strong-be-mean-or-give>), focused on helping students learn to think flexibly and understand that it's important to come up with an approach that fits the specific situation. Specifically, the lessons provide a potential bullying scenario and then have students role-play different options, and consider what the assertive approach would be, and what the best approach is based on the specific details of that situation.
- The *Assertive Communication Training (ACT) Game* (Bickford, Miller, & Rotheram-Borus, 1999; Rotheram, Armstrong, & Booream, 1982; Rotheram-Borus, Bickford, & Milburn, 2001) has been used to successfully train children in grades three through six. This social skills training program is designed to be implemented in the classroom and uses the social-learning theory concepts of emphasizing and rewarding strengths, using small steps, raising expectations, modeling socially competent behavior, and encouraging independent thinking. To use the *ACT Game* in a class, educators first teach information about a selected social competence skill (such as assertiveness), then provide a few example problem situations, and then split the class into groups of actors and directors to play the game. The actors are given a situation that requires the use of the skill and they work together to create a skit that demonstrates using that skill; directors facilitate the feedback process after the skit has been performed.
 - For example:
 - Provide the description of a problem situation, e.g., “Your friend wants to see your test paper and answers during a test.”
 - Assign two or more persons as the principal actors.
 - Assign coaches or directors: One is assigned to each of the principal actors to offer suggestions on what to say during the role-play.
 - Assign one person to be the director of the scene: He/she determines who is to play which part, where the scene is taking place, and who will speak first.
 - Assign other group members to monitor the interaction, a person to watch eye contact, a person to watch body language, a person to watch gestures or voice tone.
 - The rest of the group should be asked to pay close attention because group leaders will be asking for their suggestions about other ways to play the scene. Be sure that each person understands his/her role.

In fourth- and fifth grade classrooms where the *ACT Game* has been used, assertiveness increased as did achievement and grade point averages (Rotheram et al., 1982). A manual for teachers to use can be downloaded from <http://www.maryjanerotheram.com/mjr/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Act-GameTeachers-Manual.pdf>.

- Kolb and Griffith (2009) emphasize the importance of teaching students to use assertive communication, focusing specifically on methods of protective assertiveness that students can use when they encounter bullying or when their personal boundaries are crossed. They share several assertive techniques that can be taught to students:

- Repeat, Repeat – student gives the same response over and over again.
- Refuse to Discuss – student uses words and body language to indicate s/he does not want to engage in a discussion. This could include walking away.
- Fogging – coming up with an excuse or “white lie” to avoid an inappropriate or unsafe situation.
- Compromise – offering a suggestion that meets the needs of both individuals.

It's important for students to understand that protective assertion is necessary in specific instances, but may not be appropriate for all situations – they need to be able to evaluate a situation and determine the best approach based on the specific context.

- Teaching Assertiveness to Elementary Students (University of West Alabama, 2018) provides several strategies to help younger students work on their assertiveness skills, including encouraging students to work on their communication, modeling assertiveness for students, having students use a mirror to practice assertive body language, tone of voice, etc., and trying realistic role-play activities. Additional information available at: <http://www.pbs.org/parents/expert-tips-advice/2016/07/building-assertiveness-help-quiet-child-speak/>.
- The Centre for Resilience (<http://www.centreforresilience.org.au/Default.aspx>) is an Australian website for teachers and parents that provides information on resiliency and how to cultivate it in children. The resources include a table (below) that summarizes four types of **communication** styles, which can be used in role-playing activities with students to develop assertiveness (Centre for Resilience, n.d.). While this table provides a helpful comparison of the types of communication, some of the wording should be modified for younger students. Teachers can either model specific behaviors or create their own table using language appropriate for their grade levels.

Communication Style	Body language	Voice	Words
Aggressive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Physically standing over the other person ✦ Puffed out chest ✦ Shaking one`s fist or pointing one`s finger ✦ Getting too close (being "in someone`s face.") 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Shouting ✦ Scornful, harsh ✦ Bullying, haranguing tone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Abuse ("You`re pathetic!") ✦ Generalisation ("You never...") ✦ Personalisation ("You`re just a selfish person.") ✦ Sarcasm ("Well, Mr. <i>Perfect</i>...") ✦ Put-downs ("What would <i>you</i> know about....")
Passive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Collapsed posture ✦ No eye contact ✦ Turned away from other person ✦ Twisted, awkward limbs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Inaudible ✦ Quavering ✦ Weak, squeaky tone ✦ Uncertain intonation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Capitulation ("OK, whatever you want.") ✦ Excessive apology ✦ Self-recrimination ("I`m such an idiot.")
Passive-Aggressive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Averted eyes ✦ Sulking, hostile or bored expression ✦ Crossed arms ✦ Closed posture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Muttering ✦ "Robotic", insincere or hostile tone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Feigned indifference ("Whatever!") ✦ Insincere agreement ("Fine!") ✦ Silence or grunts
Assertive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Level, eye to eye contact ✦ Upright, open posture ✦ Feet solidly planted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Firm ✦ Clear and audible ✦ Reasonable tone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Sticks to the point ✦ Makes point rationally ✦ "I" statements ✦ Takes responsibility for self

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