

Research Guide

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).

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.

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 When those skills are lacking, children can become withdrawn, resulting in school maladjustment and high unemployment as adults (Buell & Snyder, 1981).
- 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).
- Assertiveness is an important and sought-after personal attribute for an array of professions, including nursing, education, and law enforcement. Grove, Hussey, and Jetter (2011) demonstrate that assertiveness, particularly in the context of a business environment, often has a direct bearing on an individual’s professional achievements and rate of pay.
- Paglia and Room’s (1999) review of literature on adolescent substance abuse programs and interventions shows that protective assertiveness—an individual’s ability to say no—is one of the most important tools for avoiding drug abuse and addiction. Assertiveness training videos have been shown to help high school students resist peer pressure to use drugs and respond to provocation using assertive, as opposed to aggressive, behaviors (Brenner, Head, Helms, Williams, & Williams, 2003; Hecht, Corman, & Miller-Rassulo, 1993; Polansky, Buki, Horan, Ceperich, & Burows, 1999). In recent years, videos such as “Standing Tall: Learning Assertiveness Skills” (Human Relations Media, 2006) and “Play It out: How to Be Assertive” (Mazzarella, 2010) have proven helpful in providing assertiveness training.
- When adolescents lack **self-efficacy** (i.e., belief in one’s capabilities), the ability to establish appropriate boundaries, and the willingness to act in a resolute fashion, they run an increased risk of engaging in unhealthy sexual behavior. Numerous studies demonstrate that assertiveness

matters when it comes to issues like condom use and the prevention of unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases among adolescents (Tschann, Flores, de Groat, Deardorff, & Wibbelsman, 2010; Schmid, Leonard, Ritchie, & Gwadz, 2015).

- Research indicates that assertiveness training and related problem-based learning can reduce instances of bullying and feelings of anxiety and anger among those adolescents who have been targeted by bullies (Buell & Snyder, 1981; Hall, 2006). Assertiveness training can also reduce the likelihood of sexual coercion or assault. For example, *My Voice, My Choice*, a 90-minute virtual reality training that teaches assertive resistance, has proven effective in building participants' capacity to resist sexual and psychological victimization (Rowe, Jouriles, & McDonald, 2015). According to Thompson, Bundy, and Wolfe (1996), the most effective assertiveness training programs include both instruction and practice in applying assertiveness in the context of specific social situations that students may encounter.
- Research shows that improving high school students' understanding of assertiveness through guided practice helps them seek assistance and supports, as well as future educational and career opportunities (Wolfe, Crooks, Chiodo, Hughes, & Ellis, 2012; Buell & Snyder, 1981; Lane et al., 2006).
- Teaching students to be assertive prepares them to advocate for themselves and their dreams, resist peer pressure, and work to resolve interpersonal conflicts (Paglia & Room, 1999; Wolfe et al., 2012).

Assessments:

- The Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (RAS), one of the most widely used assessments, is a 30-item instrument that uses a six-point Likert scale to measure characteristics associated with aggressiveness and assertiveness (Rathus, 1973). The RAS measures both the impression that the respondent makes on other people and behaviors in specific situations where assertiveness and outgoing behavior are necessary (Rathus, 1973). Individuals completing the survey are asked to what degree they agree with statements such as "Most people seem to be more aggressive and assertive than I am" or "I am open and frank about my feelings." See: http://www.cengage.com/resource_uploads/downloads/0495092746_63633.pdf.
- A quick self-report test on assertiveness is available at *Psychology Today* (2015): http://psychologytoday.tests.psychtests.com/take_test.php?idRegTest=3195. Note that follow-up reports are offered for a fee.
- The Assertiveness Scale for Adolescents (ASA) is a 33-item instrument designed for students in grades 6 to 12 (Lee, Hallberg, Slemon, & Haase, 1985). The 33 items are interpersonal situations where the student chooses one of three provided options, which are classified as assertive, unassertive, and aggressive/passive aggressive. Each answer that is classified as "assertive" is scored as one point, so that a student's "assertiveness score" can range from 0 to 33 (with higher scores reflecting greater assertiveness). A copy of the instrument is included in [Measures for Clinical Practice and Research: A sourcebook \(2013\), 5th edition, Volume 1 Couples, Families and Children. Kevin Corcoran & Joel Fischer editors. Oxford University Press.](#)
- The Adaptive and Aggressive Assertiveness Scales (AAA-S) is an instrument that has been used successfully with college students (Thompson & Berenbaum, 2011). It is made up of 19 scenarios that represent everyday situations, and measures adaptive assertiveness and aggressive assertiveness. The student is asked to indicate how they would react in the situation, from 1 (never) to 5 (always). An example of a scenario is included below.

- “9. If someone I know well says something that hurts my feelings, I... (a) would tell him/her off; (b) provide evidence why the comment was incorrect” (Thompson & Berenbaum, 2011, p. 332).

Instructional Practices:

- The Arizona Department of Education (ADE) website provides a lesson for teaching assertiveness as part of their *Mini Merging Two Worlds* (2005) curriculum. The curriculum is part of ADE’s transition and career planning resources. Other lessons include “The Power of Goals.” The lesson “Be Connected/Be Assertive” can be accessed from <http://www.azed.gov/special-education/files/2012/02/mini-m2w-chapter-3-lesson-7.pdf>.
- The Resiliency Resource Centre 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. More information can be found at http://www.embracethefuture.org.au/resiliency/index.htm?http://www.embracethefuture.org.au/resiliency/social_skills.htm (Mental Health Foundation of Australia, 2014).

	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

- The 24-minute video “Standing Tall: Learning Assertiveness Skills” (Human Relations Media, 2006) targets grades 5-9. It provides practical tips for developing assertiveness and is available for \$129.95 from <http://www.hrmvideo.com/catalog/standing-tall-learning-assertiveness-skills>.
- The 20-minute video “Play It out: How to Be Assertive” (Mazzarella, 2010) is available for \$149 from <http://mazz.com/product/play-it-out-how-to-be-assertive-sticking-up-for-yourself>.
- The Centre for Clinical Interventions has created a comprehensive series of modules related to learning assertive behaviors (Michel, 2008). Broken into 10 parts, the series contains modules designed for adults on “How to think more assertively” and “How to deal assertively with criticism,” among other topics. The series is available for free at http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/infopax.cfm?Info_ID=51.
- Fiedler and Danneker (2007) describe several curricula and instructional strategies for teaching self-advocacy skills, including assertiveness, designed for students with disabilities.

- Next S.T.E.P.: Student Transition and Educational Planning (Halpern, Herr, Doren, & Wolf, 2000) consists of 16 lessons that are grouped into four units: 1-Getting Started, 2-Self-Exploration and Self-Evaluation, 3-Developing Goals and Activities, 4-Putting a Plan in Place. The lessons include materials for students and teachers as well as suggestions for family involvement. For more information, see <http://www.proedinc.com/customer/productView.aspx?ID=3485>.
- TAKE CHARGE for the Future (Powers et al., 1996) uses skill facilitation, mentoring, peer support, and parent support to build adolescents' self-determination and transition planning skills. The program includes biweekly 50-minute coaching sessions and monthly 2-hour community-based workshops for students, parents, and mentors over a four-month period (Test, Fowler, Brewer, & Wood, 2005).
- The Self-Advocacy & Conflict Resolution Training (SACR) has been successfully applied as an intervention for African American high school students with disabilities (Walker & Test, 2011). The SACR training can be administered individually or in a group, and includes lessons on teaching students how to request accommodations in their courses that can be reinforced with role-play (Walker & Test, 2011).
- The Self-Advocacy Strategy (Van Reusen, Bos, Schumaker, & Deshler, 2007) helps students prepare for and participate in transition planning conferences. It is available from http://www.edgeenterprisesinc.com/products.php?category_id=10&subcategory_id=20.

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