

Assertive Advocacy

Advocacy Skills Help Prevent Violence and Increase Personal Safety

Kidpower is an educational charitable organization that, since 1989, has brought "People Safety" education to over 1.2 million children, teenagers, and adults, including those with special needs, from many different cultures - close to home and around the world. For publications; free articles, podcasts and e-newsletter; and information about our services and locations, please visit www.kidpower.org.

Copyright © 2009 Irene van der Zande. All rights reserved. Permission is granted to print this PDF and copy this article for personal or free charitable use only as long as the Kidpower information and this copyright notice are clearly visible. For example, this means you can use this article as an educator in your classroom. However, prior written permission is required to reproduce this article in any other printed or digital form for any other purpose including on websites, in newsletters, or as part of a paid publication or service. Please contact safety@kidpower.org.

The word "advocacy" is used to mean "actively speaking up for yourself and others." Kidpower teaches Assertive Advocacy to people of all ages and abilities so that they are effective in:

- Setting boundaries.
- Getting others to listen to them.
- Asking for help.
- Being included.

I have heard children as young as five and adults as old as ninety complain that the personal safety skills that Kidpower taught them didn't work.

They might mumble passively, "I kind of tried what you told me, sort of anyway, and nobody listened. I don't know why. I guess that they just don't like me."

They might grump aggressively, "I did **exactly** what you said and **nobody cared about me!** They just got mad. I think they hate me, the creeps!"

It is not surprising that **how** we communicate about what we do and do not want is going to make a huge difference in the results we are most likely to have. We can say all the right words, but this often won't work well unless we communicate our boundaries and wishes with an assertive attitude.

The difference between being passive, aggressive, and assertive can be learned at a young age -- in fact, as soon as children can speak and understand language fairly well. In Kidpower workshops, we show children the difference with puppets, stories, and role-plays -- and then coach them to try out different attitudes themselves.

When we act passively, the message that we communicate to others is, "What I want is not that important, and no one cares anyway, so I might as well give up." Our listeners are likely to agree with us -- that our message must not be that important in the midst of so many other things competing much more persuasively for their attention. People will often fail to notice our message, will ignore it, or will forget it.

Passive behavior includes:

- A soft, unsure voice.
- A hopeless expression.
- Limp or frozen posture and gestures.
- Eyes that are looking down or to the side so that there is no eye contact.
- An apologetic or whiny tone of voice.
- A closed down body that doesn't take up too much space.
- Speaking from a bit too far away to be noticed.
- Waiting and wishing that someone would just know what you want.
- Sighing or shrugging.
- Hesitant, unclear language.

When we act aggressively, the message that we communicate to others is, "You are not going to do what I want anyway, and you are probably out to get me, so I am mad at you. You are an awful person." Our listeners are likely to feel attacked and to believe that any message delivered in such a negative way is probably unreasonable. They might avoid us or get angry back.

Aggressive behavior includes:

- A glowering face.
- A tense, rigid posture.
- An irritated or loud voice.
- Jabbing or jerky body language and gestures.
- Strutting.
- Insulting language and loaded words.
- Leaning forward into someone's face.
- Crowding into the space of others.
- Interrupting others impatiently.
- Not listening.
- Acting annoyed or angry.

Whining can somehow be both passive and aggressive. Sometimes, in Kidpower classes, we explore this with children. We ask them to use a very whiny voice and say words that would be relevant to their lives: "Teeeeecherrr! Mooooooom! Daaaaaaaad! Noooooooooooooooooooo! Stooooooooop! That's not faaaaaaaair! Cooooooooome oooooooooon! Pleeeeease!"

We then ask some leading questions to reinforce our point: "Does that sound like **whining**? Is it **irritating**? I don't even feel like listening to myself! Do you feel like listening to yourself?"

Instead of communicating with either a passive or an aggressive attitude, both youth and adults can learn how to communicate assertively. Assertive Advocacy means giving others the message that, "Of course you are going to care about what I want once you understand what it is. What I have to say is very important to me, and I believe that you are such a good person that this will be very important to you too."

The behavior that goes with communicating an assertive attitude includes:

- Using body language that is calm, aware, and confident.
- Making eye contact. When you want people to listen to you, it usually works best to look into their eyes without staring rudely and without looking away.
- Having a facial expression that is consistent with your message. This means having a neutral face if you are telling someone to stop or a friendly face if you are asking someone to do something for you.
- Using polite language that is both definite and respectful, such as, "Excuse me!" "Please stop!" "I need your help!" "I'd like to sit here too." "I'd like to join the game."
- Making your voice loud enough to be easily heard and positive instead of soft, hesitant, whiny, or angry.
- Sound firm to tell someone to stop.
- Sound appreciative if you want help.
- Sounding cheerful if you want someone to do something for you or with you.
- Managing space. Move away from someone who you want to stop bothering you. Move closer to someone who you want something from.

Another pitfall to avoid is the Wishing Technique. Have you ever **wished** passively that someone would just know what you want without your having to say anything? Did it work? Did you ever give up and not get what you needed from that person? Did you ever become so frustrated that you blew up at that person aggressively?

Children might need adult help to learn that the Wishing Technique doesn't work most of the time. Children often believe that adults can read their minds. This is logical from a child's perspective, because, especially when children are younger, adults **do** anticipate many of children's needs without them saying anything.

Remind children (and yourself) that, "It's not fair to give up on people or to get mad at them just because they cannot read your mind. This is why you need to use Assertive Advocacy to speak up for what you do want and what you do not want."

Most of the adults I know, including myself, will admit to using the Wishing Technique at times or to being passive or aggressive. Remember that the children in your life are learning from the example you set. Model Assertive Advocacy by being both strong and respectful in your communications - and coach children to do the same.