

“I’ll Repeat Myself, Again?!”

Empowering Students Through Assertive Communication Strategies

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A struggling student academically and shy, Megan found herself in an awkward and scary position. DeKristi and her crew cornered Megan in the bathroom before school and demanded she make self-deprecating statements and do push-ups. “If you don’t say it and do the push-ups,” DeKristi threatened, “we’re going to beat the crap out of you tomorrow!” In the past, Megan had softly pleaded for them to leave her alone, cowered, and finally given in to their cruel demands. On this day, Megan tried to avoid meeting up with DeKristi and when it did occur, she spoke up in a louder voice but to no avail. Is there any way out of this situation for Megan? Will she ever be able to make a transition from passive to assertive communication—and succeed in deflecting DeKristi’s aggressive behavior?

Megan and DeKristi illustrate communication styles at opposite ends of the communication continuum. DeKristi and her friends are verbally abusive and intimidate through the power of their numbers. Megan, because of her history of passive communication, is unsuccessful at refusing DeKristi’s demands. Both communication styles often result in detrimental outcomes, and both girls may benefit from explicit

instruction (Hall, 2002; Konrad, Walker, Fowler, Test, & Wood, 2008) in more appropriate and effective means of communication.

One goal we should have as parents and educators is to help children become assertive and emotionally intelligent individuals (Elder, 1997; Kolb & Hanley-Maxwell, 2003). In furthering this goal, it helps to have an understanding of the three basic communication styles: passive, aggressive, and assertive. Because communication is most effective when a message is delivered assertively, teaching students to communicate in an assertive manner should be an instructional goal.

Passive individuals rarely get their needs met and when they do, they frequently do not attribute the outcome as a direct result of their own actions. Passivity is also connected to the concepts of learned helplessness, external locus of control, and external attribution—all of which impact students’ self-determination (Wehmeyer, 2002). Like Megan, passive people don’t stand up for their rights, allow others to take advantage of them, and have trouble saying “no” (Covey, 1989). As a result, they may feel angry and resentful when their assertively communicated decisions aren’t heard or respected—which in turn may lead to aggressiveness.

Internalizing a more assertive communication style may increase students’ self-determination and fuel the realization that they can be positive causal agents in their personal environments.

At the other end of the communication continuum are *aggressive* individuals like DeKristi, who often get their needs met by using their power, language, or position to coerce others. They strive to get their way by being loud, abusive, and overpowering. In our scenario, DeKristi used aggressive language and threats as well as the power of peers who backed her to coerce others to comply with her demands. Each time she was successful, she gained more power in her next bullying attempt. Aggressive communication disrespects or ignores the rights of others; it is a maladaptive coercive interaction style. Reforming an aggressive communication style to a more functional assertive communication style is difficult but can be done by empowering the individual. Teaching students to use logic as a means to meet their needs can help them become positive causal agents in their environments.

Assertive individuals get their needs met in a positive productive manner. They are effective communicators, expressing their thoughts and needs

explicitly, making good eye contact, and speaking clearly. Assertive people are confident, direct, and honest. They realize they have choices. They respect the rights of others by acknowledging and accepting differing viewpoints. Assertive individuals realize that they get results through awareness, conscious decision making, and speaking using logic rather than speaking passively and being overlooked or being coercive and aggressive.

Assertive Communication Strategies

Being assertive can help students communicate their feelings, exercise their rights, and respond to violations of their rights while respecting the rights of others. Students can learn to select a strategy and, when possible, plan a course of action in advance. We should provide opportunities for students to practice developing assertive communication skills in safe and controlled environments. When teaching assertive communication strategies, it's important to actively engage students by having them brainstorm and identify the types of situations they encounter to which assertiveness strategies can be applied (Griffith & Gill, 2006). We can teach students a variety of ways to communicate assertively, including four basic assertive communication strategies (see box, "Assertive Communication Strategies").

It can be useful to start with a strategy that addresses a specific student situation. For example, a first step for Megan might be to learn and practice the first strategy, to respond calmly and directly as soon as she realizes that her rights have been violated. Had Megan been able to remain calm and confident and directly respond to DeKristi's bullying the first time it occurred, DeKristi would have been more likely to retreat and stop targeting her.

Teaching Assertive Refusal Techniques

Once students can demonstrate mastery of assertive communication—through role playing or identifying areas of their lives where they might

Assertive Communication Strategies

- Respond calmly and directly as soon as you realize that your rights have been violated
- Focus on the specific behavior that compromised your rights by using "I" statements
- Share the feelings you experienced as a result of the behavior
- Describe your preferred outcome and discuss how to handle future situations.

use the technique—they are ready to learn to assert themselves, especially in saying "no!" to peers or in the event that their safety is threatened. No single technique will work in every situation, so we must teach students directly and explicitly a variety of assertive techniques (see box, "Techniques for Assertively Refusing Peer Requests"). The five following assertive techniques can be directly taught to students at home or in the classroom. The scenarios that follow, provided as a model for role playing, can be modified as needed to make teaching situations relevant for student levels and settings. Incidentally, these strategies are excellent for personal safety and protective behaviors.

Repeat, Repeat

We used to call this the "broken record" technique but with the advancement of technology and media, students no longer

automatically identify with the concept. The main idea of this technique is to keep repeating the same response over and over. For example, When DeKristi bullied Megan, Megan might have calmly used "repeat, repeat":

DeKristi: I want you to tell me how stupid you are and do 50 push-ups for me.

Megan: I don't want to.

DeKristi: Do it! Say that you're stupid and hit the ground!

Megan (positioning herself toward an exit): I'll pass.



Techniques for Assertively Refusing Peer Requests (How to Say “No!”)

- Repeat, Repeat
- Refuse to Discuss
- Fogging
- Compromise
- Take the Offense

DeKristi: You’d better say what I tell you to say and do what I tell you to do. Now, say that you’re an idiot and give me 50 push-ups.

Megan (maintaining eye contact and calm): I’ll pass.

DeKristi: If you don’t do what I tell you to do, I’ll beat the crap out of you tomorrow!

Megan: I don’t feel like it today.

Note that Megan continued to repeat the same idea in a few verbal phrases. Initially, students should be taught to use the same response over and over, even one as simple and direct as “no,” “no thanks,” or “no way.” The key is to have the child continue to repeat “no,” standing firm and responding confidently. Practicing the technique enables students to maintain calm and assertiveness under pressure and helps them learn to avoid resorting to aggression. We need to reassure children that it is ok to say “no” to peers and adults if the request is inappropriate or unsafe—and also teach them what to do after an event to maintain safety and decrease chances of recurrence. Although DeKristi’s threat may have been empty, Megan needed to know her options to remain safe the next day should DeKristi have followed up. Although “repeat, repeat” often works and the demanding party gives up, sometimes a different technique needs to be applied.

Refuse to Discuss

Students can employ “refuse to discuss” in numerous ways, such as walking away, saying, “I don’t want to talk about it,” or changing the subject. A factor to remember with “refuse to dis-

cuss” is that body language will determine how this refusal is met. In addition, if the refusing student can draw a common front with the requestor, she gains some power in the effort to refuse. Megan could have employed this technique, weaving the request into an unrelated question:

DeKristi: I want you to tell me how stupid you are and do 50 push-ups for me.

Megan: DeKristi, I don’t want to talk about it. Have you been doing a lot of push-ups in PE? Mr. Richards is so mean! We’re having to do at least that many *and* run laps every day this week. Do you have him for PE, too?

Megan’s focus switch to the demands of the PE class reframed her position as an equal, removing her from the role of victim. Again, it is essential for students to have an opportunity to practice these techniques in a safe classroom or home setting.

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Fogging

When withdrawal from the conversation is not an option, students can cloud their refusal by deferring decisions to a higher authority. “Fogging” is a strategy that involves not telling the whole truth, or coming up with an excuse or a “white lie” to remove the pressure of saying “no.” As parents and educators, we strongly support students using “fogging” if it prevents them from making harmful, dangerous, or inappropriate decisions; this strategy can provide an avenue for them to make a safe decision. A key factor in using “fogging” is to help children distinguish harmful, dangerous, or inappropriate situations. Note that students must be more socially skilled to use “fogging” successfully in person.

A good example of fogging that most children can relate to is declining to take a phone call (“Tell her I’m not at home.”). Sharing your personal fogging experiences with students can also help them understand the process and connect it to their own environment. For example, Sharon related to her students a time she used fogging to remove herself from a potentially unsafe situation. Her childhood friend, “Theresa,” was planning a party at her house with drinking, and wanted Sharon to stay overnight. Sharon thought about it all day and was worried sick about what to do. At the time, like most children, she did not have the skills or strategies to tell Theresa how she really felt, nor was she completely sure what she really wanted to do. When Theresa called after school, Sharon said that she needed to ask her mom. She covered the phone and yelled, “Mom, can I stay overnight at Theresa’s?” After waiting a few seconds, she told her friend that her “mean” mom would not let her go: “Once my mom says ‘no,’ she says ‘no!’” Because Sharon’s mom represented the higher authority, Theresa did not press the issue further. “Fogging” worked to get Sharon out of an evening of drinking at her friend’s house.

One of Sharon’s students subsequently used her as the “higher authority” in a situation with his older brother, who wanted him to steal some cigarettes from the gas station: The boy told his brother that he needed to stay after school to finish his assignment with his teacher. Sharon was surprised when he came to her class that day and asked if he could clean the blackboards; when she asked him, “How’s life?” he told her the whole story. Sharon assured him that it was perfectly fine to use “fogging” and that she was proud of his decision. Amy, similarly, regularly encourages new teachers to “blame” her if they need to express disagreement with a co-worker about course content; saying “Dr. Griffith told us in our class . . .” shifts the focus and facilitates maintaining collaboration on the job.

Compromise

In situations where holding a hard stance on “no” is unnecessary, “compromise” (offering a suggestion that meets the needs of both individuals) may be appropriate; although a more involved technique, it works very effectively. We believe that students do not want to get into trouble or make bad decisions. If one can make a suggestion that allows both parties to save face and/or avoid undesirable circumstances, or one that is more appropriate and appealing, others frequently will go along. Because students often make decisions in haste or out of boredom rather than through logical means, learning “compromise” can be effective. Our students have shared examples of their own experience effectively using “compromise”:

(Braden and Ricardo are walking home from school)

Braden: I’m hungry. Let’s go steal some candy from the gas station or store.

Ricardo: Yeah, I’m hungry, too, but let’s go to my house, I have some candy there.

Braden: Ok. Let’s go to your house.

(Parker and Marcus are in math class working on math problems.)

Marcus: I don’t get this stupid stuff. Let me see your paper and I’ll copy the answer.

Parker: If I give you the answer, we will both get into trouble. Let me ask the teacher if we can work together and I can help you.

When refusal involves authority figures such as teachers, “compromise” can be more successful than other ways of saying “no.” For example, Chynna’s repeated blow-ups in science class (often beginning when she refused a request) resulted in her removal from the class. After problem solving with a special education teacher and using a “Think Sheet” (Figure 1), Chynna realized that often her science teacher was less the cause and more the catalyst of the power struggle. Chynna approached the sci-

Figure 1. Chynna’s Think Sheet

Date: 11/19/06	Teacher: Brown
Hour: 2nd	
What is up? Everything	
School, home, friends, homework, talkative, it's hard to think when I'm angry FRUSTRATED. I can't I can't wake up early enough to come to school on time.	
Why do you think you are feeling the way you are feeling?	
I Don't feel good I have headache piss off me Angry derspersion The reason why I feel derspersion because my parents. My Life I'm in retard "Retard" classes. Everything I do isn't good good enough. I wish was normal	
Chynna's Solutions:	
I did think sheet calm calm down A little. I will do the work	
Agreed Solution:	

ence teacher with her “Think Sheet” and proposed that she use it for written reflection when either of them felt a power struggle emerging. Chynna’s teacher would sign the “Think Sheet” without reading or commenting and release her to process the situation with the special education teacher. A condition of admittance back to science class was Chynna sharing potential solutions and the science teacher agreeing to one or negotiating another solution. Figure 1 is an early attempt by Chynna to use her “Think Sheet.” In this particular situation, releasing her frustrations was enough for her to determine that remaining and completing her work was the best solution: the problem was that she was having a bad day. Because the science teacher was an authority in the classroom, “compromise” was optimal because it demonstrated respect rather than insubordination.

Taking the Offense

With peers, however, students sometimes need to change roles and brazen out against the demander for a position to be heard. “Taking the offense” is a complex technique that involves taking charge of the discussion and planning an offense to address the problem. Steps that need to be modeled and scaffolded in “taking the offense” are similar to writing a position paper:

- ↓ Identify the issue
- ↓ Outline support for the issue
- ↓ Identify support against the issue
- ↓ Select a stance
- ↓ Plan response to the opposition’s arguments with well-thought-out and logical support

An important lesson imbedded in this strategy is that one doesn’t need to wait until confronted to strategize. We

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can anticipate conflict, plan for it, and stand our ground. Having thought about situations and strategizing ahead of time for how we will respond increases the likelihood that the preferred outcome will occur (Griffith & Horton, 2001); after all, *praemonitus, praemunitus* (“forewarned is forearmed”).

For students, learning to “taking the offense” with an adult means learning how to maintain respect for the authority figure while being assertive. Chynna also learned to use “taking the offense.” By thoroughly thinking through the issues that were arising in science and anticipating possible confrontations with her teacher, Chynna could behave more appropriately and respectfully, in an assertively offensive rather than defensive manner.

Teacher: Chynna, what are the land formations you described in your homework?

Chynna: I don't know.

Teacher: Chynna, I have called on you! Answer the question.

Chynna: I just sat down. I need time to think. Please call on someone else.

Teacher: Chynna, answer the question now.

Chynna: Give me a minute to find my thought. I think you want me to give you a good answer and not something lame.

Teacher (escalating): Chynna, you need to participate in class. I've called on you. You need to answer now.

Chynna: Mr. Brown, I'm having a rough morning and this isn't helping me. Give me a minute to do a “Think Sheet.” Then you can keep teaching and not be bothered with me. I don't want to have an argument.

Teacher: Fine—get out your “Think Sheet.”

During her communication with the science teacher, Chynna kept her voice calm and quiet and attended to her

rate of speech. Essentially, she had learned to refuse to “take the bait.”

Returning to our opening scenario, Megan could use her prior encounters with DeKristi to help plan her strategy for future confrontations. Over time she learned to avoid places DeKristi commonly frequented. In addition, with her mother's help, Megan practiced posturing herself more assuredly and confidently brushing past DeKristi and not pausing or stopping when DeKristi told her to. She practiced and followed through with a plan to assume all interactions with DeKristi were unsafe and thus keep moving at a brisk and confident pace and seeking public areas (preferably in the proximity of a teacher) when pursued. Megan didn't stop at one solution; she thought out and considered backup plans. “Taking the offense” allowed her to complete the school year with less fear and helped her develop skills and confidence she could take into adulthood. She learned that not only her words and actions but, importantly, her planning and demeanor could powerfully communicate refusal.

Final Thoughts

Communicating assertively through pragmatics and words is learned. These skills develop over time. We can't expect students to resist unsafe or unhealthy situations unless we give them the skills to do so effectively. Explicit instruction of social skills results in greater self-esteem and social functioning (Kolb & Stuart, 2005). Many students face unsafe situations daily that place them at risk for adverse consequences should they passively comply or aggressively resist. By learning that she could say “no” and stand her ground in ways that wouldn't result in injury, Megan was able to survive the school year encountering DeKristi. She learned powerful negotiation skills that were authentic and generalized across situations and into adulthood. Skilled use of the five strategies to say “no” may help stu-

dents resist pressured decisions in adolescence and provide functional skills that will serve them well as adults.

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