

Building Healthy Families: The Lost Art Of Assertive Behavior

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Throughout our lives we will be presented with many difficult situations, ranging from someone being mean to us in school to possibly the loss of a job in adulthood. It seems like every day the world gets more and more difficult to handle, and with constant changes in our environment we need to figure out the best way to solve these problems. We have many methods of solving our everyday troubles, but the one thing that seems to be lost are the days of solving our difficult moments on our own. We are accustomed to having others solve our problems for us, to not solve them at all or by using aggression. What ever happened to people being assertive and taking control of their own lives?

Assertive behavior seems to be lost, and we need to find it. More and more in my line of work as a school social worker, I see so many students who have no idea what assertive behavior is. The problem

with this is that when a student is presented with something difficult they either avoid it all together or try and have someone do it for us. We tend to do this as adults as well in order to protect ourselves from anxiety or disappointment. The extreme opposite of having someone solve our issues for us, which all people seem to understand too well, is using aggression to resolve problems. Although these methods tend to resolve issues in the short term, it always seems that it creates far more problems in the long run. In turn, these methods create a cycle of insecurity and uncertainty.

We need to find a way to teach ourselves and more importantly our children how to use assertive behavior to resolve difficult situations. Teaching children assertive behavior starts at a very young age, and it's as simple as teaching children ways to communicate effectively. When we are kids we are told to tell an adult for anything that could possibly be troubling. I don't necessarily disagree with this, and I also find myself telling children to do this as well. But, we have to encourage children to try



and resolve the issue first before they go directly to an adult. The exception to this rule, of course, is when there is a safety concern. In this case a child needs to tell an adult immediately.

Teaching our children how to effectively talk with others, especially when they are faced with a stressful task, will get them very far in life. It is as simple as teaching your children ways to express themselves by using simple phrases. The use of "I" messages helps the person clearly explain themselves without blaming the other person completely. It allows the other person to understand how they are feeling and allows them to possibly change their behavior

before adult intervention is needed. By doing this over and over again, the child will be able to build confidence in their abilities to solve their own issues without the assistance of an adult. My advice to children is that they always use three assertive methods to solve their problem, and if it still doesn't change the problem, then request assistance from an adult.

Assertive communication isn't all about specific phrases either. Body language is a key factor in this as well. Someone who is slumped over, looking at the ground and speaking very quietly tends to have a difficult time getting their message across to someone. Have the confidence to stand tall, look right at the individual and use a firm tone of voice. This sends the message that you are serious and care about what you are saying. It tells the individual that you are in control and not them.

I find that this is one of the hardest parts for children because if they look right at the person that means they are being accountable for what they are saying. If they look away or have someone say it

for them, then they don't have to take as much responsibility for the outcome. They can always make excuses, and say "Well they must not have understood me," or "they didn't listen to the teacher." In turn it places blame on someone else, and that it is someone else's fault.

Assertive behavior is a lost art, and many of us have forgotten that we are in control of our own lives. We cannot control others, but we can certainly control ourselves. Using assertive behavior and being confident in what we believe in can rub off on others and in turn create a better world around us. As adults, if we model for our youth that respectful/responsible behavior is what we demand, then we will have children that follow the same line of thinking. So the next time you are presented with a difficult situation, meet it head on, grow from it and believe in yourself. You can assertively change your life for the better. For more information, contact us at Family Service of the Chautauqua Region, 332 E. Fourth St., Jamestown, 488-1971 or check us out on the web at www.familyservicecr.com.