

Mobilise

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Be Assertive!

An assertive person is a strong person. Parents of disabled children need to train themselves to be more assertive than other parents in order to cope with and master the added stress in their daily life. A mother at parents' training group said, "I'm afraid of becoming too assertive!" But there's no such thing as becoming too assertive. That's like saying that you are afraid of becoming too healthy, or too honest. Assertiveness means being direct and honest. It means speaking up for your rights without putting others down. Non-assertiveness means that you don't think your rights are worth as much as other people's rights; that it's best to hide your true feelings because they may hurt others. The opposite of non-assertiveness is aggressive behavior, not assertive behavior. Aggressiveness means putting others down, and behaving as though other people's rights always come after yours.

Assertive behavior gives you the strength you need to take on the world, while non-assertive or aggressive behavior creates barriers to effective action.

Here are some examples of non-assertive, assertive, and aggressive statements. Read through them, and you'll soon see that the assertive statement is the most effective.

1A. "I'm sorry to bother you, but I was hoping you would let me know if my child could get into your program." (Non-assertive)

1B. "You don't care at all about children. All you care about is pleasing the superintendent and collecting your pay cheque." (Aggressive)

1C. "I expect that you took this job partly because of your concern for children. Therefore, I expect that you will ..." (Assertive)

2A. "I didn't realise there was no money in the budget for this service!" (Non-assertive)

2B. "If there's no money for this service, it's because you're overpaid!" (Aggressive)

2C. "If there's no money for services it's because this school district has set other priorities. I would like to remind you that PL 94-142¹ requires these services and that federal funds will be withdrawn if you do not provide them." (Assertive)

3A. "I'm sorry to be calling again, but I was hoping you would pay the tuition at private

¹ This article refers to PL 94-142 which is the U.S. Public Law clause related to inclusive education. The Australian equivalent would be NSW Education Act. You could also quote the Disability Discrimination Act or Disability Standards for Education.

school because the program here doesn't seem to be what she needs." (Non-assertive)

3B. "I don't care if you do have a program in the public schools. I want my son in a private school. Everybody knows how rotten this public school is!" (Aggressive)

3C. "I'm willing to visit the program in the public school and document the services it offers before I decide whether or not it's an appropriate program for my child." (Assertive)

See the difference? A non-assertive approach is so indirect that the administrator hardly knows what is most important to the parent. And aggressive statements are such put-down that the administrator can't really hear what he is being told because his defences go up immediately. Assertive statements are direct and effective without being offensive (unless the administrator considers another opinion offensive!).

Assertiveness practice makes perfect. Here are three very common excuses for not providing required services for a disabled child. Look over the assertive responses and notice how direct they are. Learn to think and respond in assertive ways to these and other excuses for resisting change:

Administrator's statement

1. "You should be grateful your child is in any program. There are so many children who have nothing."
2. "You're too emotionally involved to know what's really best for your child. We are professionals. We know what's best!"
3. "Do you expect us to change the whole school system just to accommodate your child?"

Assertive response

1. "This program is not appropriate for my child. PL 94-142 requires an appropriate program for every child who needs special services. What my child needs is..."
2. "You are the professionals, but I am the authority on my own child; I know him better than anyone else precisely because I am so involved!"
3. "I expect you to obey the law and provide services for my child required by PL 94-142. Those services are... "

Accentuate the Positive!

The better you feel about yourself, the easier it is to assert yourself. How can you feel good about yourself when bureaucrats who remind you of how little you know constantly put you down? Start right now to replace negative thoughts and images about yourself with positive ones. Don't depend on others to convince you how good you are: **CONVINCE YOURSELF!**

Here is an exercise to help you build your confidence. Get a sheet of paper and write down the names of all the people with whom you feel good about yourself. Opposite each name, write down why you feel good when you are around that person. You will probably notice that the people you feel good with are relaxed and non-judgmental, people with whom you feel you can be really is "yourself." On another piece of paper, write down the names of all the people with whom you feel bad or uncomfortable, and why. You may notice that these people are usually unbending, arrogant, judgmental, critical, and often put you down. Think about how you act around these people. Are you usually up tight, stiff, rigid, and unable to give and be expressive? Are you more the "you" that you don't much like - the "you" you'd like to get away from? It's important to learn how those people who bring out the best or worst in us affect us.

To increase your feelings of self-confidence, increase your contacts with people with whom you feel good, and consciously LIMIT your contacts with those with whom you feel inadequate. That can be tough to do - especially if the person you should avoid is your spouse or a close relative!

Before you have an important meeting with school or medical or vocational rehabilitation personnel, try to have contact with the positive people in your life, and avoid the negative group. Talking to someone who is open and relaxed empowers you with confidence even if it's only a phone call. Your positive feelings then make it easier for you to respond assertively, even when confronting the "experts."

Watch Your Body Language!

People don't have to hear you speak before they know whether you're going to be assertive, non-assertive, or aggressive. Whether you are aware of it or not, your body is saying things about your power position before you even open your mouth; therefore, it's important for you to know how to reinforce your message with your body language. If you say one thing and your body says something else, it's much more difficult to shift the power to your side. Here are some body language clues to be aware of.

Non-assertive Body Language

1. Slumps when he's standing and doesn't look at you when he speaks.
2. Sits on the edge of her chair as though she was sitting on eggs, afraid to move an inch because she may break them. Doesn't feel that the whole chair is "hers," that she deserves the total space.
3. Is uncomfortable looking at you for more than a glance; never keeps steady eye contact as he makes his point.
4. Is afraid to take the initiative in greeting people; always waits for "permission" from

others to say "hello."

5. Chooses a seat away from people he perceives as powerful or threatening.
6. Never has necessary information for a meeting with one of the professionals dealing with his child.
7. Is usually underdressed or overdressed; dresses as though she were going to a picnic or a Saturday night party, instead of a business meeting.

Aggressive Body Language

1. Walks in a strident manner.
2. Doesn't listen when others are speaking.
3. Often interrupts when others are speaking.
4. Speak in a loud or monotone voice; not letting others takes their turn.
5. Can't hear what others say, or if he hears, can't understand.
6. Uses "overkill," spreading his documents and materials all over the room even when another case is being discussed.
7. Tips her chair back, or sits on the edge of her seat ready to pounce.

Assertive Body Language

1. Stands straight and look people in the eye when speaking with them.
2. Sits back in a relaxed manner, takes the space she deserves, in the chair and in the room.
3. Keeps eye contact with people with whom he is conversing.
4. Takes the initiative in greeting others at a meeting and in opening the conversation.
5. Seats himself next to the opposition's most powerful representative in the room.
6. Doesn't wait for permission to speak before making her point.
7. Carries necessary materials with him to meetings, spreads them on the table when his case is being discussed, and has the information well marked so that it is all at his fingertips.
8. Is dressed appropriately for a business meeting.

Learning to be assertive is a growth process. Don't think you can't do it just because all of the assertive things you want to accomplish don't happen overnight. If you are a woman, you have been programmed since you were a little girl to be non-assertive! Give yourself credit for the

assertive body language that you DO use. Consider yourself doing well if you are going in the direction of being assertive. Don't wait till you have achieved it to pat yourself on the back; you deserve credit for every bit of assertiveness you pull off.

Steady That Voice!

We usually know when our voice is a dead give-away of our fear, intimidation, anger, rage, and expectations. All of us sometimes get let down by our voice - even the strong ones. Think of times you've made a phone call that you were anxious about. You thought you were OK until the person answered, and then you choked up and could hardly keep from sobbing, or you lost your breath and could hardly speak loudly enough to be heard. Or the times you stood up to say something at a meeting or in a class, and the moment you were recognised to speak, your heart started beating so loudly you couldn't hear your own voice. It happens to almost everybody! What we have to remember is that we lived through it. And what we have to learn is that we can train our voices to work for us.

One way to get started is to speak in an assertive voice, a voice that sounds as if you expect cooperation. It helps to think about how your voice sounds when you are talking with people with whom you feel confident- your children, your friends, your spouse, relatives. Think how comfortable you are with them, and how you can and do control your voice.

Use the same skill in situations where you are less comfortable. Develop a low, sure voice so that you don't convey the message, "I'm not sure," when you are asking for an appointment or evaluation, or disagreeing with a bureaucrat. If you have to make a presentation at a meeting and are scared to death of public speaking, try to think of the worst things that could happen. Here are two fears that parents often mention:

1. "What if I forget what I'm going to say and my mind goes totally blank?" One way to deal with this is to turn to others at the meeting and say, 'We are all here to help in some way. What are some of the ways you can help?' Or, 'What are some of your needs?' Or, "What are some of the problems you bring to this meeting?" Start with someone near you and go around to the other people in the meeting. As you relax, you will remember the points you wanted to make.
2. "What if I say something stupid or embarrassing and make a fool of myself?" If you say something stupid or silly, the audience will probably laugh, so be direct about it - laugh with them. Say something like; "Things sometimes come out backward when I stand up in front of a group! Now let's get back to the issue ..."

Here are good ways to prepare for a presentation:

1. Rehearse your presentation before friends and members of your group. Practice for

clarity, brevity, naturalness, sincerity, eye contact, poise, and persuasiveness.

2. Tape your presentation and play it back. Make appropriate corrections in style, content, and body language.
3. Just before your turn to speak, think of an occasion in the past when you gave a successful speech. Think about positive people in your life. You will discover that you feel more relaxed and more self-confident as you concentrate on knowing how well you are able to do.

Fight Guilt!

Blaming yourself for your child's disability, or bothering a busy bureaucrat for information he promised you often spells G-U-I-L-T. Stop and think. How does feeling guilty help your child? What steps can you take to fight that guilt?

You can stop feeling guilty by acknowledging that you would love to be a better parent. We all would-even the professionals who imply that better parenting would help. But how do you think other parents would handle their family life, if they had a child with a disability to add to the stress of any parenting situation? Don't waste your energy wishing you were a better parent. Start doing something about it. Suggestions for action are provided in the next chapter, "Activise!" Fill the time you are spending on guilt with positive action toward your goal.

Defy the Hostage Trap

Many parents hesitate to ask for the services they need because they are afraid the doctor or teacher or therapist will take their resentment out on their child, or withdraw the service altogether. It does happen - if the professionals think you won't do anything about it. The deal is that your "co-operation" with the agency insures that they will "do the best they can with the money and staff resources they have." If you say that their best isn't good enough, they can penalise the hostage - your child - for your lack of co-operation.

One way to deal with the hostage trap is to call the bureaucrat on his threat immediately. For example, suppose he says, "if you aren't satisfied with this program, Mrs. L., he can go back to the regular classroom where he started!" Write the statement down and repeat it to the speaker to confirm the accuracy. If he doesn't withdraw or change his remark, immediately file a written complaint with his superiors, with a copy sent to the offender.

If your child or other children report incidents of physical or verbal abuse, do the following:

1. Contact other parents of children involved. Inform them of your child's report and invite them to a meeting to formulate a plan of action. If you don't know any other parents, ask your child for the names of other children she knows, and look up their names in your phone book. Your child will probably know at least one or two other children. And their

parents will know one or two more.

2. At the meeting discuss the report and ask parents if they have similar reports from their children. Write down a factual account of all incidents, with names, dates, and places.
3. Take your report to your local school board, to your parent organizations, to the PTA. Ask to be placed on the agenda.
4. Present the written report to the school principal, and ask her to conduct an investigation and take appropriate action. If the principal is not responsive, bring your complaint to the superintendent of schools, state officials, and to the United States Office of Civil Rights.
5. Remind groups those incidents of abuse and threats are seen and felt by ALL CHILDREN, whether they are disabled or not. A classroom where children are abused or threatened creates a destructive environment, and all parents should take appropriate action to stop it.

Cool It!

Parents report that whenever they assert themselves and ask for services, they get "put down." They don't go back to the school administrator, clergy, counsellor, or doctor because they dread being put down again.

Here are some things to do to resist the put-down:

1. It's easier to be put down when you are on the defensive. Try hard not to let anyone put you on the defensive. Never apologise for someone else's mistake or inaction, by saying, "I'm sorry to bother you again about this, but" Don't apologise because the bureaucrat didn't do something she was supposed to do, and you have to keep calling about it. It's SHE who needs to apologise!
2. Practice your conversation before you have a meeting. Anticipate the arguments your opponents will bring up, and the resistance to change tactics they will use. Practice an assertive response. Get your friends to help you role-play assertiveness and keep your cool.
3. The cooler you are the better an impression you make. Keep your cool even if the bureaucrat loses his. The person who keeps her cool is the one who is in control.

Stop the Run-around!

One trick administrators use to get parents off their backs is to claim that someone else is responsible for providing those services to your child, or someone else has the authority to make that decision. Here's how to stop getting the run-around:

1. Ask for the name of the person who has the responsibility, and that person's position, address, and phone number. Write the information in your notebook.
2. Ask her to call - right now, while you are there - the person just named, and arrange an appointment for you.
3. Don't leave until the other person acknowledges responsibility for providing the service you are requesting, or until you have an appointment with him to make specific arrangements for the services.
4. If you are getting the run-around on the phone, get the names, titles, and phone numbers of the people identified as having the authority to provide the required service.
5. Confirm by letter whatever you learn in a meeting or by phone.

Say What?

Effective listening is an important part of assertiveness. It's also an important part of negotiation and communication. Do you really listen when you are meeting with bureaucrats? Do you ever find yourself talking at the same time as the person you are listening to? Test your listening skills:

1. Pair off with another person and have her speak to you non-stop for a full minute.
2. Repeat, as closely as you can, what the speaker has just said to you.
3. Have the speaker correct you.
4. Change roles so that you are now the speaker, and try the above again.

How did you do? Could you repeat the speaker's statement reasonably accurately? Or did you find it hard to concentrate?

Practice listening skills with other parents in your group. Practice a couple of times for content, and then increase your listening skills by "tuning in" to the person's feelings. Try to be sensitive to the attitudes of the speaker. When you improve your sensitivity, you will find you are a better communicator, and able to assert yourself more effectively.

Strategies for gathering your allies²

In order to gather your allies you must be an ally of all children with disabilities. If you cannot share other parents' anger, sense of injustice, and commitment to change, you cannot be an ally and you cannot gather other allies to your side. For example, when a child has to wait for two hours at the doctor's office, do you say, "This is too much to ask of any child, especially a four-year-old hyperactive child," or do you say, "The doctor is a busy man and he always docs

² Adapted from Biklen, *Let Our Children Go*, pp. 33-39

the best he can"?

When things you and other parents ask for at school don't come through, do you say, "Our children have a right to more than this," or do you say, "The school has only so much money, and all the other children have a lot of demands too"? In other words, do you explain away the problem, excusing the bureaucracy, or do you join others to work for change, to work for the services your children deserve by law?

If you can find more in common with other parents of disabled children than with the administrators, then you can make alliances with other parents to create the power you need. It is only through such alliances that you can move bureaucracies, shift the balance of power to your side, and help your child become the emotionally and financially independent adult that is your goal for him.

A partnership with other parents can:

1. Strengthen you by letting you know that you are not alone with the problems you are experiencing in getting services for your child.
2. Inform you of your rights under the law.
3. Teach you the necessary tools for decision-making and action.
4. Help you rehearse your presentation when negotiating for services for your child.
5. Help you analyze problems and pinpoint areas of responsibility.
6. Help you determine available options to resolve a problem.
7. Help you file complaints with the United States Office of Education and the United States Office of Civil Rights.
8. Help you lobby for necessary legislation when the service your child needs does not exist.
9. Provide the emotional support you need to be effectively assertive.
10. Organise and participate in coalitions to reach mutual goals.
11. Initiate new services.
12. Help you to investigate grievances.
13. Follow up on complaints.
14. Go to court with you when other avenues have failed to get results.
15. Provide opportunities to share experiences, coping skills, negotiating and advocacy skills with other parents.

How can you gather your allies? Other parents have found them by:

- Attending meetings for parents of special education children, or conferences sponsored by the foundation related to the particular disability of their child.
- Visiting other parents at home.
- Volunteering to help other parent groups with their projects.
- Organising skill workshops for parent groups.
- Setting up regular coffee hours or an open house where parents can meet each other informally.
- Starting a newsletter and inviting other parents to contribute their frustration stories - and their success stories.
- Joining other parent groups to work together on common issues.
- Talking to parents about how to meet other parents.
- Visiting church and synagogue meetings, town meetings, or other public gatherings, and actively asking for parents who are interested in joining in partnership.

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SOURCE: Taking on the World: Empowering Strategies for Parents of Children with Disabilities

PUBLISHER: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1982



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