

Honesty and Assertiveness

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Life presents us with the same dilemma again and again: should you stand up for what you want, or let other people have what they want? Some people tend toward passivity, and others lean toward aggression. A passive response honors the other person's rights, but may cause you to neglect your own needs. An aggressive response is one where you stand up for what you want, but you trample other people's rights in the process. For example, if your friends are talking about a sleepover they're planning without you, you could:

Be **passive**, and keep quiet

OR

Be **aggressive**, and tell them what a bunch of rude jerks they are for leaving you out.

I taught a six-week class for students who tend to lean in the passive direction. These children are so polite and aware of other people's feelings that they choose not to voice their own thoughts and feelings. Passive children have often been praised for their passive behavior. Teachers like them because they quietly get their work done without arguing; peers like them because they're kind and very likely to say "yes" to any request. Unfortunately, there is a downside to passivity. Being too passive (too "nice") can send the message that "What I want doesn't matter." Passive children are vulnerable to neglecting their own needs, and allowing others to hurt them. Passive adults may get passed up for promotions, or get stuck in abusive relationships. Passive people end up getting hurt.

Fortunately, there is a solution. The cure for passivity is not aggression: it's assertiveness. If you imagine a straight line with "Passive" on one side and "Aggressive" on the other, "Assertive" would be the sweet spot right in the middle. Assertiveness is standing up for ourselves, but also respecting the wishes of others. I used the analogy of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" to help the children understand

this concept. If “Passive” is “too soft,” and “Aggressive” is “too hard,” then “Assertive” is the “just right” place in the middle.

If we go back to the original example of friends discussing an event that you’re not invited to, there is a third way to respond. Instead of being passive or aggressive, you could:

Be **assertive**, and tell your friends that it makes you sad to hear them making plans without you, and ask them if they could stop talking about it in front of you.

This is a hard thing for passive children to do. They’re afraid of making other people angry, and they’re afraid of being rejected. They don’t want to get in trouble, and they don’t want anyone to think they’re being mean. They have trouble saying no, and they have trouble being completely honest about their feelings. Becoming assertiveness takes practice. If you want to foster assertiveness in your students, make an effort to praise your kids when you hear them speaking up for themselves. Your child will realize that assertiveness is a quality you value. If you praise your kids for their assertiveness, they’re more likely to start praising themselves internally. This is the best way to get a new skill to stick.

If you’d like additional ideas on how to help your child build assertiveness skills, please contact me at (530) 559-0101 or egallup@nevcooca.org