



DIRECTORATE OF PREVENTION, RESILIENCE AND READINESS

Resilience in Focus

Assertive Communication: Modeling Healthy Boundaries for Teens

This article draws on insights from Treva Anderson, Ph.D., a Master Resilience Trainer - Lead Performance Expert and subject matter expert in healthy relationships and communication. She explains how Families can model assertiveness and boundaries in everyday life.

February is Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month, which makes it a great time for Families to talk about what healthy communication and respectful relationships look like. Teens learn these skills long before they start dating, mostly by watching the adults around them. When parents model assertive communication and clear boundaries, teens pick up those habits and carry them into their own relationships.

This article will explain:

- What assertive communication is.
- How parents and Families can model it at home.
- How healthy boundaries support safe, respectful relationships.

Why assertive communication matters

Assertive communication means expressing your thoughts, feelings and needs clearly, confidently and respectfully. It sits in the middle between being passive (avoiding conflict or not speaking up) and being aggressive (blaming, attacking or trying to control the conversation).

One common misconception about assertive communication is that it's a personality trait; but it's actually a skill that anyone can learn and practice.

Another misconception is that being assertive means staying emotionless. You don't have to avoid emotion—you just need to be aware of your emotions so you can communicate without losing control.

When teens learn assertive communication, they build important skills, such as:

- Saying what they think or feel in a direct, calm way.
- Staying away from exaggerations that can escalate conflict.
- Recognizing when someone is disrespecting a boundary.
- Handling disagreements without shutting down or overreacting.

These skills help teens feel safer, more confident and better prepared for healthy relationships.

How Families can model assertiveness at home

Children and teens learn a lot from watching how adults communicate. Parents and Family members can model assertive communication by:

- Speaking clearly and calmly, even during disagreements.
- Pausing to regulate emotions when conversations get heated.
- Explaining why certain behaviors or words crossed a boundary.
- Listening and encouraging teens to share their thoughts.
- Showing that it's possible to be firm and respectful at the same time.

Even small moments, such as taking a break to cool down or calmly asking for space, show teens what assertive communication looks like in practice.

Three doable steps for setting and maintaining boundaries

1. Know what you want: Determine your needs and limits before you start the conversation.
2. Pause and self-regulate: If emotions rise, take a moment to steady yourself so you can communicate calmly.
3. Use "I" statements: Share your feelings without blaming. Sticking with "I" language, such as "I felt frustrated during the conversation," helps keep communication focused and respectful.

Tips for parents and Families

- Model the communication style you want teens to use; actions teach far more than lectures.
- Talk about boundaries and why they matter.
- Reinforce healthy norms, such as not cursing or belittling each other.
- Give teens opportunities to practice expressing their needs respectfully.

Why practicing helps teens

When teens get regular practice with assertive communication and boundaries at home, they learn what acceptable behavior is, how to express themselves clearly and how to handle conflict without aggression or passivity. These skills are essential not only for preventing dating violence, but also for building strong, respectful relationships in every part of their lives.

Resources

- Assertive Communication for Teens: How to Help Your Teen Become More Assertive <https://www.horizonservices.org/assertive-communication-for-teens-how-to-help-your-teen-become-more-assertive/>
- Being Assertive and Setting Boundaries <https://kidshelpline.com.au/teens/issues/being-assertive-and-setting-boundaries>

- National Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Month <https://acf.gov/node/28884>
- Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month <https://www.loveisrespect.org/tdvam/>
- Use the 3 C's of Effective Communication to Navigate Tough Conversations <https://www.armyresilience.army.mil/ard/r2/Navigating-Tough-Conversations.html>