

## LEARNING ASSERTIVENESS AND BECOMING AN ADVOCATE

Learning assertiveness and becoming an advocate for your child are not necessarily easy tasks especially when you are in the middle of a crisis. However, we feel if you can learn new assertiveness skills and polish up the old ones that you already have, which will assist you on the path of helping to be your child's number one advocate. Advocacy (getting what you want for your child and what is best for your child) without assertiveness is nearly an impossible task.

So, what exactly is **assertiveness**? It can be defined in the following ways:

- Knowing what you want
- Making sure that your "wants" are fair
- Expressing our thoughts, feelings, beliefs in a direct, honest and appropriate way
- Asking for what you want clearly
- Developing the skills to stay calm
- Being open to praise and criticism

Assertiveness, as we know, is not the same as **aggressiveness** (trying to get what you need/want by bullying, threatening, whining, putting-down others or by making demands) can get you places, but generally not without doing some damage to your relationship with others. The flip side of aggressiveness is **passivity** or non-assertiveness. Being **passive** or **non-assertive** allows others to violate our rights and shows a lack of respect for our own needs. When being **passive**, the **non-assertive** person has decided that his or her own needs are secondary and opts to be a **victim**. Being aggressive or passive does not work well especially if you have to work cooperatively with a team of professionals who are trying to help your child

One of the side effects of assertiveness is that it is infectious: once you start practicing it, it is so pleasant and productive that you won't want to stop! Plus others on your team will begin practicing it as well. When assertiveness is present, everyone cooperates, willingly. Truly a "win-win" strategy.

There are, however, situations where assertive behavior is really difficult. Examples would be.

- When you need to vent your negative feelings
- When you are angry and feel that you need to show it
- When you need to complain
- When you need to ask for help
- When you are asked for your personal opinion
- When you want to refuse care
- Use the "I" message: Instead of saying or thinking "You make me so mad", try: I am feeling upset about this situation. I want to talk with you about this in greater detail..."

One of the most often encountered piece of advice/information/strategy given to people who are trying to develop their assertiveness skills is to learn how to:

- Give an “I” message which has 3 parts:
  - Behavior* (what it is that the other person has done or is doing);
  - Effect*: what is happening because of their behavior and
  - Feelings*: what effect does this behavior have on your feelings?
- An example: “When you are running behind in your schedule and are late for our appointments (*behavior*), and I have to wait an hour in this room (*effect*), I feel angry and also feel like I don’t matter much to you as a patient (*feelings*)” I would really like for you to try to be on time for our appointments or to keep me informed as to why you are falling behind.” This is a much more productive and assertive way of responding to a frustrating situation. little

Other strategies for conveying an assertive attitude:

- use suitable facial expressions, always maintain good eye contact
- keep your voice pleasant, but firm
- pay careful attention to the way you are holding your body and what (if any) gestures you may be using
- ask questions for clarification
- listen...and let people know you have hear what they have said

## **RESOURCES**

### **Advocacy and Assertiveness**

Roots and Wings: A Manual About Self-Advocacy—by Susan Lehr and Steven Taylor. Designed for parents who want to help their children with disabilities become their own advocates.

Managing Assertively: How to Improve Your People Skills: A Self-Teaching Guide, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition – by Madelyn Burley-Allen

The Assertiveness Workbook: How to Express Your Ideas and Stand Up for Yourself at Work and in Relationships – by Randy J. Paterson, Ph.D.

Brave New You: 12 Dynamic Strategies for Saying What You Want and Being Who You Are – John and Mary Valentis

Health Care Resource Guide for Consumers Navigating the Health Care System:  
<http://library.uchc.edu/departm/hnet/hcbib.html>

How to Get Services by Being Assertive- by Charlotte Des Jardins 1993. 208 pages.