

Assertiveness is a Better Way

Have you ever nagged your children until they complied, or aggressively demanded them to “Do what I tell you,” or submissively given in to whatever they wanted to do? Probably so. Did this foster your respect for your children, or their respect for you? Probably not. The good news is: assertiveness provides a better way.

The bad news is: few individuals are assertive because our natural tendency is to fight (act aggressively) or to take flight (act submissively) when we encounter a perceived stressful situation. When our autonomic nervous system is triggered, the fight or flight reaction occurs to protect us – unless our central nervous system overrides this.

Because assertiveness does not naturally occur, it must be learned and then developed as a competency comprised of new concepts, new attitudes and new behavioral skills.

Assertiveness is much more than a middle path between aggressiveness and submissiveness, and is also different from nagging. The foundational difference is this: only assertiveness expresses respect for oneself and for others. In plain language, everyone “wins” when assertiveness is employed.

To differentiate these approaches (except nagging – I’m writing a book on this), I’m going to describe an actual situation.

My wife, daughter (Tam) and I wanted to take a single mom and her two girls to Granville Island after church. Our family often went there for lunch and to have fun, and so we invited them to join us. Many times, I had seen this very submissive mom allow both girls to do whatever they wanted (run around, make noise, show no respect for anyone or anything), and occasionally nag them into submission.

After the mom and two girls and our daughter got seated in the car, I opened the rear car door, leaned inside without hovering and looked my daughter directly in the eye, then looked both girls directly in the eye (to get their total attention) and said in a well-modulated voice, looking back and forth: “Tam has told you how much fun we have at Granville Island. Today, all of us are going to have fun and eat there. We can only do this if each of you behaves. Tam will tell you that we have left there and come home when she misbehaved. Tam, is what I’m saying true?” Tam nodded and said, “Yes.”

I then explained the fun things we were going to do, and said: “Do each of you want to do... [I described several fun activities]?” I explained the appropriate behaviors we expected, and said: “Tell me how each of you need to behave.”

They did, and I said: “If you do what you’ve said you will do, we will have fun today. If you don’t, we are all leaving Granville Island immediately. Tam, do I mean what I just said?” Tam nodded and said, “Yes.”

I then said: “Each of you has a choice today – to behave and have fun, or we come home immediately. What is your choice?” I asked each girl and Tam to tell me how they were going to behave.

The two girls obviously understood my assertive eye contact, plan for having fun, clear statement of needed behaviors and consequences for misbehaving, the choice I gave and the appropriate behaviors each restated.

The mom looked like she was in shock because her two girls had not responded to any adult like they just had to me. She was in greater shock when her two girls behaved as they said they would, so that we all had fun together plus a good meal each one chose – over a three-hour period!

And, Tam once again learned that her parents enjoy doing fun things with her without nagging, being submissive or aggressive. At age 42 with four children of her own, she still knows this when she phones us to do fun things together and seeks our wise counsel – and teaches us what she has learned as an assertive mom.

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