

CORNERSTONE
DAY SCHOOL

Parents Matter

JUNE 2023



Communication: Effective and Assertive

For many parents, it is an important goal to teach their child how to communicate effectively. One communication skill with lifelong utility is assertiveness: learning how to make a request respectfully and firmly or say no. The following is a useful framework, adapted from Dialectical Behavior Therapy (pioneered by Marsha Linehan) that you can practice with your child or adolescent to help cultivate this skill, or that you yourself can practice to lead by example. It is illustrated by the acronym DEARMAN, with a parent-relevant example. Practice with your kids with a child relevant example.

D: Describe. In this first step, you describe the problem, sticking to the facts (rather than making judgments or interpretations) to get everyone on the same page. Everyone should agree about the description.

NO: Earlier you ignored my request that you come home by 6pm.

YES: I notice you came home at 8pm instead of 6pm like I asked.

E: Express. Here, you express how it makes you feel, using 'I' statements instead of 'you' statements. You can fill in the blanks "I feel _____ when you _____"

NO: You are so rude and disrespectful

YES: It makes me feel disrespected when you come home later than I have asked you to.

A: Assert. Here, you say no (if a request is being made) or say what you would like them to do instead with an affirmative statement (please do X) being preferable instead of a negating statement (please don't do X) which leaves confusion about the desired behavior.

NO: Please don't be late in future

YES: I would like you to be home by 6pm on school nights in future.

R: Reinforce. Here, we highlight the benefits for the other person for cooperating without threatening or using vague negative consequences.

NO: If you don't you will be in a lot of trouble

YES: I would be able to trust you more and give you more privileges if you stuck to our curfew agreement.

M: Mindful. Stick to your message! It's easy to go down a rabbit hole when the other person protests, particularly when discussing an emotional matter, allowing the message you are trying to communicate to fall by the wayside. This involves being a 'broken record'.

NO: Getting into arguments about what did or did not happen or what the rules should or should not be.

YES: I know that other kids stay out later than you and that you feel that is unfair AND I would still like you to be back at 6pm.

A: Appear. Appear confident (even if you don't feel it) by using a confident tone of voice, standing up tall, and making eye contact.

N: Negotiate. When appropriate, be willing to give to get with compromises. Kids are more receptive to requests when they are asked for their input. E.g. how do you think we can address this problem?

Practice makes perfect! It is perfectly natural that the first times you and your child use this skill it feels a little unnatural. It's all about finding your own voice in communicating with this skill, which takes time and practice and willingness to embrace the discomfort of trying something new and outside of your comfort zone.



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