Keeping Bullies at Bay: Assertive Communication for Kids

by [Jyl Johnson Pattee](http://mommygossip.blogspot.com/" \o "Visit Jyl Johnson Pattee’s website) on July 14th, 2010

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*By Signe Whitson LCSW, brought to you by a*[*baby clothes*](http://www.mybabyclothesboutique.com/)*boutique*

Round-the-clock internet availability and 24/7 cell phone access gives kids the opportunity to be in touch at any (and every) moment.  For many tweens and teens, it is a thrill to be able to connect with friends beyond the school day or a traditional curfew.  For those who are targeted by cruel peers, however, it can seem as if there is no escape from cruel teasing, taunting, and texting.  In this world of constant contact, children need to know how to use communication to keep bullies at bay.

Assertive Communication for Kids

Assertiveness is a style of communication in which a person expresses his thoughts and feelings in a verbal, non-blaming, respectful way (Long, Long & Whitson, 2008). When considered in the context of young people targeted by bullies, assertive communication is the essential middle ground between an aggressive comeback that escalates a bully’s hostility and a passive response that projects a target’s lack of power.

Bullies often select targets that they believe will not stand up for themselves.  The more a bully confirms that he can pick on his target unchecked, the more he will do it.  That’s why an assertive response is so effective in countering bullying; the child who masters assertive communication demonstrates that a bully’s attacks will be answered in a fair, but formidable way.  Finding his target to be too powerful to provoke, the bully will most often move on.

Passive, Aggressive & Assertive Communication Styles

Consider these possible exchanges between a bully (Abby) and her would-be target (Tess):

X  
**Abby**: If you want to sit at our table, you can’t dress like that.  You have to wear [trendy clothes](http://www.mybabyclothesboutique.com/trendy-baby-clothes-c-88_91.html) from the mall.

**Tess**: These are from the mall. They’re from your favorite store.  I love the way you dress.

This response is a passive one that allows Abby to trample over Tess’ personal boundaries.  By complimenting Abby after her obvious attempt at exclusion, Tess sends a clear message: “Insulting me is OK.  Demeaning me is just fine.  I will tolerate whatever you say, in hopes that you will like me.”

**Tess**: Who would want to sit here with you at the loser table, anyway?

This aggressive response challenges Abby to up the ante on the conflict.  While snappy comebacks sound and feel good in the moment, in the long run, they are the classic example of two wrongs spiraling toward disaster.  By mirroring Abby’s aggressive response, Tess has virtually guaranteed that another conflict will ensue.

**Tess**: Cut it out, Abby.  Clothes aren’t what’s really important here.

This response is assertive.  Tess lets Abby know that she does not intend to be victimized.  Her communication is simple and unemotional.  It protects her boundaries without trampling over Abby’s.

Children who learn from a young age to communicate assertively project a kind of confidence that protects them from being targeted by bullies later in life.

Using Body Language Effectively

When teaching your child to use assertive communication, practice using body language to reinforce words.  These non-verbal strategies alert a bully that your child means what he says:

* Use a calm, even tone of voice—Shouting, cursing, or using a shaky voice negates the power of assertive words.
* Maintain an appropriate distance from the bully—Stand well within earshot, but not “in the bully’s face” or shrinking back.
* Use the bully’s name when addressing her—This is an assertive technique that lets the bully know she is your equal
* Look the bully directly in the eye—Maintaining eye contact is a mark of emotionally honest and direct communication.

Unlike the aggression that underlies bullying, assertive behavior does not depreciate or cause harm. Rather, assertiveness is a healthy way of de?ning personal boundaries.  When parents teach their children the skills of assertive communication—both verbal and non-verbal—they fortify them with lifelong skills for maintaining healthy boundaries and signaling bullies that they are too powerful to be victimized.