

E-4: Be assertive and fair while maintaining student dignity

What should I do in order to respond to students assertively?

Being assertive means giving **firm, positive, and respectful** directives to students that maintain their dignity. Use the chart below to see suggestions for what to do and what to avoid in order to be assertive:

What to do	What to avoid
<p>Maintain a confident mindset that you are in charge of upholding expectations in your classroom</p>	<p>Thinking that you aren't ultimately responsible or can't influence whether students will follow our expectations</p>
<p>Find a style that works for you by examining your own strengths and personality traits</p>	<p>Becoming someone you're not by adopting a different "persona" that feels awkward or unnatural</p>
TONE	
<p>Establish expectations and deliver consequences in a calm, neutral, and respectful tone</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use falling intonation on the last word of your sentences • Maintain an emotionless voice that establishes personal distance from the situation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yelling, sounding hostile or harsh • Using a sarcastic, demeaning, or insulting tone • Sounding indecisive, meek, or permissive of student behavior that does not meet your expectations • Using "up-talk" (rising intonation on the last word of your sentences) • Showing emotions in your voice, such as frustration, fear, or pleading • Sighing
BODY LANGUAGE	
<p>Use a confident, poised posture, while making direct eye contact with students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face students with shoulders squared • Stand straight and tall • Keep arms behind your back or comfortably at your sides • Maintain a blank, emotionless face 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoiding eye contact • Standing with a slouching posture • Using distracting arm or hand gestures • Having crossed arms • Keeping your back to students or turning away from them • Using an expressive, emotional face • Rolling your eyes

What to do	What to avoid
VERBAL LANGUAGE	
<p>Speak in positively-worded, tight imperatives or statements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Listen.” • “Sit.” • “Take out...” • “I need you to...” • “You will...” • Positive reinforcement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “I like the way ...” ○ “I am impressed by ..” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using interrogative language <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “OK?” ○ “Can you...?” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Will you...?” • “Let’s...” • Using insults or demeaning language toward students
<p>Employ language that empowers students with a sense of control or choice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Chris, since you chose to get up and walk around the room without asking for permission, please go and flip your card to yellow.” • “Jessica, I already gave you a warning for turning around and talking to Juan during the warm-up. Since you chose to continue that behavior, you will now be required to remain in the room during hallway time. I’m putting your initials on the board as a reminder.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making students feel like they’re powerless to influence or improve their situation • Telling students they are “in trouble” or giving consequences without saying why or explaining what they can do to rectify the problem and improve their standing
<p>Employ descriptive language that <i>portrays</i> a situation, behavior, achievement, or feeling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For example: you turn to Linda, who has just interrupted Faye while she is speaking, and say “I cannot concentrate on what Faye is saying while you are talking. We will discuss this further in our after-class conference.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using judgmental language that <i>labels</i> behavior and students. • For example: you turn to Linda, who has just interrupted Faye while she was speaking, and snarl, “Don’t be so rude! We’ll be discussing your poor manners after class.”

Other strategies for empowering students with your behavior management

In addition to using language that conveys to students what choice they have, consider the following:

- **Use signs in your classroom**, such as one above your consequences chart that reads, “If you CHOOSE to break a rule...” or “Look here to see how we have CHOSEN to behave”
- **Give students a “clean slate” after the consequence is over.** If at the elementary level, start your series of consequences over each day or halfway through the day (for example, putting each student back to “green” on the traffic light after they have served the consequence for moving to red). If at the secondary level, allow students to return to the bottom rung of the consequences ladder for a fresh start every Monday if you see your students for an hour each day

Examples of using student conferences to deliver consequences respectfully

If you find that Nicole is constantly turning around and talking to Kia, you will want to work with her to get at the root of the problem – and to involve her in that process. When she stays after class, you might have a conversation like the following:

Teacher: Nicole, I’ve noticed that in the past few weeks you’ve had a particularly hard time staying quiet when you are supposed to be doing independent work. Today you repeatedly turned to talk to Kia. Last week I remember you talking to Stanley. I’d like to understand why this is happening.

Student: Well, I guess I just like to talk. My grandmother always tells me I talk too much. And today I had something I needed to tell Kia.

Teacher: I see. Was it something that you could have told her during hallway time?

Student: Yeah, I guess.

Teacher: Ok, so how can we help you stay focused during the class period?

Student: I don’t know. (teacher waits) I guess...well, with Kia right behind me it’s really tempting to talk to her. Maybe if I sat farther away from her, and couldn’t even see her, it would be easier for me.

Teacher: So looking at the seats in the classroom, there are empty ones here and here. This one would put you far away from Kia. You can move to this seat as of tomorrow.

In the situation with Dexter [below](#), you should seek to understand Dexter's frustration with the book. Again, rather than just being punitive, you want to have a solution-oriented approach to student misbehavior. "Empathetic listening" requires teachers to avoid taking student complaints personally (as we are often tempted to do) and instead focus on "hearing the intent and emotions behind what another says and reflecting them back by paraphrasing."¹ That conference might go as follows:

- Teacher:** You said the book was really dumb and seemed pretty frustrated that you had to read it. (*teacher paraphrases the student's statement*)
- Student:** Yeah. I hate it.
- Teacher:** You sound like you're not enjoying the book at all, Dexter. (*again, paraphrasing*)
- Student:** I'm not. I can't keep track of what is happening in it. And I have to stop every two sentences to look up all these stupid words. I hate it!
- Teacher:** It's difficult to understand, and that bothers you. (*paraphrasing once again*)
- Student:** Yeah, and I'd rather read a book about aliens anyway. That's what I want to do my book report on.
- Teacher:** Well, there are a few other books in our class library that are about aliens. Let's see if we can find one that won't have as many frustrating vocabulary words.

What are examples of assertive responses?

Comparison of assertive, nonassertive, and hostile responses

Situation	Nonassertive Response	Assertive Response	Hostile Response
A student is disengaged from a lecture.	The teacher ignores it, thinking, "I'm just glad he's not disrupting anything."	Without stopping the lecture, the teacher walks back and stands near the student. The student reengages.	The teacher stops the lesson and says, "Hey, I'm not standing up here to hear myself talk. Wake up and pay attention. If you like staring out the window so much, I'll have you stay in after class and you can stare out the window all you want."
A student with a history of misbehavior is on-task, working well.	The teacher appreciates the fact in his mind, but doesn't communicate that to the student in any way.	The teacher makes eye contact and nods in approval to the student. Later, as the class is leaving the teacher says, "You did a wonderful job working on that assignment today."	The teacher says, "It's about time you are finally started working like a ninth-grader."
Students are running in the classroom when you are trying to line up for lunch.	"Boys, how many times do I have to ask you to walk in the classroom? Now I'm tired of having to repeat myself. Next time, please try to act like third-graders, okay?"	The teacher calmly yet firmly states, "Kevin, Jerry, Jon, the rule is no running in the classroom. You know the consequence for that behavior is to be last in line. Now I want the three of you to stand at the end of the line—quietly and quickly. Thank you."	Clearly exasperated, the teacher says in a strident tone, "I've had it with you boys. I'll see all of you after school."

¹ Woolfolk, Anita. *Educational Psychology*. New York, NY: Allyn & Bacon, 2001, 466.

These examples paint a good picture of how effective teachers assert their authority in a given situation. Remember, however, that your authority is manifested in more than just your words - facial expressions, body language and overall behavior also contribute to your students' perception of you as the authority figure. A key component of effectively asserting your authority is attending to how you *behave* as much as what you *say*. The following chart outlines the verbal and non-verbal characteristics of the nonassertive, assertive, and hostile teachers exemplified in the table above:

Nonassertive Teacher	Assertive Teacher	Hostile Teacher
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses an indecisive tone; requests often sound more like a question and leave room for student refusal. • Implements consequences and rewards inconsistently. • Cannot model behavior, since student expectations for behavior are unclear. • Body language may convey timidity and lack of confidence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses a firm, positive, respectful tone. • Applies consequences as outlined and delivers praise as expected. • Models how students are expected to behave (for example, during “silent time” the teacher is silent as well). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses a harsh, disrespectful tone; shout at students. • Administers consequences that are several degrees harsher than what is necessary, and positive reinforcement is given rarely and/or sarcastically. • Flaunts the fact that they are “above the rules.” Teacher brazenly chews gum, drinks soda, or engages in other activities from which students are prohibited. • Body language may also be intimidating, cold or aloof.

Model teacher responses to classroom situations

Student Behavior	Your Response
<p>During silent independent work, Nicole turns around and says something to Kia. Kia simply shakes her head and continues to work. You catch Nicole's eye and write her initials on the board, signifying a warning. Ten minutes later, Nicole is turned around in her seat again, talking audibly to Kia.</p> <p>Later, Kia turns to her left and says something to Miwa.</p>	<p>“Nicole, because you chose to turn around and talk to Kia after my warning, you have chosen to stay after class for three minutes once everyone else leaves to explain what is preventing you from focusing.”</p> <p>You write Kia's initials on the board.</p>

Student Behavior	Your Response
<p>You notice Chris stealthily eating chips during your explanation of how to solve a second order equation.</p>	<p>Once students are working independently on solving the equations you have written on the board, you walk over to Chris and quietly say, "Chris, because you chose to eat those chips in class you'll need to stay after school so we can strategize about how to keep you from getting hungry during class."</p>
<p>You are walking the class down the hallway to the library. You turn around and watch as Jenny lags behind the line, stopping to wave at friends in Mr. Farr's class and do a little dance in front of Ms. Baker's class.</p>	<p>"Jenny, please get back in line and plan to speak with me when we arrive at the library." Once there, you speak to her individually. "Because you chose to play in the hallway on the way to the library instead of walking quietly in the line, you have chosen to write a letter of apology to the teachers whose classes you have disrupted with your antics. I expect you to deliver a letter to Mr. Farr and Ms. Baker by 3:30 today. While in the library, I know you will make better behavioral choices."</p>
<p>During a whole group discussion, James answers a question. After James gives his response, Curtis mutters, "What a fag." The other students near Curtis laugh.</p>	<p>"I am shocked that you would use such a hurtful word and that others would laugh. Hurtful words, and laughing about their use, damage our goal of making this classroom a space where everyone feels welcome. The word Curtis used, "fag," is a hurtful word that refers to gay people. We need to stop what we're doing. I'd like each of you to write a page in your journal that explains a time someone used a word that hurt you. Then we will read some out loud..."</p> <p>Some students complain and say, "I didn't say any bad words." You respond, "that's excellent. This assignment should be very easy for you – you already know how hurtful language can be."</p>
<p>During small group reading time, Dexter throws his book on the floor and exclaims, "This book is so DUMB! Why do I have to read it?"</p>	<p>You move Dexter's clothespin to the yellow light and say, "Dexter, it sounds like you need a cooling off period. We don't treat school materials like that. Please pick up your book and put it on the table, and then move to the timeout chair and fill out a behavior reflection form. I'll be over in a moment to discuss your frustration with you."</p>

Corps member testimonial about being assertive

The Firm and Positive Approach

Theresa Noble (Miami '03) discovered that, if she wanted to create an environment where her students were respectful toward one another and excited to be in school, she would need to act the same way. She wrote this reflection five months into her first year of teaching:

My classroom culture has improved enormously. That is not to say that it is perfect now by any means. In fact, I think it has improved so much because it was so bad at first! In the beginning, I was so intent on being a serious, respected teacher that had control of her class that I forgot to be myself and relax sometimes. I became someone I never wanted to be in the classroom: I was snappy, rude, loud and intimidating. I realized this needed to change when I was sitting next to a retired teacher on my flight back to Miami from Christmas break with my family. I was tired and not looking forward to going back. The woman could sense this and she said, "First of all, you need to relax and stop expecting perfection. I was still learning my 35th year of teaching. The key to managing for me was to treat every child as if they were the most important person in the class. Find what works for you and don't pay attention to the teachers who think you should be yelling more." I started back with a calm, focused attitude and tried being polite for a change. It worked! My kids have responded so much more positively to a kind, respectful but firm teacher than they did when I was trying to be intimidating.

What should I do in order to be fair when responding to misbehavior?

- Respond to all students in a **just, unbiased** manner
- **Avoid using preferential treatment** – e.g., being more lenient in administering consequences to students who have been good in the past
- **Avoid being stricter with students who have shown a pattern of misbehavior** – e.g., watching “problem” students particularly carefully, looking for them to act up, or sending them out of your classroom the first chance you get, rather than following your ladder of consequences, to get the child out of your hair.

Why is this important?

Not treating students fairly undermines the legitimacy of your behavior management system. Once you start eyeing certain students with suspicion even before they've done anything wrong that day, you've exploded the power of high expectations. Kids can smell mistrust a mile away and may even play the role you've cast for them. For children who are weighing whether to follow the rules, it may not be worth trying to behave if your teacher simply expects you to be bad.

Note: responding justly is closely related to being consistent in addressing misbehavior.