

# A Guide to Help Children Speak Up Confidently



# Why These Skills Matter Now



## They're Noticing

Between ages 9 and 11, kids begin noticing what feels fair, when they're uncomfortable, and what they want – but many don't have the words or confidence to express it just yet.



## A Powerful Window

This stage is a powerful time to teach self-advocacy and assertiveness as skills that help them speak up clearly, calmly, and respectfully.



## Long-Term Impact

These tools protect them in tricky peer moments, support their emotional resilience, decision-making, and ultimately, their mental health.

## Start with Self-Awareness

Before kids can advocate for themselves, they need to *notice* what they're feeling and *recognize* what they need. Help them tune into early body cues or emotions.



### Body Cues

*"My stomach feels weird when I'm nervous."*



### Emotional Triggers

*"I get mad when someone touches my stuff."*




### Name It

When we name feelings and connect them to situations, kids begin understanding when to speak up.

# Explain Healthy Boundaries

Before a child can use assertiveness effectively, they need a working understanding of what boundaries are – and why they matter.

 For children around age 9, explain: *"Boundaries are limits we set to help ourselves feel safe, respected, and comfortable – with our bodies, our space, and our emotions."*



## Physical Boundaries

Not wanting someone to stand too close, hug you, or touch your belongings.



## Emotional Boundaries

Needing someone to stop teasing, not sharing private information, or giving you space when upset.



## Self Check-In

*"Do I feel okay with this?" "Am I comfortable right now?"* This self-awareness is the foundation for boundary-setting.

As they build awareness, support them in putting words to it: *"I don't want to be touched right now,"* or *"That joke hurt my feelings."* These small moments of clarity build capacity to protect their well-being in more complex situations over time.

# Teach 'I' Statements Early

## Instead of...

*"You're being mean!"* – which can escalate conflict.


## Try an "I" Statement

*"I don't like when people cut in line."* – focuses on their own experience and encourages problem-solving.

Practice simple, respectful phrases that your child can use to express their needs – **without blame**. Help them share what they're feeling without accusing or attacking someone else.

→ A friend laughed at their answer in class → *"I felt embarrassed when people laughed – I wasn't trying to be funny."*

→ A sibling barges in without knocking → *"I need more space when I'm reading. Can you knock next time?"*

 By age 9, most kids can start using short "I" statements with adult support. Coach them in the moment – or role-play later that evening after a tricky interaction at school or with a sibling.

# Build Decision-Making into Daily Life

**Self-advocacy grows when kids feel their choices matter.** Offer low-stakes decisions they can own.



## Snack Choice

Which snack to bring to school or have after class.



## Task Order

Which homework or chore to start with first.



## Free Time

Whether to go outside or stay in and read.

- ✔ Avoid correcting small decisions that can be negotiable – even if you'd make a different one. When kids see that their voice has an impact, they're more likely to speak up when it *really* counts.

## Model Assertiveness (Not Aggression)

Kids this age are watching how adults handle frustration, disagreement, and boundary-setting – and they're absorbing those cues more than we realize. Assertiveness means standing up for yourself **without being disrespectful or overpowering**.



### Narrate Your Boundaries

*"I'm saying no firmly, but kindly."*

*"I hear you're frustrated, but I'm not okay with being spoken to that way."*

*"It's okay to feel mad. It's not okay to yell at people."*



### After the Moment

If your child yells, shuts down, or uses sarcasm – wait until they're calm, then model what they could say next time:

*"Next time, instead of slamming the door, you could say, 'I need some space right now.'"*



### Scripts Over Time

Modeled phrases become scripts your child uses in other situations of pressure – learning to remain respectful but confident in emotionally-charged moments.

# Make It Safe to Practice at Home

Home is a child's first and most consistent social environment – which makes it the most effective place to practice assertiveness from an early age.

- **Allow Respectful Disagreement**

When your child says, *"I don't think that's fair,"* pause before reacting. You can still maintain the limit – *"I understand you feel it's unfair, but we're still turning screens off now"* – while validating their perspective.

- **Reinforce Emotional Safety**

This kind of interaction strengthens emotional safety and helps your child build confidence using their voice in a calm, regulated way.

- **Reframe "Assertiveness"**

Over time, kids learn assertiveness isn't about being "rude" or always getting their way – it's about expressing their needs, setting boundaries, and protecting themselves clearly and firmly.

## Prepare for Peer Moments

Many kids freeze or go along with things when they don't want to – especially in peer settings. Practicing what they could say *ahead of time* can reduce that freeze response.

1

When a rule is broken

*"That's not okay with me."*

2

When they feel pressured

*"I don't want to do that."*

3

When someone is unkind

*"Stop – please don't say that to me."*



Role-playing short, assertive phrases like these ahead of time makes a real difference when it counts in the moment.

# Reinforce and Remind

## Praise Specifically

When your child expresses a feeling clearly, communicates a need, or holds a boundary – even in small moments – name it.

*"You told your friend you didn't want to play that game, and you said it kindly. That's assertiveness."*

*"You let me know what felt unfair without yelling. That took self-control."*

Specific reinforcement like this strengthens internal motivation and builds a growing sense of competence.

## Normalize the Challenge

Let your child know that setting boundaries and speaking up isn't always easy, even for grown-ups.

*"It's normal to feel nervous or unsure when you're standing up for yourself. I still feel that way sometimes too."*

Remind them that practicing takes time – and it's okay to ask for help. If they're ever unsure what to say, encourage them to talk to a trusted adult. Knowing they don't have to handle it alone reinforces that asking for support is part of being strong.

# References

References: American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), Children's Wisconsin, Children's Hospital Colorado, Nemours KidsHealth, BrainLine / HEATH Resource Center.