

# Assertive Discipline<sup>1</sup>

Assertive discipline is a structured, systematic approach designed to assist educators in running an organized, teacher-in-charge classroom environment. Lee and Marlene Canter, when consulting for school systems, found that many teachers were unable to control undesirable behavior that occurred in their classrooms. The Cantors, rightfully so, attributed this to a lack of training in the area of behavior management. Based on their research and the foundations of assertiveness training and applied behavior analysis, they developed a common sense, easy-to-learn approach to help teachers become the captains of their classrooms and positively influence their students' behavior. Today, it is the most widely used "canned" (prepared/packaged) behavior management program. Assertive discipline has evolved since the mid 70's from an authoritarian approach to one that is more democratic and cooperative.

The Cantors believe that you, as the teacher, have the right to determine what is best for your students, and to expect compliance. No pupil should prevent you from teaching, or keep another student from learning. Student compliance is imperative in creating and maintaining an effective and efficient learning environment. To accomplish this goal, teachers must react assertively, as opposed to aggressively or non assertively.

**Assertive teachers** react confidently and quickly in situations that require behavior management. They have a few clearly stated classroom rules and give firm, clear, concise directions to students who are in need of outside control. Students who comply are reinforced, whereas those who disobey rules and directions receive negative consequences. Assertive teachers do not see students as adversaries, nor do they use an abrasive, sarcastic, hostile style (a "hostile teacher"). Neither do they react in a passive, inconsistent, timid, non directive manner (a "non-assertive teacher").

Assertive teachers believe that a firm, teacher-in-charge classroom is in the best interests of students. They believe that the students wish to have their behavior directed by the teacher. The Canter's state that society demands appropriate behavior if one is to be accepted and successful. Therefore, no one benefits when a student is allowed to misbehave. Teachers show their concern for today's youth when they demand and promote appropriate classroom behavior. Additionally, educators have the right to request and expect assistance from parents and administrators in their efforts.

More than being a director, assertive teachers build positive, trusting relationships with their students and teach appropriate classroom behavior (via direct instruction...describing, modeling, practicing, reviewing, encouraging and rewarding) to those who don't show it at present. They are demanding, yet warm in interaction, supportive of the youngsters, and respectful when addressing misbehavior. Assertive teachers listen carefully to what their students have to say, speak respectfully to them, and treat everyone fairly (not necessarily equally).

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Mac's Behavior Management Site, <http://www.behavioradvisor.com/>.

## How to Use Assertive Discipline

1. Dismiss the thought that there is any acceptable reason for misbehavior (Biologically based misbehavior may be an exception).
2. Decide which rules you wish to implement in your classroom. Devise **four or five rules** that are specific and easily understood by your students. (For more on making rules, see the home page link on "[How to create your own behavior management system](#)")
3. Determine negative consequences for noncompliance (You will be providing a consequence **EVERY TIME** a student misbehaves). Choose **three to six negative consequences** (a "discipline hierarchy"), each of which is more punitive or restrictive than the previous one. These will be administered if the student continues to misbehave. The Canters recommend that you **NOT** continue punishing if talking with the youngster will help to defuse the situation. (For more on making and implementing consequences, see the home page link on "[How to create your own behavior management system](#)")
4. Determine **positive consequences** for appropriate behavior. For example, along with verbal praise, you might also include raffle tickets that are given to students for proper behavior. Students write their names on the cut up pieces of paper and drop them into a container for a daily prize drawing. Even if a student is having a bad day, there is a reason to improve...s/he might get a ticket and have a chance at winning the raffle prize. Others might receive notes of praise to be shown to their parents.

Group rewards are also used. A marble might be dropped into a jar for each predetermined interval that the class as a whole has been attentive and respectful. When the jar is full, a special event is held. Some assertive teachers also write a letter of the alphabet on the board for each period of good group behavior. When the letters spell "Popcorn Party" (or some other activity), that event is held.
5. Conduct a meeting to inform the students of the program. Explain why rules are needed. List the rules on the board along with the positive and negative consequences. Check for understanding. Review periodically.
6. Have the students write the rules and take them home to be signed by the parents and returned (optional depending on age, language of parents, chances of forms being returned, etc.). Attach a message explaining the program and requesting their help.
7. Implement the program immediately.
8. Become skilled in the use of other assertive discipline techniques:
  - a. Communicate your displeasure with a student's misbehavior, but then be sure to tell the student **what to do**. For example: "Bill, stop writing and pass your paper forward." Notice that the teacher told the student what not to do, but also told the student **what to do**. Many students continue to display inappropriate behavior when they have been told to discontinue because they do not know what they **should be doing**. Now that you have given a direction, you can reinforce

the student for compliance or punish him or her for noncompliance. Be sure to add emphasis to your directions by using eye contact, hand gestures, and the student's name.

**b.** Recognize and quickly respond to appropriate behavior. This quick action will encourage the students to display the desired behavior more often. Be aware that some students may need to be reinforced quietly or non-verbally to prevent embarrassment in front of peers.

**c.** Learn to use the "broken record" technique. Continue to repeat your command (a maximum of three times) until the student follows your directions. Do not be sidetracked by the student's excuses. **For example:**

Teacher: "Vince, you have work to do. Get away from that window and sit in your seat."

Student: "But I want to see the cop give that guy a ticket."

Teacher: "I understand, but I want you to sit down now."

Student: "Just one minute, OK?"

Teacher: "No, Vince, I want you to sit down now."

Student: "Aw, OK."

**Nice kid.** If the command is not followed, you might issue a **choice** to the student. This can be done after the first, second, or third request. Give the student a choice between following the command or facing a consequence for disobedience. For example: "Vince, you have a choice. You can sit down now or you'll sit with me after school (or during recess)." If you find it necessary to implement the consequence, make it clear to the student that he or she made the decision as to which option will occur. The consequence should be administered quickly and in a calm, matter-of-fact manner. In the above situation, you would move through your list of negative consequences until the student complies.

**d.** Learn to use the "positive repetitions" technique. This is a disguised way of repeating your rules so that all students know what to do (Taken from Kounin's "ripple effect"). Repeat the directions as positive statements to students who are complying with your commands (e.g. "Jason raised his hand to be recognized. So did Harold and Cynthia.").

**e.** Use "proximity praise" (also borrowed from Kounin). Instead of just focusing on the misbehaving students, praise youngsters near them who are doing the correct thing. It is hoped that the misbehaving students will then model that appropriate behavior (Kounin's "ripple effect"). The comments can be specific and obvious for younger students. More subtle recognition is required for adolescents.

**f.** Use proximity control...moving toward misbehaving students (younger kids). Invite adolescents into the hallway to talk to avoid embarrassment in front of peers (and the negative behavior that will result if you engage in public chastisement).

**g.** If kids don't presently possess a desired classroom behavior, teach it to them. This involves more than giving commands. Teach and roleplay to promote responsible behavior

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### Activities and Discussion Questions

**1.** Identify the following teacher response as being that of an **assertive** teacher, a **hostile** teacher, or a **non-assertive** teacher (sometimes you see a combination of two types):

**a.** "Tish, I like the way you raised your hand before speaking."

- b.** "Conchita, please start putting your project away. It's been five minutes since I asked you to clean up."
- c.** "I give up. If this group doesn't want to listen, it's your problem, not mine."
- d.** "Get to the end of the line! (The teacher grabs the student's shoulder and pushes him toward the end of line.) If you want to act like a bully, I'll show you what it's like to get pushed around."
- e.** Typically active students are working quietly on their projects while the teacher sits at his desk and talks with the classroom aide.
- f.** Students are off task while the teacher quietly sits at her desk and corrects assignments.
- g.** "Jamie, stop hitting. You will keep your hands to yourself or you will go to the time-out room."
- h.** "Louise, you did such a nice job on your composition! Let's go down and show Mrs. Gailey (the well-liked vice principal)."
- i.** "Hank, when are you going to learn that spitting at people is not a good way to handle conflicts?"
- j.** "Quit acting like a baby. Act your age."
- k.** "I want you to stop talking and finish those math problems."
- l.** "I don't believe it. You finally handed in an assignment that doesn't look like chicken scratchings."
- m.** "Wow, you only made that one small mistake. Great work Carmen."
- n.** Peter is working diligently on his seatwork. He feels a hand on his shoulder and looks up to see the teacher give him a smile and a wink.

**2.** Provide an assertive response to the following situations:

- a.** Five students are gathered around a small table for their reading lesson. While three students read or listen, Calvin and Poonam are poking each other and making faces.
- b.** When told to get back on task, Juanita tells you that she is feeling ill today. This is not typical behavior for her.

c. When told to get back on task, Kevin tells you that he is feeling ill today. This is commonly reported by her, has been checked out by the school nurse, and is believed to be a ploy she uses to avoid class work.

d. Berj rips up his worksheet and throws it on the floor, mumbling, "I'm not doing this crap."

e. Diana leaves her seat to tug on your arm and ask for assistance. You tell her to sit down and raise her hand. She starts to cry and accuses you of never helping her.

3. Demonstrate the "broken record" technique by writing responses for the teacher. Show your concern for the student by prefacing your unwavering direction/command with a supportive message (e.g., "I understand, but...").

a. Mike is not wearing his goggles during an activity that requires chipping pieces off of a rock with a hammer and chisel.

Teacher: "Mike, put those goggles on."

Mike: "It's OK I've done this before."

Teacher: ". "

Mike: "But the goggles get hot and fog up."

Teacher: ". "

Mike: "Aw, but they mess up your hair and leave red lines on your face."

Teacher: (Offer a choice. Restate the direction and inform him of the consequence that will occur if he fails to comply.)

b. The softball beats Antonis to home plate and he violently pushes Tim who is waiting at the plate for the tag. Tim receives a hard knock on the head as a result of the push-initiated fall.

Teacher: "Antonis, sit down for a few minutes."

George: "For what?!"

Teacher:

George: "They do it in the pros!!"

Teacher:

George: "Bullshit! Why do I have to sit out for playing right? If Tim doesn't want to get hurt, he shouldn't stand in front of the plate!"

Teacher: (Offer a choice with a negative consequence for noncompliance.)

c. You see Tyler put the stuffed clown doll in his desk rather than returning it to the toy box. You decide to give a friendly hint or two.

Teacher: "Tyler, I don't see Emmett in the toy box."

Tyler: Places his face in his folded arms on the table, then raised it up to give you one of his wonderful smiles.

Teacher: "Emmett gets lonely without his clown friends."

Tyler: "I won't play with him."

Teacher: (Issue a direction)

Tyler: "No!"

Teacher: (Offer a choice with a negative consequence for noncompliance.)

**4.** To understand how messages are made more effective by the use of the student's name, eye contact, and gesture, practice the following steps with another person.

- a.** Sit ten to fifteen feet apart from your partner who is standing.
- b.** While looking down or away from your partner, say, "Sit down."
- c.** (partner stands up again if seated) While looking down or away from your partner, say "(Name), sit down."
- d.** (partner standing) Say, "(Name), sit down," while looking assertively into the eyes of your partner. Maintain this eye contact for a few seconds.
- e.** (partner standing) Say, "Name, sit down," while maintaining eye contact and gesturing toward the chair.
- f.** (partner standing) Stand up while completing step (e). Be aware that some older students may see this behavior as a challenge to a conflict.
- g.** Switch roles and repeat steps (b) through (e) (...but leave out the gesture). Have a partner play the role of a student who has just sat down in his/her chair after delivering a message for you. Instead of using the phrase "Sit down" (as in the last situation), use "Thank you for your help".

**5.** Practice giving positive reinforcement and consequences in different ways by engaging in the tasks below with a partner.

- a.** Have someone play the role of a student who is quietly writing a composition and sometimes looks up momentarily to think. Give five different nonverbal signals (e.g., wink, smile, nod, "thumbs up," OK sign, etc.).
- b.** Use positive touching on the student's back or shoulder and give a nonverbal signal.
- c.** Give a positive comment to the whole class (use your imagination) because they are all working so diligently.
- d.** Have your partner approach your desk and ask if his or her paper is "OK". Say something positive to the student in a personal, quiet voice. Give specifics in a positive or constructive manner. Remember to use eye contact and the student's name.

**6.** Conduct a self-analysis by completing the following:

- a.** List the names of a few students whose behavior has been difficult for you to manage.
- b.** Decide with which of these pupils you failed to set firm consistent limits (non-assertive) because:

You were afraid of them or their behavior

You might cause them psychological harm

You felt inadequate to handle their unusual behavior

You were concerned that they might not like you

You weren't sure what to do

**c.** With which of these pupils did react in a hostile manner (hostile/aggressive) by:

- Yelling
- Berating
- Belittling
- Getting physical
- Using sarcastic, hurtful humor
- Using a punishment that was too harsh given the offense

**d.** Analyze your typical behavior management style. Do you set firm, consistent limits for all students? Do you respond to misconduct in a non hostile, assertive manner?

Do you use a firm, calm, confident voice?

Do you use eye contact, gestures, and the student's name?

Do you have a sequential listing of responses (e.g., warning, detention, send to office) so that you are prepared to administer a negative consequence, and do the students know that you will respond in a consistent manner?

Do you "catch the students being good" (e.g., answering questions, doing requested assignments)?

**e.** Write down the changes that you must make to develop a style that is consistent with the assertive discipline.

**7.** Follow steps 2, 3, and 4 under the section entitled [How to Use Assertive Discipline](#).

Also write the message mentioned in step 6.

**8.** Visualize a classroom experience you have had when you felt inadequate or reacted in a nonassertive or hostile manner. Now relive that experience and act assertively in it. Say your response out loud. Use an assertive, confident voice.

**9.** With another person, discuss the following:

**a.** Should students have an influence in the formation of rules and routines? If so, to what extent?

**b.** Are there any legitimate excuses for misbehavior (e.g., misinterpretation of a situation, illness, home problems, cultural difference in what is perceived as the correct way to respond in a situation)?

**c.** Is this approach useful for all teachers, students, and educational programs?

**10.** The Canter's believe that kids choose to misbehave. Do you believe that all behavior is a conscious choice on the part of youngsters? Might some kids be reacting habitually and therefore need to be made aware of options to create the ability to choose?

**11.** The Canter's recommend that your first step in dealing with misbehavior is to tell the student that s/he has "[a warning](#)". How do you feel/react when you are given "a warning"? Might the word "Reminder" be a better choice? Might you try other things before giving a direct warning? (e.g., distracting the youngster back to task, asking the youngster what's up, etc.)

12. Go to the link on Dr. Mac's home page titled "**Different ways to catch them being good**". There you will find reports on the use of many of the techniques mentioned above.

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### **For More Information**

*Materials and catalogs for the massive amount of materials (books for various educational professionals, videotapes for staff development) offered by Canter and Associates can be ordered by calling: 1-800-262-4347*

Lee & Marlene Canter. (1993). *Succeeding with difficult students: New strategies for reaching your most challenging students*. Santa Monica, CA: Canter and Associates.

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