

# How Low-Energy Parents Can Get Their Children to Cooperate

These days I look at most things through the lens of temperament.

I know people who run their own businesses, get up at four or five AM to go running or cycling, socialise broadly, and oversee their young children's busy lives while even looking after *other people's* children at the same time.

These people are either Choleric or Sanguine in the traditional temperament system. They were high-energy before they had kids, and their own (likely high-energy) children won't slow them down.

In a similar, albeit drastically obverse way, I was extremely low-energy prior to having children, and having children didn't miraculously give me the vitality and enthusiasm I needed to take on these new responsibilities.

Bill Gates famously said "I choose a lazy person to do a hard job. Because a lazy person will find an easy way to do it." And I'm sure you'll all agree that raising children is a hard job.

But it's also a job that differs from parent to parent and child to child. So with that in mind, I offer this first in a series of three tips with all the implied caveats you might wish to imagine.

## **Assertive communication works**

A year or so ago I came across assertive communication. It's been around for decades, and was once fashionable enough that I knew some of the jargon even if I didn't know what it meant.

The gist of it is that instead of using aggressive or passive-aggressive behaviours to coerce others into doing what you want, you can learn to *literally* assert your needs and wants, thoughts and feelings to others, with the implication that merely communicating your own inner world is the first and most important step in interacting with others.

In other words, relationships are ideally *not* power struggles of passive or outright coercion, manipulation and resentment. How novel!

Learning to communicate well is important because other people don't necessarily understand what we want, think, or feel (even though it's obvious, right?), and many of us are blinded to good communication by an expectation of conflict in our relationships.

But in an ideal world we could all learn to be open and clear about what we want, think, and feel, and let others decide how *they* think, feel, and want in response to that.

### **Polite, reasonable coercion...**

My default setting for dealing with my five-year-old son is to ask politely:

"Can you please finish your toast?"

I offer a rationale so he sees there's a logic to it: "we have to go to school soon..."

But typically he ignores me, or gets distracted, or just refuses to do it.

Whether it's instinct or how I was raised, my next move is to repeat my request a little louder and more firmly.

"Alex\*, *please finish your toast, we have to go soon!*"

"Please" is pretty insincere. I mean, historically it's an

abbreviation of “may it please you to...”, and by this stage I care less and less about how *pleased* he would be to finish his breakfast.

And in any case it obviously *doesn't* please him at all. He might make a token effort, but another move is required, and the most common options are twofold: aggressive, or passive-aggressive.

Aggressive doesn't mean violent, but is pretty unpleasant nonetheless. It might involve raising my voice, standing over him, frowning, threats of taking away toys or games, anything that might “force” the outcome I desire.

Aggression is ugly, but for many people it's just part of raising a child.

By contrast the *passive-aggressive* mode is what happens when you still want to “force” the outcome you desire, but don't want to be overtly angry or aggressive.

One notorious form of passive-aggressive communication is the “silent treatment”, but it might also include sarcastic comments, or implementing “consequences” for the child's behaviour.

“You don't want to eat your toast? That's fine. I don't want to take you to your friend's birthday party on the weekend.”

See? Everyone's happy! Nobody's angry! There's just an awful, miserable torpor over the household as a small child is coerced into eating his breakfast.

### **What's the alternative?**

With the best of intentions I still found myself getting mightily irritated and searching for successful ways to “encourage” my child to do the right thing without resorting to ugly coercive methods or unsustainable incentives.

Besides, shouldn't we be helping our children to *want* to do the right thing? Philosophically-inclined as I am, this often set me on a course of wondering what really was the right thing.

Did he have to finish his toast? Did it matter if we were late for school? Was there an easier way?

Eventually I stumbled upon the concept of assertive communication and immediately saw that it was not so much an alternative method of *getting my child to do what I want*, as it was a clear and ideal model for communication and relationships.

Here's what I learned, and how it helped me:

You can think of assertion as putting something "out there". Assertive communication means putting your wants and needs, thoughts and feelings "out there" for others to receive and respond.

When I say to my son "please eat your toast or we'll be late" I'm not communicating by assertion but by command. "Eat your toast" is imperative, and the implied consequence of "or we'll be late" is delivered impersonally.

I've said nothing directly about what I want or need, what I think, or how I feel. Yet I assume it's all implied to the mind of a five-year-old child!

It's not reasonable or fair to feel irritated and angry when our own communication omits the most important features of what we want and need, think and feel.

### **What are we seeking to communicate?**

Once I felt confident in the assertiveness principles, I began communicating like this:

"Alex, I need you to eat your toast, so that we can get to

school on time.”

That shift from command “Eat your toast” to assertion “I need you to eat your toast” is subtle but meaningful.

He said “okay”, but was immediately distracted and forgot. Time for my next move:

“Alex, I feel irritated because I need you to eat your toast, but you’re not eating it.”

Every word of that was true, and simply communicating it for communication’s sake took away the pressure of trying to “force” an outcome.

What was his response?

“Oh, sorry!” and he started to eat.

He never said “Oh, sorry” when I berated him in the past or reiterated my orders.

Perhaps that’s because in the past I wasn’t telling him anything new. I wasn’t sharing with him how I felt in response to his actions (or inaction).

I can repeat “put your shoes on, please!” ad nauseam with increasing intensity in my voice and he won’t comply.

And in hindsight that’s probably a good thing. What do we want from our kids? Compliance or communication?

I keep forgetting to do it. It doesn’t come naturally for me. But this morning after three attempts in a long-running saga of getting dressed for school, I finally remembered.

“I need you to put your shoes on,” and he did it immediately.

## **Natural sequences**

Instead of consequences imposed for coercive effect,

assertiveness communicates what follows naturally – the *sequence* – in genuine interaction.

My son doesn't always act on my stated need or want, or on my expression of how I feel in response to his inaction.

But that doesn't matter, because I just continue to communicate how I'm feeling.

At first I feel irritated when he doesn't listen. If he still doesn't listen I start to feel annoyed. Then I feel frustrated. Sometimes I feel disappointed.

It turns out there are a lot of gradations of feeling between neutral and angry, and even if I end up genuinely angry, I still go ahead and communicate it.

That part was a revelation. If you're angry, you can just communicate "I'm feeling angry" along with an explanation of why. Communicating anger is as simple as that, and doesn't include *expressions* of anger such as changes in tone, facial expression, or threats and coercion.

It turns out that *most* people, especially the people who care about you, don't want you to be irritated, annoyed, frustrated, disappointed, let alone angry.

My son has learned that these emotions follow quite predictably in sequence if he refuses to do what I need or want him to do. But he's not "on the hook" for my responses because I'm not expressing them in aggressive or passive-aggressive ways; and better yet, the sequence is clear to him, so long as I do the right thing and communicate what's actually going on in me.

### **A less-bad approach**

I'm not an exemplar of this approach. I've only read enough to get a feel for it and yet the results have really impressed me.

Even so, it's not a perfect system and has its own potential faults and weaknesses. At some point our children will be old enough to need less oversight and more autonomy, and then the game will change.

Besides, our children are dependent on us, and as parents we have duties and responsibilities to our children that we don't have to other adults. There's a degree of entirely appropriate paternalism in parenting, but assertive communication can reflect that.

Assertive communication alone won't guarantee I'm a good parent either, or that the things I want or need are legitimate, justified or appropriate expectations. I could communicate really well, and still be a bad parent.

But the ideal remains the same, and it's an awesome ideal. Take all the petty tricks and ploys out of our interactions, and grown adults can decide for themselves what they want to do on the basis of genuine communication.

And what better place for adults to learn to communicate well than in childhood, through the example set by their parents?

\*Not his real name. Not that there's anything wrong with Alex.

## **Resources**

Assertive communication resources tend to focus on specific domains like addiction/codependence, relationships, careers and self-development, but the principles are generalisable.

A general introduction to assertive communication: <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/assertiveness>

A brief primer on four communication styles: [https://www.uky.edu/hr/sites/www.uky.edu.hr/files/wellness/images/Conf14\\_FourCommStyles.pdf](https://www.uky.edu/hr/sites/www.uky.edu.hr/files/wellness/images/Conf14_FourCommStyles.pdf)

A detailed video on the subject: [https://youtu.be/9zbt\\_9R8GrM](https://youtu.be/9zbt_9R8GrM)

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