

# ASSERTIVE LEARNING

Assertive Learning is both a set of skills and an interesting characteristic of the brain. Learning is more effective when more of the brain is involved and active in the process. An energized brain will be able to give greater attention and organize information more successfully. Assertive Learning is a set of behaviors students need to master in order to make use of the mental capabilities they are developing. A talented body will go to waste if the athlete does not have the dedication to train it. Likewise, a brilliant brain will go to waste if a student does not have the discipline to use it.

Unfortunately, the group conditions of our classrooms often allow and even encourage students to become passive. Students watch more television and spend more time as spectators than active participants. In school, students are expected to sit quietly at their desks and wait for the teacher to tell them what to learn and how to learn it. Students are rarely taught how to monitor and control their own behavior and how to invest themselves in the learning process. Rather, teachers typically take control of students' behavior by frequent regulation.

In the process, they assume more responsibility for their students' learning than the students do. Think for a moment about how teachers typically assume responsibility and fail to relinquish it.

Teachers:

- Give specific assignments and use a system of rewards and punishments.
- Typically are required to tell students exactly what to study for a test and monitor all make-up work for the students.
- Often feel forced to take these responsibilities upon themselves because if they do not, students may not motivate themselves.

The net result of all this is that many students fail to invest in the learning process and assume less responsibility for learning. They may also have difficulty acquiring a sense of responsibility for other aspects of their lives.

An alternative to taking the responsibilities of the students upon yourself is to teach them how to take charge of their behavior and learning. Assertive Learning Skills help students do just that. When students learn to be active or responsible, teachers have to carry less of the burden. Also, learning is accelerated because by

assuming responsibility; more brain energy is being used in a positive way. Interestingly, research reveals that a sense of agency (freedom and responsibility to learn) enhances learning rates and improves levels of recall. Further, the application of agency significantly improves the ability to employ high order, or more complex reasoning, to learning tasks.

Another benefit is that teachers have more freedom. Teaching only in simple and repetitive ways is restrictive. When students are more responsible, teachers typically can provide more open-ended and creative projects for their students.

## **An Additional Word to Teachers about Assertive Learning**

Most teachers love the idea of having students take more responsibility for their own learning. However, teachers may resist introducing Assertive Learning Skills, saying that students resist new direction. Students may say it is too challenging to have to move out of the comfortable, passive learning role. Teachers may think it difficult to shift educational responsibility to students. A brief look at historical and international advances relating to Assertive Learning shows that teaching active learning to children is both possible and desirable.

Since the 1960s, a series of educational reforms have begun to challenge the longstanding instructional theories that “viewed students as playing a reactive rather than a proactive role” (Zimmerman 1989). The new reform movements show self-directed learning (Cropley 1977; Knowles 1975), autonomous learning (Weltner 1978), independent learning (Treffinger & Barton 1981), and learning through active self-regulation or active learning (Zimmerman 1989). Basically, educators are recognizing the huge responsibility that students have to take control of their own education through what we call Assertive Learning.

Assertive Learning involves at least ten basic skills that students must be aware of and practice in order to be in control of a learning situation. These skills are presented more fully in the “Learning Activities” section of this chapter.

For now, it is sufficient to summarize them as:

1. Organizing Work
2. Listening
3. Clarifying Instructions
4. Questioning
5. Estimating
6. Predicting the Results
7. Starting
8. Staying on Task
9. Self-Monitoring
10. Completing Work

Notice that all of the skills involve verbs. The student is expected to assume the duties of active participation, thought, self-monitoring, and supervision. Expecting such responsible behavior from students and teaching them Assertive Learning Skills has produced great results—not only here in the United States, but in many countries around the world.

In Denmark, one hundred schools under the direction of the Minister of Education participate in quarterly regional seminars where teachers are trained not only to be assertive learners themselves, but also to lay that responsibility on the students (Dolin & Ingerslev 1997).

In the Netherlands, twenty secondary schools started the program “All Learners Active” in which all of the students would have to assertively involve themselves in their own education. Teachers were first trained to change their teaching style to include some instruction-management skills that would foster active learning in students. Then they gave assignments to groups along with high-level questioning and limited reaction to students’ questions. In this way, the responsibility for organizing, interpreting, and supervising the educational experience fell mainly on the students, though they were still directed by the teachers’ inquiries. The schools that implemented this program showed marked improvement in learning participation and attitude over schools that did not implement the program (Stern 1997). Similar programs have been or are currently being conducted in the United Kingdom, Spain, Germany, Finland, and Australia.

In France, 144 educators were asked “For you, what makes quality teachers?” The answer was overwhelming: ninety-nine of the teachers said it was “the ability to motivate students.” In other words, the real drive in learning should be the individual students’ motivation. Teachers are only effective when they can foster personal student ambition. This happens when teachers are not pushing students from behind, but instead they are motivating students to use their own resources to learn.

A teacher quality seminar in Austria asked which skills were necessary for a truly effective teacher. At the conclusion of the conference they had determined eleven essential points of pedagogic skill. Of all possible teaching traits and characteristics, teacher emphasis on Assertive Learning was considered by far the most important, since nine of the points summarized ways to encourage active student participation in learning.

According to the consensus of the Austrian conference (Ribolits 1993), teachers should:

- Allow pupils to assume responsibility for their own learning process.
- Encourage pupils to perform a self-evaluation of talents and weaknesses.

- Dispose of a repertoire of pedagogic skills in order to respond to pupils' individual needs — arousing and retaining curiosity and promoting independent, action-oriented work.
- Promote learning and work by discovery and research through processes and through the senses.
- Impart different learning techniques.
- Grant sufficient time and create flexible free scope.
- Take suggestions and allow the finding of solutions and their implementation.
- Teachers promote pupils' self-reliance.
- Teachers provide for opportunities of relating theoretically acquired knowledge to lifetime situations.

The last point re-emphasizes why Assertive Learning is essential for students. Today's children will face real-life learning necessities, including multiple career changes and frequent job retraining. If they can be active listeners, self-starters, self-evaluators, and questioners, they will be significantly more prepared for the educational necessities of the future. Thus, educational goals both here in the United States and abroad must include focus on student responsibility in Assertive Learning.

## Effects on Beliefs

Many students believe that external factors such as the school, teacher, class, or textbook are responsible for their success or failure. They take a passive role in their own education. They say things like, "I can't learn math because my teacher is so boring," or "This textbook is so confusing there's no way I can get a good grade in this class." Students will even blame their failure on the fact that the teacher did not remind them to make-up a test. When students believe that external factors control their success, they typically do not put forth the effort to succeed because they don't see the connection between personal behavior and success.

Assertive Learning principles help students believe in the power of their own effort and ability. When students use Assertive Learning Skills, they activate the brain's energy because they see that their actions (rather than external things) are responsible for the results.

## References

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# LEARNING ACTIVITIES: ASSERTIVE LEARNING

## Objective

- Introduce your students to the Assertive Learning Skills (ALS). You will help them gain an understanding of each one and learn how to use them in school to become better learners.

## Materials

- ALS cards (make sets of index cards which have the name of each Assertive Learning Skill written on them and sets which have the short definition of each Assertive Learning Skill), scissors, markers, and glue sticks.

## Activity #1

- Have students turn in assignments from last class. Allow students time to talk about what they did and what they learned.

## Activity #2

- Give the following introduction.
- We have talked about how our brains can naturally grow smarter and how we can learn to use them better. However, a great brain will do you no good if you lack the ability to be responsible for your learning. For example, you could be the greatest mathematician in the world, but if you are so unorganized that you always lose your assignments, you will still fail your math class. In this class, you will learn about Assertive Learning Skills. These are the skills that allow you to be in charge of your learning.

### Definition

- Explain what it means to be an "Assertive" student by contrasting it with being "Aggressive" and "Passive."

#### Passive Mouse

- Does not do anything unless the teacher asks.
- Only writes down the notes that the teacher says to write down or writes on chalkboard.
- Only studies exactly what the teacher says will be on the test.

#### Aggressive Monster

- Only learns what he or she wants to learn.
  - Doesn't do anything the teacher asks.
  - Only does assignments the way that he or she wants to do them.
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- What do you think an "Assertive" student is like?

## Activity #3

- Pass out the Assertive Learning Skills (ALS) definition sheets on pages 388-389. Display a poster of the Assertive Learning Skills or write them on the chalkboard. Allow students to look over them.
- Use the following tasks to introduce the Assertive Learning Skills. After completing each task, ask students which ALS the task focuses on.

#### ALS Cards

- Divide the class into small groups. Give each group two sets of ALS cards (names and definitions) and have them mix them up on their desks or table. Ask them to arrange them by matching the name to the definition. When they finish, ask them to evaluate their work. (Organizing Work, Self-Monitoring)
- Tell students to turn the name cards face down and randomly pick a card. In the following activities, they should demonstrate the ALS on the card they picked.

#### Listen and Draw

- As you speak, have students follow the directions given on the worksheet on page 390. Do not make copies of this sheet to pass out, the students should draw on their own paper. (Listening, Questioning, Clarifying Instructions, Estimating)

#### Procrastination List

- Have students make a list of five things they do to avoid doing homework. (Starting, Staying on Task, Finishing)

#### Animal Game

- Think of an animal. Have students try to guess what it is by asking questions to be answered “yes” or “no.” (Questioning)
- Have students guess what ALS cards the others in their group have picked.

### Activity #4

- Pass out the checklist on page 391. Each student should monitor the student to his or her left. Have them check the appropriate box each time they observe an Assertive Learning Skill being demonstrated during the next activity.

### Activity #5

- Pass out the flexihexagon sheet on page 392, scissors, markers, and a glue stick to each group. Have students follow these instructions:
  - Cut out Flexihexagon—outside line only. Place it vertically in front of you.
  - Count up four triangles from the bottom and fold up.
  - Fold back (toward you) the top triangle on the section that you just folded.
  - Count three triangles down from the top. Fold the section down (toward you) and place the top triangle under the triangle you just folded back. Use a glue stick to hold in place. A hexagon is now formed.
  - Now color each triangle on one side of the hexagon. (Just use one color.)
  - Repeat on the other side of the hexagon, using a different color.
  - Flip the hexagon surfaces to expose more uncolored sides. There are six more uncolored sides. To flip the hexagon: a) fold back and forth along all the triangle lines (this makes the hexagon easier to flip); b) put both

thumbs under unfolded edges of hexagon in the center of the hexagon; c) pull thumbs up and out to expose unmarked triangle sides.

- Color the exposed triangles a new color. It will take two or three flips to expose all six uncolored triangles.

## Closure

- Conclude the lesson by saying: Each of these Assertive Learning Skills can help you take charge of your learning. These are the behaviors that you need to develop to accompany your growing brain. You can probably slide through middle school and high school without a knowledge of how to be responsible for your behavior and learning, but life beyond high school is a totally different story. In order to be successful in life you must learn how to take charge of your behavior and learning.

## Assignment

- Hand out the homework assignment on page 393.

# Assertive Learning Skills

## 1. ORGANIZING WORK: I arrange and plan.

Do I have all the supplies I need to be successful with a project or an assignment? Is my environment, workplace, lighting, etc., conducive to my success?

Am I aware of how best to get the work down on paper so I or anyone else can read, follow, or use my work? Is there a better way to simplify any confusing area or part? Can I experience the personal power feeling when I am in control of my environment?

## 2. LISTENING: I am an active learner.

Am I an active learner by listening to the teacher, my parents, or friends? Am I being quiet so that I can listen to my inner voice? Am I paying attention? Do I listen in order to receive instructions necessary to start and complete, to problem solve, to ask and answer questions, to spark my imagination?

## 3. CLARIFYING INSTRUCTIONS: I create a clear understanding.

Am I able to repeat back to the teacher or to myself what I understood that I am to do? Do I know how to start and proceed? Do the instructions make sense to me?

In math, clarifying instructions means I will ask myself if I understand what the problem is asking and if I know what information I need to solve the problem.

## 4. QUESTIONING: I ask and answer questions.

Do I, could I, would I ask a question to myself, to a teacher, to a parent, or to a friend about something I did not understand or wanted to know?

Am I an active learner and listener? Am I involved and paying attention to the discussion, activity, or lecture, etc., so I will be able to contribute by answering questions?

## 5. ESTIMATING: I judge and evaluate.

I will estimate how much time it will take me to complete my work. When I finish my work, I will compare the actual time against my estimated time. How did I do? Does estimating help me make better use of my time?

In math, estimating helps me to make reasonable judgments about what the answers to the problems will be.

**6. PREDICTING THE RESULTS:** I declare the outcome in advance.

Do I know how my assignment or task will end? What will I have as a result of my work? Do I understand the law of cause and effect here? Do I know that the more I understand what I must do and understand the best way to do it, that I will experience better results with the end product? Can I give myself credit for my predicting great results and know that I have created those results?

**7. STARTING:** I begin the work.

Do I begin my work immediately after it has been presented or at the agreed upon starting time? Do I avoid distractions, daydreaming, and procrastination?

Starting in math means I know how to set up the facts and to begin computing to find the answer to the problem.

**8. STAYING ON TASK:** I keep working.

Do I keep working until my assignment or project is completed? Do I experience that satisfied feeling of knowing that through my persistence I have been productive?

**9. SELF-MONITORING:** I evaluate my attitudes and habits.

I take a look at myself by evaluating my behavior and study habits. I can talk to myself and describe what I am doing. Am I on task and working toward the goal being pursued? Do I need to make any changes in my behavior, thoughts, or attitude?

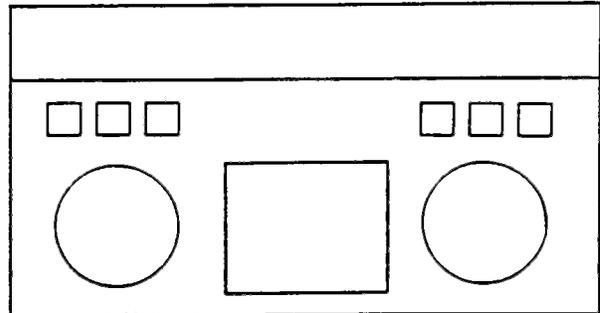
**10. COMPLETING WORK:** I finish my work.

Are all parts of my work or project finished? Have I set up a system to “check-off” so I know that I have finished my work? Have I experienced and acknowledged the feelings of success, satisfaction, relief, and pleasure that come from following through and finishing?

# Listen and Draw

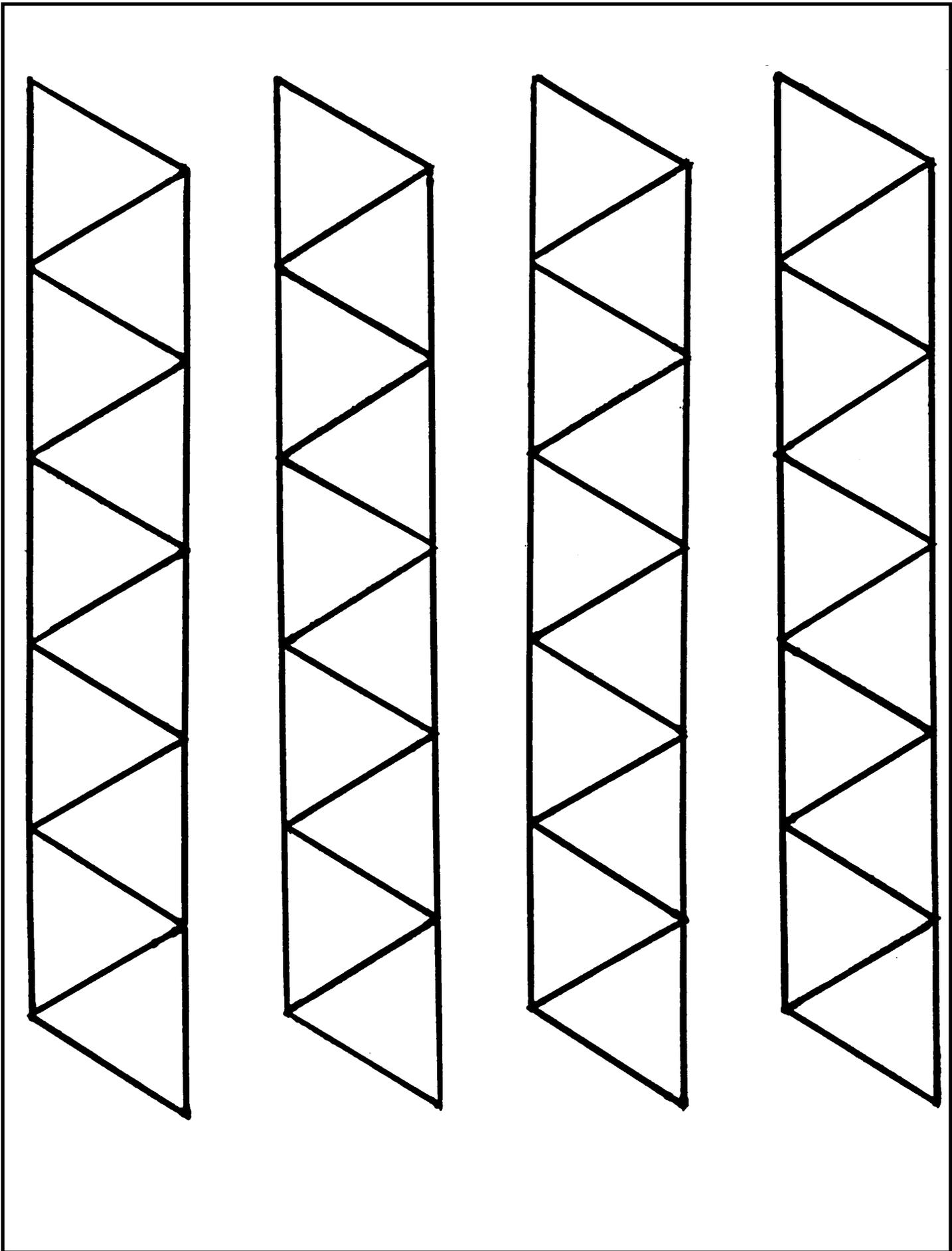
This is a fun activity to help students experience early listening success. Present the directions below at a normal, conversational speaking rate. Use normal inflection. Repeat each instruction once. Pause after each instruction to give students time to complete the task before going on.

1. In the middle of your paper, draw a rectangle. It should be about 7 inches long and 3 inches high.



2. In the middle of your rectangle, draw a smaller rectangle. It should be about 2 inches long and 1 1/2 inches high.
3. On both sides of the small rectangle, draw a circle. Each circle should be about 1.5 inches in diameter.
4. Above each circle, draw 3 very small squares. Each will be about the size of a telephone push button.
5. Next, look at the top of the big rectangle. Draw a half-inch vertical line at each end of the rectangle.
6. Last, connect those two lines with one long, straight, horizontal line.
7. What did you draw? (answer: a boom box)





# Assertive Learning Skills

## Assignment

Pick a subject and an Assertive Learning Skill you are going to use in that class for a week. Write down specifically how you are going to use that Assertive Learning Skill. For example, if you choose Questioning, you could write, "I will ask at least two questions in math every day."

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Bring a written summary of what you did to class on \_\_\_\_\_ (date)