

Solutions Newsletter

February 2021



Effective School
Solutions

Solutions is a newsletter published by ESS for parents, guardians and caretakers. Each issue highlights an important topic related to children's mental health and provides practical applications for parents in the home environment.

Fostering Healthy Interpersonal Relationships

Regardless of what you think about Valentine's Day – from denouncing it as a made-up holiday, to jumping head-first into celebrating love and relationships – there is no doubt that February 14th, 2021 will look quite different for your children than in previous years. Classroom traditions like exchanging cards and sharing cupcakes, school-hosted dances and parties, will likely not happen. And yet, what better time than during this extended period of social isolation to celebrate relationships and to foster interpersonal skills?

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) is a treatment approach that is woven throughout both the clinical and psychoeducational components of ESS programs. DBT has four modules, three of which focus on self-regulation skills: Distress Tolerance, Emotion Regulation, and Mindfulness. The fourth module is Interpersonal Effectiveness, the goals of which are to be skillful in getting what one wants and needs from others; to build, nurture and repair healthy relationships and to end destructive ones; and to develop and maintain self-respect within the context of one's relationships. Included in this module is a step-by-step approach for assertive interactions with others (the DEAR MAN skill), and a model for maintaining self-respect as one navigates those interactions (the FAST skill).

Many people confuse assertion with aggression. Because of this, they either remain passive for fear of hurting or disrespecting others, or they act in ways that violate the rights of others. People who act assertively identify and advocate for their own needs, feelings, opinions, and priorities. At the same time, assertive people seek to understand and respect the needs, feelings, opinions, and priorities of others. This does not mean, of course, that each person will always get his way, or that someone won't walk away disappointed. Assertive behavior does not guarantee that you will always get what you want, but it does offer the opportunity for self-respect, and to nurture respectful and healthy relationships.

DBT interventions for young people also typically emphasize "Walking the Middle Path". This approach involves adopting a dialectical way of thinking: that is, embracing the idea that

seemingly opposite thoughts, opinions, and feelings can all be true, and that there is more than one way to see any situation, or to solve any problem. Acceptance and validation – of self, of others, of the reality of a situation – are critical aspects of "Walking the Middle Path".

The most effective parenting approach includes firm discipline with clear, consistent rules, boundaries, and follow-through, coupled with a flexible style that allows for discussion and negotiation, within reason. Parents can use February as a month to model and discuss Interpersonal Effectiveness skills:

- Encourage mental flexibility by pointing out all-or-none speech and thinking patterns (e.g., avoid "always" and "never", and replace with "some times", "many times"). Help your child find the kernels of truth on both sides of any conflict.
- Show children how to acknowledge the opinions/feelings/priorities/experiences of others even when they disagree. Validation is not agreement. "It makes sense that you feel that way given your past experiences. I see things differently because ___".
- Point out unhelpful thoughts that interfere with assertive behavior: "Why bother asking, I won't get what I want anyway"; "She was mean to me – why should I take her feelings into account?"; "If I stand up for myself, no one will like me"; "I will look weak or stupid if I ask for help".
- Encourage children to use "I" rather than "you" statements: "I feel hurt and angry when you tease me" or "I feel like you don't care about me when you won't listen to my side of the story" instead of "You make me ...", "You are ...", "You should ...".

Resources:

[Assertiveness: How to Get What You Want \(or Say No\) Using DBT | Psychology Today](#)

Rathus, J. H., Miller, A. L., & Linehan, M. M. (2014). *DBT Skills Manual for Adolescents* (Illustrated ed.). The Guilford Press.