

Love and Assertiveness

Love and Assertiveness are two sides of the same coin; one necessitates and depends on the other. Loving yourself requires asserting your rights to liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Loving a partner requires assertiveness in creating and protecting an environment of honesty and communication. Loving a child requires asserting certain boundaries or limits around their behavior.

Assertiveness requires some grit; courage in the face of the constant temptation of a more comfortable life now. Surrendering a right is easier than fighting for it, avoiding a tough conversation with your spouse is easier than finding time for it, and giving in to every whim of a child is easier than saying *No* in the moment. The costs are instead deferred to a later date, and accrue in all manners of tragedy.

Many of us grew up with one “loving” parent and/or one “assertive” parent. An imbalance of the two poles, whether within the individual or between two parents, is all too common. Failing to balance and coordinate effectively, the traits manifest as The Pushover and The Dictator, or a swing from one to the other.

“How can you love me if you won’t be assertive and set clear boundaries with me?”, the child wonders, and/or “And how can I respect your assertiveness and boundaries if I don’t feel like it’s coming from a place of love?” Both situations represent a threat to the child’s primal need for safety, so this conflict is born in his mind even before formal language develops. We may put on a good face for the world, by demonstrating our combined strength and care in the workplace for example, but our children see us in our most natural state. There is no hiding a deficiency of love *or* assertiveness from our children.

Loving Assertiveness is a mindset (heart-set?), or guiding principle that we make clear to our children. We’re focusing more on the assertive aspect here. The thinking and conversation, obviously tailored to the development of the child, is as follows:

I love you, I want you to be happy, I care about your feelings. If you’re ever in doubt of any of these things, let me know, I’ll make it my highest priority, and I will correct myself or do what is necessary to resolve it.

I wish your experience of schoolwork or healthy eating wasn’t negative, and I’m committed to working with you to make it more positive. But you gotta eat your veggies, and you gotta learn to write,

for your health and wellbeing. Not doing these things will cause you greater suffering over time. I understand that you don't have direct evidence of that, and I know that's hard too. You're having to take my word for it, and I want to show my appreciation for your trust.

Sure we can have a break, a vacation from our responsibilities now and then, and we can schedule that first. But most days, we all need to accomplish our work. I'm sorry but neglecting it is not a sustainable option, or one that I can allow. Enabling you to develop unhealthy habits would be neglectful of me.

So what can I do to help you get through it? How can I help you shoulder the burden of work required to live happily and healthily? We're calling any unpleasant action with a future payoff "work". Brushing teeth is another example.

I'm willing to shape your environment, to create incentives and disincentives, to bend our world to meet your preferences where I can. Your input is crucial, let's be creative and have fun with it together. Let's also be scientific about it. If the goal is to reinforce healthy habits, let's find out what I can do that is reinforcing.

Let's work together to make a list of things you really want to earn. You really want to go to Chinese Buffet this weekend, or to borrow my tools to work on your treehouse? Ok, that will be the reward for the work during the week (outlined clearly). This is a special privileges you won't receive if you don't put in the effort with your work. Contracts, however informal, come in handy here.

The choice is yours to make, and I won't add guilt and shame if you make the "wrong" choice. If I'm disappointed I'll be honest about my feelings, but I'll share in the responsibility there, and look forward to re-visiting our agreement. We'll go back to the drawing board to find something that works better for you. Let's set things up just right so

that we're all encouraged to work hard and play hard!

Of course you WILL get what you earn. If I promise you buffet, I'll get you there. If I promise not to share my tools, I'll do that too. I won't be manipulated into being overly indulgent any more than I will be swayed to become miserly and petty.

The potential for variation here is endless, we're just describing the mindset / theory. We stay within the bound of the NAP by never threatening the child's body, freedom, or property. The NAP forbids us to withhold food, or confine the child to her room or the home, or to confiscate toys that she owns.

Instead, the negative consequences are simply lost future opportunities or earnings, mirroring the "real world" that we're preparing them for.

Though we've spelled it out explicitly here, actions speak louder than words. Children raised by parents with this attitude don't need it explained. You won't have to say "I don't break my promises" if you never break your promises, and you won't have to say "I care about your feelings" if you're never dismissive. You won't have to nag or threaten a child if negative consequences are consistent. We spell it out for ourselves, to check our own behavior by. For anyone not raised this way, becoming fluent in this mindset requires regular reflection.