

Discipline When Children Don't Listen

What is the concern?

Children sometimes do not do what we ask of them. Younger children are often just testing limits, and a parent saying STOP can be like a dare—they will try again. Children who are a little older learn that being defiant sometimes gets them what they want.

Parents sometimes accidentally reward children by giving them more attention for *not* doing what they are told than for doing what they were told to do. This attention may be talking, nagging, or arguing. Sometimes parents are not consistent in dealing with a child's defiance. They may threaten, ignore, or punish. Due to frustration or a lack of time, parents may give in to their child. This can teach children that they do not always have to do what they are told. Finally, directions and instructions are not always clear to children.

How can I help my child cooperate with directions and prevent problems?

Parents can help their children learn limits that they need for their own safety as well as getting along with other people.

- Give clear directions.
 - » Get close, get her attention, make eye contact, and say her name.
 - » Use a calm, firm voice.
 - » Tell your child exactly what to do and be specific.
 - » Allow your child some time to cooperate. Usually if a child will follow directions, she will start to move within 10 seconds of your command.
- Have plenty of age appropriate toys and activities available for your child to keep him occupied. Make sure to give positive attention when your child is playing well.
- Create a special playtime for you and your child. Break the cycle of nagging and arguing by catching your child “being good” during special, one-on-one time.
- Praise your child for doing things when she is told to do them. Praise is one of the easiest ways to reinforce desirable behavior.
- Reward positive behavior every time it happens. Involve your child by having him help choose rewards and by decorating sticker charts or penny jars.
- Ignore annoying but harmless behaviors that occur often. To ignore, do not look at or talk to him. You should act as if he is not there. You might have to leave the room. It also helps sometimes if you pick something up (like a magazine) and start looking at it. Be sure to give your child attention as soon as the negative behavior stops.
- Offer quiet time prior to the point of needing to discipline. Say things like, “I see you are becoming upset and that is okay but throwing things is not okay. Maybe you can use some quiet time.”



Tips to Remember:

- Prevent problems by paying attention to good behaviors. Positive attention at the right time helps later.
- Be clear and simple in your directions.
- Praise your child for doing things when she is told.
- Use consistent consequences if your child refuses to do what she is told.
- If these suggestions do not work, please talk with your pediatrician for more ideas.

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What should I do if my child doesn't do what she is told?

- Repeat your direction ONCE and start with an IF / THEN statement that includes a consequence. “IF you do not clean up the toys, THEN you will have a time out.” Follow through on your statement. In this way your child learns that you mean what you say.
- Apply sensible consequences.
 - » **Loss of Privilege** – After misbehavior, remove the activity or object that is logically tied to that misbehavior. For example, if toys are left out in the family room and your child is expected to clean up after playing, he will not be allowed to play with the toys for a specified period of time. Sensible consequences work best when they are brief (5 to 30 minutes).
 - » **Positive Practice** – Have your child practice the correct way of behaving when misbehavior occurs. This type of punishment educates as well as disciplines. It teaches the child the correct behavior and punishes the misbehavior. For instance, if your child runs down the aisle at the store, he must walk slowly down the aisle three times.
 - » **Time Out** – Remove your child from enjoyable activities when she needs to calm down, does something dangerous, or breaks a known rule. For example, if your child is aggressive or clearly breaks an established rule, she should go to time out immediately with a brief explanation. “You hit your sister, so you have to go to time out.” Just like ignoring, it is important that you do not look at or talk to your child while they are in time out. Time out should be brief, 5 minutes or less. When time out is over, repeat the direction. If she refuses again, then put her back in time out. Repeat this until she does what she is told.