

# Giving Clear Directions

## What is the concern?

Children often forget or simply don't follow directions they are given. Sometimes children ignore directions from parents and at times they argue and get angry.

## How can I help my child follow directions?

Children often copy the actions they see in adults around them. Show your child the behaviors you want to see through your own actions. Think about how you give directions too. Sometimes children just don't understand exactly what they're supposed to do or the directions get lost within a lot of conversation.

## How can I help my child listen?

- Try to give directions only when you'll be able to make sure your child follows them. If you're too busy to follow through, it might be better to wait until another time.
- Reduce distractions. For example, turn off the television or radio.
- Get closer. Position yourself about 5 to 7 feet in front of your child.
- Make eye contact and say your child's name.
- Be calm and matter of fact.
- Give your command or directions simply and politely. Use positive commands. For example, say "Be quiet, please" rather than "Stop yelling."
- If your child doesn't begin to follow the direction within about 10 seconds, calmly repeat the direction with one warning. For example, "If you don't pick up your toys, they will be put away."
- As soon as possible, praise your child for following your direction.

## Replace confusion with clarity.

### 1) Give one direction or command at a time.

Instead of "Please get dressed, brush your teeth, brush your hair, and go to the kitchen for breakfast," give one direction at a time and praise your child for each direction that is followed.

### 2) Use clear action words.

Avoid vague or unclear directions—children may be unsure of what to do in the situation. Use "Sit here quietly and wait, please" instead of "Be good."

### 3) Break complicated tasks into several, separate directions.

Although you may know exactly what you mean by "Clean your room," a child's understanding may be less clear. Tell your children exactly what you need them to do, one step at a time. For example, the tasks involved in cleaning their rooms may include "Make your bed," "Pick up your toys," and "Put your laundry away."

### 4) Say what you want your child to do rather than ask for the behavior.

Avoid stating directions as questions. Say "Come to the table to eat." instead of "Would you like to come to dinner?"

### 5) Make your directions the last thing you say.

Many parents feel the need to explain things, but often times children only remember the last thing said. Instead of saying "Get your jacket on, we need to go to the store to get a birthday present for Matthew," say "John, we need to get a birthday present for Matthew, please get your jacket on and get in the car."



## Tips to Remember:

- Be a good example. Show your child the behaviors you want to see through your own actions.
- Make sure you have your child's full attention by getting close, making eye contact, and reducing distractions.
- Replace vague instructions with specific instructions, using clear action words.
- Praise your child for following directions, even simple ones.
- If these suggestions do not work, please talk with your pediatrician for more ideas.

By Deborah Miller, PhD  
Doug Tynan, PhD  
Lynn Chaiken, MSW