

# How to Give Clear Directions

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Listening and following directions are important skills young children must learn. There are many reasons children do not follow directions:

- **The child does not hear the direction**, or it is given from a distance or in passing. Just as adults often don't hear what their partner has said to them because they are focused on reading, email or talking on the phone, children often don't hear what a parent has said because they are focused on a task such as building a tower or drawing a picture.
- **The parent gives too many directions at once**. When you give your child too many directions at one time, it lowers the chance that she will follow the directions and increases confusion. "Lauren, please go upstairs, brush your teeth and get your PJ's on." This multi-step direction is too long for your child to easily follow. Instead, try giving one direction at a time.
- **The child doesn't understand the direction**. Directions such as "settle down," "stop," or "be nice" might be too vague and hard to understand. If she is throwing toys out of the bathtub and you simply say, "Lauren," you have not actually told her what you want her to do. If you say, "stop it," it may temporarily stop the behavior, but she still may not know what to do instead. If what you mean is, "Lauren, toys stay in the tub," then you need to tell her so.
- **The direction does not tell the child what TO do**. It is important to state directions positively to help your child learn the expectation. For example, instead of "don't run!" say, "Use walking feet."
- **The direction sounds like a suggestion or question**. When you say, "Will you put your shoes away?" you are not giving your child a direction—you are asking her a question. When you give your child a direction to follow, it is important to tell your child what to do rather than ask. For example, "Lauren, put your shoes by the door."

## Suggestions for Families

It is important to follow through when you give your child a direction. A technique you can use to help you follow through when your child has difficulty following directions is **Do-WAWP**.

- **Do** – State the "do" direction.
- **W** – Wait for compliance (silently count to 5).
- **A** – Ask the child to restate the direction.
- **W** – Wait for compliance (silently count to 5).
- **P** – Provide encouragement or help (helping will ensure success).



Make sure you have your child's attention. Eye contact is a great indicator!

When you state the "do" direction you are telling your child the desired behavior. When you count to five, you give them the opportunity to hear and process the direction. Parents often repeat the same direction over and over in that five second period; this teaches your child that they don't have to follow the direction the first time. Instead, give the direction once and then have your child repeat it back to you. This way you know that they heard you and understood what you said. Finally, offering help may simply mean that you take their hand and lead them to the bathroom. Remember to encourage your child by saying something like, "Wow, what great listening ears! Thank you for brushing your teeth."

## Suggestions for Educators

Educators use many methods to give directions and help children understand expectations. These may include using pictures, sign language gestures, songs, puppets, instruments, timers, or other tools. The more opportunities children have to see and hear instructions, the more likely they are to complete the task. For example, when educators tell the class that it is time to go inside from the playground, in addition to words they may use a sound (e.g., ring a bell) to alert the children about this event. Children know that the sound means that it is time to line up at the door, even if they do not hear the verbal instructions. When educators use more than just words to give directions, they help children confidently and successfully participate in activities.

## The Bottom Line

Listening and following directions are skills that children learn through their daily interactions. When children do not follow directions, it can be extremely frustrating. You can increase the chances that your child will listen and follow your directions when you make sure that your direction is clearly stated and you follow through. An important consideration for parents when teaching their child to follow directions is to "pick your battles". You want to avoid insisting that your child follow directions that are not important or can escalate to a major struggle when the direction is not critical. Pick a few, very important directions that you will follow-through with your child.



More resources can be found at:  
<https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/>

