



Use Everyday Opportunities to Teach your Child how Follow Directions

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By the time a child enters primary school he needs to be able to follow directions, but most learners struggle in this area. Here's how to use everyday opportunities to make sure that your child masters this skill from an early age:

Be ready to put effort into training. This is a skill that children learn through repeated practice. It's going to take some effort and it won't happen overnight. You'll need to start with the easiest instructions and gradually progress from there.

Create a sense of competence in your child. Praise more and correct less. Your goal is to help your child to discover, and believe, that he is a competent child who can understand, remember and follow instructions.

Make the most of everyday opportunities. Children learn better when the directions that you give fits in with what is happening, for instance, helping to set the table at mealtime, or putting things away after bath time. The more often you do things together, the more teaching opportunities you will have.

Make sure your child listens and understands when you give directions. To avoid failure, make sure that you have his full attention when you give directions. Get down to his eye level so that he can see your facial expression. Squat if you have to. Make eye contact; speak clearly and not too rapidly. Use simple words and short, simple sentences.

Use gestures to demonstrate the meaning of your words. When dealing with a baby or toddler, add a natural gesture to help your child understand your message. For example:

"Come here" paired with the hand gesture.

"Give it to me" paired with your hand reaching for the item.

"Go to your room and get your coat" paired with pointing to your toddler's room.

Use repetition. To follow your directions, your child has to do some mental work. The first step is to *understand* the meaning of what you are saying and the second step is to *remember* the directions while acting. After giving the instruction, give him some time to process the information. Then repeat the instruction slowly. This demonstrates to him that repeating an instruction in his head after he has heard it is a good way of remembering it.

With older children, ask your child to repeat your directions after you. This activates his memory. It also tells you if he actually understood your directions.

If needed, take him to a quiet room in the house before giving directions. This eliminates distractions and demonstrates that you have something important to say. The sounds of a radio, television, or others talking, make it more difficult for your child to listen to your directions.

Give your child clear feedback. When he completes your directions, let him know exactly what was done correctly. This reinforces the learning that has taken place and builds his confidence. If he didn't complete your directions at all, show or tell exactly what needed to be done. If an attempt is partially successful, praise whatever he did correctly.

Adapt to your child's level of development. He will be able to understand and follow more difficult directions as his language and memory skills develop.

Use the following guidelines to help him progress:

- At first, use gestures to demonstrate the meaning of simple directions: "Give it to me" while extending your hand.
- Then teach your child to follow simple directions without gestures: "Stand up." "Get the ball." "Sit down."
- Following that, he will learn to do one thing with two objects: "Give me the bowl and the spoon."
- The next step is where you ask him to do two things with one object: "Get your coat and put it on."
- He will then learn to understand a combination of where to go and what to do there: "Go to your room and get your shoes."
- Then develop his memory even further by linking two totally separate directions together: "Give me the toy and put your glass on the table."
- Finally, he should understand and follow a series of three unrelated directions involving three actions: "Put your toys away, go wash your hands and get in the car."