

Giving Great Instructions

Kids are asked to do lots and lots of things by adults, and even the best-behaved kids don't always do as they are told. Sometimes parents think kids are disobeying on purpose, but kids are confused about what they are supposed to do. Parents can help kids listen well by giving really great instructions. Being careful with how instructions are given teaches kids to listen when told something in a calm, matter-of-fact tone, rather than when you are yelling. This helps parents and kids be less stressed.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- ***Not getting kids' attention*** – Parents often call from across the room, or give instructions while kids are playing. Young kids have a hard time paying attention to several things at once, so listening to an instruction if other things are going on is really hard for them.
- ***Asking questions*** – Parents try to be nice to their kids by asking questions instead of telling. For example, parents might say, “Are you ready to pick up?” or “Don't you think it's time to go?” Kids think they have options when asked questions.
- ***Being vague*** – Often parents say things like “act right” or “behave”. These kinds of instructions leave it to the kids to figure out what to do. That's hard for them and so sometimes they don't even try.
- ***Giving lots of information*** – We can all think of times when parents have said things like, “Okay it's time to clean up. We're going to grandmas, then the store, and after that we'll come home for dinner.” When parents say a lot, it makes it hard for kids to figure out what they should listen to. It also gives kids more to argue about!
- ***Multiple instructions at once*** – For all kids, especially kids who are already having a harder time listening, hearing several instructions at once is really hard. They have to stop what they are doing, remember each of the steps, and then get them done. It's easy to see why kids might just think it's easier not to listen.

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Giving great instructions helps all kids. It's even more important when kids are having a hard time listening to adults. To help kids listen well, here are some important points:

- ***Secure attention and get eye contact*** – Parents need to make sure that their child has heard them. Get at kid level; make sure to have eye contact.
- ***Use positive statements*** – Tell kids what to do, rather than what not to do. Replace questions like “How about putting on your coat?” and “Don't/Stop . . .” statements with positive instructions that tell kids what to do. For example, instead of saying “Don't climb on the furniture,” a parent can say, “Please get off of the table.”
- ***Be specific*** – Use instructions that make it clear to kids what needs to be done. Parents should get rid of statements like “Let's clean up your toys” or “How about putting on your coat?” *Specific instructions should be used when parents really want their child to listen.* Suggestions are fine if listening is not that important.

- ***Give just enough information*** – If parents want to tell kids why it is important that they listen, do that before giving the instruction. For example, “It’s time to go to grandma’s. Please put on your shoes”. This makes sure the last thing kids hear is the instruction.
- ***One at a time*** – Telling kids to do several tasks at a time is harder, even if kids can do it. Giving one task at a time makes it easier for kids to listen. This is really important if kids are already having a hard time listening. Give one instruction at a time, wait for it to be done, and then give the next one.

Other tips that may be helpful are:

- ***Give in a neutral, but firm, tone of voice*** – Kids should learn to listen to instructions given in a normal tone of voice rather than only when parents yell or plead.
- ***Polite and respectful*** – Instructions should be direct and clear without being disrespectful to kids. It is helpful to start commands with “Please.” This also shows kids how to be polite.
- ***Give choices when possible*** – Kids like to have choices, and this helps them learn to make decisions when they are given choices. “Choice” instructions should be very simple and given in a way that kids can understand. Also, both choices should be okay for parents.

When kids listen, positive attention should be given. Praise, a thank you, even a high five goes a long way to help kids learn that listening is good to do.

Please note that resources such as this are intended to offer guidance and suggestions. However, no claim is made that the information provided is appropriate for any specific child or family. Many families will find this information helpful and sufficient for addressing child rearing issues. Others will not. Parents are encouraged to talk with their child's pediatrician or seek help from a mental health professional if needed.

Prepping for Success

For parents to do the best they can to give great instructions, it can help to practice thinking through how they would tell their kids to do some things. Below is a space that parents can write down ways they might tell their kids to do things using the steps of giving great instructions.

Scenario 1: Your child is playing with toys in the living room. You need to head out to the grocery store to pick up some things for dinner.

1) Not so effective way:

- a. Parent: (calling from kitchen): “Okay buddy, put your toys away and get your shoes on. We gotta go.”
- b. Child: (whining) “But I’m not done. Why do we have to go?”
- c. Parent: (still in kitchen) “Come on. Don’t give me a hard time. We gotta go. We’re late.”
- d. Child: (just keeps playing, ignores parent).
- e. Parent: (comes in to the living room, with upset voice) “I said we gotta go. Now put that stuff away and hurry up!”

2) Better way:

- a) Parent: (walks into living room and kneels by child). “I see you’re having fun. I’m going to give you a moment to finish this part and then we need to go to the store. Okay?”
- b) Child: “Okay”.
- c) Parent: (after waiting a moment and still in living room) “Okay, we need to leave now. Please put your cars back in their bin.”
- d) Child listens, parent says “Great job picking up. Now, put your blocks in their bin”.
- e) Child listens, parent says, “Awesome, you did that so fast. Now, please get your shoes.”
- f) Child listens, parents says, “What a helper. You did what I asked right away. Let’s go”.

Scenario 2: You are trying to get your child to clean up his room. Write down exactly what you would do and say using the steps of giving good instructions:

Scenario 3: You are trying to get your kid to stop getting into everything in the grocery store. Write down what you would do and say using the steps of giving good instructions (hint, stay focused on what you want your child TO DO):

Below parents can think of other scenarios that are specific for their child. Write down the scenario and the specific way to give great instructions:
