

10 Tips to Help Your Child Follow Directions

By Amanda Morin

Kids with learning and attention issues might have trouble following directions. Here are 10 ideas for helping your child improve.

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Ask for your child's attention.

Giving directions when your child isn't focused on you could set both of you up for failure. Ask for your child's attention by saying, "Look toward me, please. I need you to listen now." Some kids have a difficult time with the nonverbal aspects of language. Asking your child to look toward you, instead of looking you in the eye, takes that into account. You can make it easier by moving into your child's line of sight.

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Minimize distractions.

Once you have your child's attention, you want to keep it. It can be hard for him to hear and follow directions while he's playing video games or when the TV is on in the background. Minimize any distractions before giving directions. Turn off the TV. Ask your child to put down his game or book. Make sure he's looking toward you.

You can model this behavior by giving your child your full attention when giving instructions. That also shows your child what you're saying is important.

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Speak quietly.

It may be tempting to speak louder or speak over your child when there is something you need to say or get done. But you may capture his attention better by speaking in a softer voice. Give directions in a calm, even tone. Your child may be able to focus more easily on the substance of what you have to say when he doesn't have to process the tone and the volume, too.

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Use “wait time.”

Teachers often use “wait time.” So do educational TV shows for kids. “Wait time” is that three- to seven-second pause after you say something or ask a question. Research shows that kids process better what you have to say—and respond to it appropriately—when they let it sink in.

Your child still may not follow directions or answer your question after that pause. If so, it's OK to repeat what you said.

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Check for understanding.

Checking for understanding goes hand-in-hand with giving your child some “wait time.” Ask your child to repeat your directions back to you. Or ask him to explain your directions in his own words. It gives your child a chance to ask questions, if he has any. It also gives you a chance to clarify what you said in case he misunderstood anything.

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Tell, don't ask.

Many parents phrase directions as questions, such as, “Would you set the table, please?” Your child may think he has a choice about following directions. Rephrase what you said so that you are telling your child what to do instead of asking him. Simply saying, “Come set the table, please,” can make a big difference.

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Give instructions one at a time.

Younger kids with learning and attention issues may have trouble following a sequence of steps. You may say, “Please set the table, wash your hands and tell your sister it’s time to eat.” Your child, however, might get stuck after setting the table. Give directions one at a time, when possible.

If you can’t break directions down into steps, try to group things together in ways that make sense. For example, “While you’re upstairs washing your hands, please tell your sister it’s time to eat.”

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Number your directions.

Help your child follow multi-step directions by actually putting a number to them. Typically, people can hold up to four things in their working memory at a time. This is easier to do when they’re connected or there’s a way to make them more memorable.

Say things like “There are three things you need to do,” or use words like *first*, *second*, *then*, *next* and *last*. That can help your child keep all the steps in mind or at least remember there’s more to the directions than what he’s done.

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Be precise in what you say.

Kids who have problems with planning and organization or language may have trouble with vague directions. You may think your child isn't following the directions to clean his room. But maybe he's really having trouble figuring out how to get started.

Be specific. For example, you may get better results by saying, "Please put your laundry away, pick up the trash from the floor and make your bed" instead of "Clean your room."

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Use visual cues.

Kids who have language processing issues can have a hard time following spoken directions. Consider using visual cues, too. For example, point out what needs to be cleaned. You can also demonstrate what you're asking him to do. For instance, "Please set the rest of the table the same way I'm setting this spot."