

## How to Give Clear Directions

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

- **The child doesn't hear the direction**, or it's 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 or talking on the phone, children often don't hear what an adult has said because they are focused on a task such as building a tower or drawing a picture.
- **The adult gives too many directions at once**. When you give your child too many directions at once, it lowers the chance that they 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 they're throwing toys out of the bathtub and you simply say, "stop it," it may temporarily stop the behavior, but Lauren still may not know what to do instead. "Lauren, toys stay in the tub," clearly states what is expected.
- **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, "Please walk inside."
- **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.** Make sure you have your child’s attention. Eye contact is a great indicator! When you state the “do” direction you tell your child the desired behaviour.
- **W – Wait for compliance (silently count to 5).** This gives your child the opportunity to hear and process the direction.
- **A – Ask the child to restate 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.
- **W – Wait for compliance (silently count to 5).**
- **P – Provide encouragement or help (helping will ensure success).** Help may simply mean that you take their hand and lead them to the bathroom. Remember to encourage your child by saying something like, “Thanks for listening and 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 helping their child learn to follow directions is to “pick your battles”. You want to avoid insisting that your child follow directions that are not important or can result in a conflict when the direction is not critical. Pick a few very important directions that you will follow through with your child.

