



Giving Clear Instructions to Children

Does getting your child to do something feel like an impossible task? One of the reasons may be the way you're giving an instruction.

Children are not necessarily receptive to the types of verbal instruction we use with our spouse, colleagues or other adults. Instructions for children must be given so they can clearly understand what you want them to do.

➔ **Here are some helpful hints on how to give kids instructions that will make you and your child more successful.**

- **Get your child's attention** – Make sure you have your child's attention before giving an instruction. You should be within three feet of your child so you can talk in a normal or calm voice. This helps your child know that you are talking to him or her. You can get your child's attention by calling his or her name, making eye contact or turning the lights off and back on.
- **Be clear and concise** – Instructions should be short and to the point, the fewer words the better. A good guide is to use one word for each year of your child's age. For example, an instruction for a 2-year-old might be "Shoes on." For a 5-year-old, it might be "Go get your

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shoes on.” If you use too many words, it makes it difficult for the child to know what is expected. Also, avoid using vague words in your instructions.

- **Give one instruction at a time** – Do not give your child a long list of instructions. When you give more than one instruction at one time, your child may forget, not understand or feel overwhelmed.
- **Be realistic** – Give your child instructions you know he or she can follow. For example, do not expect your 3-year-old to get completely dressed by himself or herself.
- **Be positive** – Let your child know what you want him or her to do rather than not to do. When you only describe a negative behavior like “Don’t run,” you still leave many other options available (skipping, hopping, etc.). Instead, telling your child “Walk, please” eliminates any other options.
- **Don’t ask, tell** – Do not ask your child to do something. Instead, tell your child in a firm but pleasant voice what you want him or her to do. Do not say “Will you go brush your teeth?” This implies that your child has a choice. Instead, say “Go brush your teeth.”
- **Reward compliance** – Praise your child when he or she does a good job following an instruction. The more praise you give, the more likely your child is to follow your instructions in the future.

Additional Resources

- **Help! There’s a Toddler in the House!** by Thomas M. Reimers, Ph.D.
- **I Brake For Meltdowns: How To Handle The Most Exasperating Behavior Of Your 2- To 5-Year-Old** by Michelle Nicholasen and Barbara O’Neal
- **Parenting the Strong-Willed Child: The Clinically Proven Five-Week Program for Parents of Two- to Six-Year-Olds** by Rex Forehand and Nicholas Long



Examples of **Clear** Instructions:

- “John, give me the truck.”
- “Lindsey, go wash your hands.”
- “Dylan, look at the book.”
- “Taylor, put three blocks in the bucket.”
- “Jessie, walk next to me.”

Examples of **Poor** Instructions:

- “Be careful.” (*Too vague*)
- “Can you put your toys away?” (*Don’t ask, tell*)
- “Go upstairs, wash your face, brush your teeth and go to bed.” (*Too many instructions*)
- “Okay, I think it is time for you to go to bed.” (*Too many words*)
- “Don’t run in here.” (*Negative and too vague*)
- “Stop horsing around!” (*Negative and too vague*)

➔ **For more information** or to make an appointment at the Boys Town Center for Behavioral Health, call **531-355-3358**.

Visit **BoysTown.org/Parenting** for more information from the parenting experts at Boys Town.

