



# Giving Great Instructions

Kids are asked to do lots of things by adults, and even the best-behaved kids don't always do as they're told. Sometimes parents think kids are disobeying on purpose, but kids are actually confused about what they should do. Parents can help kids listen by giving effective instructions. You can watch a video on this topic by clicking this [link](#) or scanning the QR code above with your mobile device.

## Tips for Effective Instructions

- **Secure attention.** To make sure kids hear you when you give an instruction, get at kid level and make sure to have eye contact. This alone can improve cooperation.
- **One at a time.** Giving one task at a time makes it easier for kids to listen. Give one instruction at a time, wait for it to be done, and then give the next one.
- **Focus on what you want (not what you don't).** Tell kids what *to do*, rather than what *not* to do.
  - Replace statements that begin with "Don't/stop \_\_\_\_\_" with "Please do \_\_\_\_\_"
  - *Example:* Instead of saying "Don't climb on the furniture," a parent can say, "Please get down from the table."
- **Specific and direct.** Use specific instructions that make it clear to kids what needs to be done. Try to avoid using general statements (e.g., "Let's clean up your toys.") or asking questions ("Should we put on your coat?") if you mean to be giving an instruction.
  - *Example:* Replace "How about we put on your shoes because it's time to go to grandma's?" with "It's time to go to grandma's. Please put on your shoes."
- **Polite and respectful.** Instructions should be direct and clear without being disrespectful to kids. It is helpful to start with, "Please." This shows kids how to be polite.
- **Effective tone.** Kids should learn to listen to instructions given in a normal tone of voice rather only when parents yell or plead. Use a neutral, firm tone of voice.
- **Offer choices.** Kids like to have choices, and this helps them learn to make decisions. "Choice" instructions should be very simple, and you should be okay with all possible choices.
- **Praise cooperation!** When your child follows instructions well, make sure to provide them with extra praise and attention. This helps good listening become a habit.
  - *Example:* You are being such a good listener!

## Common Mistakes to Avoid

- **Not getting kids' attention.** Kids have a hard time paying attention to several things at once.
- **Too much info.** When parents say a lot, it is hard for kids to figure out what part they should listen to. They may find it easier to not listen at all!
- **Asking questions or opinion.** To be nice, parents allow for kids to be confused into thinking they have a choice or option to say no.
- **Being vague.** Avoiding verbs that are not directly linked to an action like "act right" or "behave".

## An example of better behavior through better instructions:

Not so effective	Better way
Parent: (calling from kitchen) "Okay buddy, put your toys away and get your shoes on. We got to go."	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 and then we need to go to the store."
Child: (whining) "But I'm not done. Why do we have to go?"	Child: "Okay."
Parent: (still in kitchen) "Come on. Don't give me a hard time. We got to go. We're late."	Parent: (Waited a moment) "Okay, we need to leave now. Please put your cars back in their bin."
Child: (keeps playing, ignores parent).	Child: (listens and picks up) Parent: "Great job picking up. Now, please get your shoes."
Parent: (comes into living room, upset) "I said we got to go. Now put that stuff away and hurry up!"	Child: (listens and puts on shoes) Parent: "What a helper. You did that so fast. Let's go."

# Prep for Success

It helps to prepare for giving great instructions by thinking through how you would tell your kids to do some things. What instructions would you give in these scenarios?

**Scenario 1:** You are trying to get your child to clean up their room. Write down exactly what you would do and say using the steps of giving good instructions:

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**Scenario 2:** 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):

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**Below, think of other scenarios that are specific for your child.** Write down the scenario and the specific way you will give great instructions:

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