



Trauma
Care

Newsletter

TraumaCare

Box 1807, Magaliesview, 2067

5a Franshoek Rd, Lonehill

Tel: 0715929690

Website: www.traumacare.co.za

Email: mail@traumacare.co.za

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Kids who can't follow instructions



When I opened the door of my seven-year-old daughter's room-20 minutes after I'd sent her upstairs to put on her leotard and tights-Rosalie was sitting on the floor in her underwear, happily playing with a Barbie doll. Though I tried to stay calm, my voice grew sharp with annoyance as I asked, "What are you doing? I told you to get ready for ballet!"

Few things are as frustrating and as infuriating, as having our children ignore our instructions. But how do we convince youngsters that it's important to follow directions—not just to please us or avoid punishments, but to make their own lives easier as well? (After all, a child's health and safety can depend on her ability to follow orders. And kids function better in school, sports and other group activities when they know how to carry out instructions.) Here's some expert guidance on getting your kids to do as they're told.

What to avoid

The methods parents typically use to get children to listen are often ineffective or actually encourage noncompliance, according to a new study by Edward Christophersen, PhD, professor of pediatrics and author of *Beyond Discipline: Parenting That Lasts a Lifetime* (Westport Publishers). He and other experts advise steering clear of some common mistakes.

Don't say "don't." A negative instruction like "Don't let me come home and find that you still haven't done your homework!" is much more likely to be ignored than one that gives a positive alternative, such as "Please get started on your homework right after you eat your snack this afternoon." Emphasizing what your child is *not* to do has pitfalls, Christophersen says. Kids under age frequently misunderstand negate directions—particularly if they are shouted—and may hear "Don't bring that wet dog into your room" as a command to "Bring the wet dog into your room." Older children may find that disregarding a "don't" can be more rewarding than obeying it: They get your attention that way.

Reasoning gets little or no results. Explaining why certain actions are undesirable—"If you leave your toys lying around, you might trip over them and hurt yourself"—has no impact on

children under age six, Christophersen finds Your words simply go in one ear and out the other. "A young child doesn't relate to abstract future consequences, so he's not likely to be motivated by a warning like this. Since he isn't hurt right now, he doesn't feel there's anything to worry about. With an older child, a detailed list of reasons for every rule can spark a tedious debate or, at best, create short-lived compliance, he adds.



You might get a 10-year-old to return a book to the library on time by explaining that if she doesn't, she'll have to pay the fine out of her allowance. However, she'll probably forget to return the next book she borrows because at this age, dipping into her piggy bank isn't nearly as painful as wasting precious playtime to walk to the library.

The more you nag, the less kids listen. It's very easy for parents to slip into the "nagging and shouting syndrome," observes psychotherapist James Windell, MA, author of *Children Who Say No When You Want Them to Say Yes* (Macmillan Books). "When a child doesn't respond the first time she's told to do something, parents often repeat the request over and over until they finally lose their temper and start shouting. The message you give your child when you let her tune you out many times is that there's no need to pay attention to you until you're screaming."

Avoid empty ultimatums or threats. Making impulsive threats when a child doesn't listen, such as "Do this right now, or I'm going to ground you!" is another common mistake parents make, Windell says. This can create a no-win situation, because kids resent being forced to give in. As a result, they often get angry and end up focusing on that anger instead of concentrating on what you asked them to do.

Tactics to try

With a few minor changes in the way you give directions, you can prevent communication problems as well as create an atmosphere that encourages cooperation. These attention-getting strategies will help you get your message through to your kids.

 **Lay the right groundwork.** The time to work on better communication with your child isn't when you're already knee-deep in conflict over something he's forgotten to do, but during the calm moments of the day, says Susan K. Golant, co-author of *Getting Through to Your Kids* (Lowell House). "Show your child you're curious about what's going on with him, so he feels comfortable discussing any problems that may be making him less attentive than usual. You might want to set aside time each day to talk." What if your child is too young for such discussions? "Play activities are a good way to elicit a preschooler's feelings," adds Golant. "If your four-year-old is being balky, you could use dolls or puppets to act out the situation. She'll probably laugh when she sees the 'child' puppet dawdling instead of getting dressed or eating dinner. Then you can ask her why the puppet is doing that. Also try giving her the 'Mommy' puppet, so you can see how she perceives your behavior toward her. You may get some unexpected insights into how you interact with each other."

Define your expectations. A key step to having your child hear you is to decide *exactly* what you'd like him to do, emphasizes Windell. "Many parents fail to tell their kids what they expect of them—but get angry anyway when their child doesn't do a particular task," he says. "Morn or Dad comes home from work, sees their kid has left dirty dishes and food out in the kitchen, then greets him with an outburst, such as 'What's wrong with you? Can't you even clean up your own mess?' Since the child was never given clear instructions to do this, he'll get angry about this unjust attack, and that leads to an unpleasant confrontation."

A more productive approach would be to come up with a precise, *positive* guideline you want your child to follow. For instance, try saying "After your snack, I want you to put your dishes in the dishwasher and the food back in the fridge."



■ **Get her undivided attention.** Before telling your child about an important rule or expectation, eliminate potential distractions. If she's playing, ask her to put down her toys for a minute, then move them out of her reach. Turn off the TV or radio, and sit down next to her. Make sure she is facing you before you speak—you may need to gently turn her shoulders toward you or touch her cheek to get her total attention. Next, look her right in the eyes, and use her name: "Sally, I need you to ask me before you go out into the yard."

■ **Let your child help make some of the rules.** Everyone, kids and adults, wants to have a say in things that concern them. To help your child feel that he's not always being bossed around, request feedback from him if possible as you make a new rule or give him instructions to do something. For example, a 10-year-old might be told, "I notice that there are candy wrappers on your floor. What do you think would be a good rule to help you remember to throw them away in the future?" Giving a child a say gives him an impetus to follow the rule or direction—and he's less likely to claim you're unfair.

■ **Give choices—not commands.** Whenever possible, let your kids decide *how* or *when* to follow your directions. With a five-year-old, you might say, "You need to put away your crayons. Do you want to do that now or in fifteen minutes?" Again, giving your child some say in what procedures she's to follow can often prevent power struggles.

Be careful, however, not to use words implying that *not* doing the task is one of the options, notes Windell. "If you say, 'Would you mind taking the garbage out?' your youngster probably won't realize this is meant as a rhetorical question. She's likely to argue with you, because in her mind, the answer is yes, she would mind taking the garbage out and would rather have somebody else do it. If you want to offer her a choice, make it clear that what she gets to decide is *when* to do the job, not *whether* to do it."

■ **Make instructions easy to understand.** Many parents give directions that are too broad and open to misinterpretation. Instead of just telling your nine-year-old to clean out his closet, break the task down into several steps, and stay with him until the job is completed. You might begin by saying, "Put the dirty clothes in the hamper." Next, tell him, "Put all the toys in this box." Then say, "Throw those crumpled papers in your wastebasket."

- **Ask your child to repeat your request.** Getting your youngster to recite rules and instructions out loud can prevent tearful protests of "I didn't know" or "I didn't understand" later on. Ask young, easily distracted kids to repeat your directions silently to themselves several times. Offer older kids a written checklist or, better still, have them write down the information themselves.
- **Create positive and negative consequences.** Offering a reward for following your directions, and a penalty for disregarding them, has two important advantages, Windell says. First, you'll provide *motivation* for your child to mind you when you tell her that if she finishes her homework by six, she'll have time to watch her favorite TV show. Then you'll reinforce the message by reminding her that if she doesn't, the TV will stay off all evening. "You'll also give your kid the freedom to decide how she wants to behave, instead of giving her the feeling she's being forced to do what you say," observes Windell.
- **Acknowledge good behavior.** Do you pay more attention to your kids when they shout or ignore you than when they quietly follow directions? "What most parents don't realize is that even so-called 'negative' attention can *reinforce* disobedience unless you make an effort to balance it by noticing and appreciating your kids when they're being good," says Christophersen. "Give them a brief hug or a kind word anytime you see they're doing something you *approve* of. You don't have to make a big deal of it—a quick pat on the back now and then can do more to get your kids to cooperate than an hour of reprimands." So stop scolding, and start setting *loving* limits that make everybody feel good about doing what you say, *when* you say it!

