



Workbook Sample from

Positive Parenting Practices for
Young Children with Autism –
Trainer's Manual

1-866-811-8665

2

MODULE

Teaching Children to Follow Directions

Main Ideas

- Reasons children do not follow directions
- Ways to make difficult directions easier to follow
- How to give directions that are clear and specific
- What to do when a child follows a direction
- What to do when a child does not follow a direction

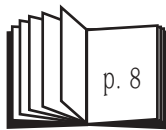




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Introduction

Listening, understanding, and following directions are important skills for children to learn. Young children learn these skills through interactions with their parents and other important people in their lives. Although children typically try to please people by doing what is asked of them, they also test their limits by not following directions. Children may be trying to find a balance between pleasing the adults they interact with and asserting their own independence. The way the adult responds will affect how well the child follows directions in the future. Today, we are going to discuss why some children may not follow directions, and some ways to teach children to follow more directions.

Why Won't My Child Listen To Me?

When your child doesn't follow your directions, you may feel frustrated or angry. You may think "Why won't she listen to me?" You may try many other ways to get your child to follow your directions. Let's look at a few examples that will illustrate the reasons why children don't follow directions. (*Refer parents to the Activity Sheet on page 8 of the Parent's Workbook. Write the heading, "Why won't my child listen to me," on the board.*) Read the first example on your Activity Sheet. (*Give time to read.*)

Melanie wanted her daughter to set the table for dinner. She said, "Megan, how about if you get the blue plates with the little flowers and the silverware and all the napkins and put them on the table at everyone's place?" Megan looked very confused and didn't even begin to follow the directions.

Why didn't Megan follow these directions? (*Possible response: She didn't understand the directions.*) Sometimes children don't follow directions because **they do not understand what they mean.** (*List "1. Doesn't understand direction" on the board.*) The directions may be too complicated or too vague. It may not be clear if the child has a choice of whether or not to follow the directions. Some children also have a difficult time remembering directions that are given too far ahead of when the directions are to be followed. How many of you remember giving your children directions when you were getting them dressed or tying their shoes? It's possible that when you finished with what you were doing, your child no longer remembered what was asked. A direction



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such as, “Don’t forget to put the toys away when you are done eating dinner,” may be difficult for a preschool child to remember.

Now look at example number two on the Activity Sheet. (*Give time to read.*)

Kristina was watching her favorite TV show. Her mother called from the kitchen and said, “Kristina, pick up your toys.” Kristina didn’t even turn her head when her name was called.

Why did Kristina not follow her mother’s directions? Another reason that a child may not follow directions is that **she doesn’t hear what was said.** (*List “2. Doesn’t hear direction” on the board.*) She may not have been paying attention to her mother or her mother was too far away for her to hear. You probably can remember hearing your name called in school when you weren’t paying attention and hadn’t heard the question. Children can get so wrapped up in a game, video, song, book, or their own thoughts that they tune others out.

Let’s look at another reason children don’t follow directions in example number three on your Activity Sheet. (*Give time to read.*)

Alex and his father, Arnold were having a wonderful time playing at the park. After about an hour, Arnold said, “OK Alex, it’s time to go home. Come to the car.” Alex sat down on the ground and began to cry.

Can anyone tell us why Alex didn’t follow the direction to come to the car? A third reason that children may not follow directions is that **they don’t want to do it.** (*List “3. Doesn’t want to follow direction” on the board.*) If they cry, ignore the direction, or begin to do something else, they may get out of doing something they really don’t enjoy.

Another common example of this is when a parent tells a child to go to bed. It is difficult for a child to leave favorite activities and toys that are so rewarding to go to bed, so the child may think up several excuses (e.g., a drink of water, 15 more minutes of a TV show, or another story), or simply ignore the direction.

Read the final example from the Activity Sheet. (*Give time to read.*)

Rob was reading the newspaper while his son, Joseph, was playing nearby. After a short while, Joseph began to sneak up the stairs. Rob said, “Joseph, please stay downstairs.” Joseph giggled and ran up the stairs. Rob said, “OK, now I’m going to get you,” and chased after him. By the time their chasing game was over, both Rob and Joseph were laughing.



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Why didn't Rob follow the directions? Sometimes children don't follow directions **to get extra attention**. (List "4. To get extra attention" on the board.) Often, when a child doesn't follow directions, the parent or teacher will repeat them, give additional assistance, or turn it into a game. This attention can be very reinforcing and the child may try to get the same attention when the parent can't or doesn't really want to play that game any longer.

Another way a parent may respond when a child refuses to follow directions is to yell, threaten, or engage in a discussion with the child. Even though this attention seems unpleasant, children may not follow directions to continue to get this type of attention. Children may also anticipate receiving this extra attention because it is something that has happened in the past.

(Summarize this section by reviewing the information on the board.)

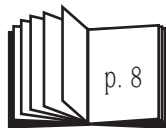
Why won't my child listen to me?

1. Doesn't understand direction
2. Doesn't hear direction
3. Doesn't want to follow direction
4. To get extra attention

How to Give a Direction

Many times, the way you state a direction can improve a child's chance of successfully following it. If your child hears and completely understands, he is more likely to do what you have asked. However, if your child does not understand the direction, for whatever reason, he will not be able to follow it. Making sure the direction is clear, specific, and within the child's ability will make it more likely that the direction will be followed. (Write the heading, "How to Give a Direction," on the board.) We'll be referring back to the examples from the Activity Sheet to discuss how we can make these directions clearer and simpler. Read example number one again. (Give time to read.)

Melanie wanted her daughter to set the table for dinner. She said, "Megan, how about if you get the blue plates with the little flowers and the silverware and all the napkins and put them on the table at everyone's place." Megan looked very confused and didn't even begin to follow the direction.





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This is a very complex multi-step direction. There are several ways that Melanie could simplify this direction. One thing Melanie could do is to **give one direction at a time**. (List “1. Give one direction at a time” on the board.) Can anyone restate part of this direction giving just one direction at a time? (Possible response: “Get the plates.” Then wait. “Put them at the table at each place.” Then wait. “Get the napkins.” etc.)

Giving your child too many directions at one time can be confusing to him and can reduce the chance that he will follow the direction. Initially, it is better to give one direction at a time. When you feel that your child is able to follow one-step directions, you can begin to give more complex, multi-step directions such as “Get the plates and napkins.”



Children may have a difficult time following a direction that is too long or complicated. **Giving short, simple directions** is important for children who are just learning to follow directions. (List “2. Give short, simple directions” on the board.) Instead of saying, “Okay now, Caitlin, be a big girl now and try real hard to pull up your pants,” you can say, “Caitlin, pull up your pants.” This shorter sentence is easier for Caitlin to understand. She doesn’t need to sort out which words actually go with what she is being asked to do. Extra words such as “Okay, now...,” “How about if...,” or “It would be really nice if you...,” make a simple direction more difficult for a child to follow.



Another guideline for giving clear, simple directions is to **be specific**. (List “3. Be specific.” on the board.) Tell your child exactly what you want him to do. Specify the desired behavior in your instructions. If your child is throwing food on the floor and you say, “Johnny,” you have not told him what to do. If you say, “Stop it,” it may temporarily stop the behavior, but he may still not know what you want him to **do**. If what you mean is, “Johnny, keep your food on your plate,” then you need to tell him so. Directions such as, “Be good,” “Stop,” or “Calm down,” may be too vague for a child. They do not specifically tell a child what you want him to do.

Now look at example number two on the Activity Sheet. (Give time to read.)

Kristina was watching her favorite TV show. Her mother called from the kitchen and said, “Kristina, pick up your toys.” Kristina didn’t even turn her head when her name was called.



What could Kristina’s mom do to make it more likely that Kristina would follow the direction? (Possible response: she could make sure Kristina is listening to her before she gives the direction.) It is



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important to **make sure that your child is paying attention to you** when you give a direction. (List “4. Make sure your child is paying attention” on the board.)

Remember that children can “tune out” parents. Before you give a direction, get your child’s attention. Look at your child, make sure you are close to him, get down to his level, and say his name. You may need to eliminate some things that are distracting. Turn off the TV, take him aside from a group of children, or get between him and the toy he is playing with.

You also may need to stop some distracting behaviors before you give your child a direction. If the child is running around, throwing a tantrum, throwing toys, or doing some repetitive verbal or motor behavior, you may need to calm him or interrupt the behavior to be sure you have his attention. To do this, you could hold him on your lap or rest your hand on his shoulder.



Whenever possible, it is important to **state your direction in positive terms**. (List “5. State it positively” on the board.) In other words, emphasize the positive behavior rather than the negative behavior when giving your child a direction. Saying, “Don’t,” or “No,” only teaches your child what not to do; it does not tell your child what you want her to do. Stating instructions positively will help teach your child the correct behavior. For example, instead of saying, “Don’t run,” you can tell your child, “Remember to walk”; instead of saying, “Stop screaming,” you can say, “Play quietly.”



Remember that you can **give extra assistance**, if necessary. (List “6. Give extra assistance if needed” on the board.) Directions are much easier for children to follow if they are accompanied by gestures or other prompts. If you tell a child to put a coat on, you could point to the coat, gently guide her toward it, give the sign language for coat, or show a picture of a coat to make sure she understands. It is common for parents to tap or point to a chair when they ask their child to sit down. When a child is beginning to learn a complex task such as scooping food with a spoon, the parent can give the direction while helping him guide the spoon with his hand. Assistance given with a direction may be in many forms.



The final guideline for giving a direction to your child is that you **tell the child what you want him to do rather than asking or suggesting**. (List “7. Tell, don’t ask” on the board.) Listen to these statements:

“You could hang up your coat.” “Can you ask for more milk?”

“Let’s see if you can sit still.” “Are you ready to go?”



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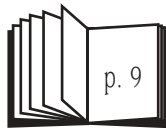
These statements can be confusing to a child because it is not clear whether they are directions to follow or simply suggestions. Sometimes it's okay to give a suggestion to your child—it's part of a natural conversation. However, when your child does **not** have a choice about whether to follow the direction, a short, simple direction **without** extra words like “can you...” or “let's see if...” will be less confusing.

(Summarize this section by reviewing the list that is on the board)

How to Give a Direction:

1. Give one direction at a time
2. Give short, simple directions
3. Be specific
4. Make sure your child is paying attention
5. State it positively
6. Give extra assistance
7. Tell, don't ask

Reducing the Number of Directions You Give



(Refer parents to example number one on the Example Sheet, found on page 9 of the Parent's Workbook.) Listen to this example:

Nicholas and his mother Annie were playing with blocks. Annie gave the following directions within the first two minutes of play:

“Give me the red block.”

“Put this block on top of your tower.”

“Let's build a gas station.”

“Go get a car.”

“Put the little man in the car.”

“Bring the car to the gas station.”

“Don't knock down my tower.”



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One thing to remember about giving directions to children is to **give directions only when necessary**. Be careful not to give a large number of instructions in a short time period. This may be frustrating or stressful to a child. Reducing the number of directions you give does not mean you need to talk or interact with your child less frequently. You can replace the time spent giving directions with talking about what your child is doing or commenting on things you see. This is a great method of language enrichment for your child.

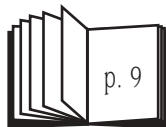
Another way to reduce the number of directions you give to your child is to **offer choices**. During play you may say, "Would you like to color with crayons or markers?" While dressing, the child can be given the choice of a red or blue shirt. Giving choices helps the parent guide the child in what to do while giving the child some control over the situation.



Can anyone give an example of how Annie in the previous example could have given Nicholas some choices while playing with the blocks? (*Possible responses: "Would you like the green or the red block?" "What would you like to build?" or "Do you want to knock down this tower?"*)

As we discussed earlier, suggestions are another way to offer children choices. Instead of a direction such as, "Turn off the TV," you could give the suggestion, "If you want to, you could turn off the TV." Stating this as a suggestion, however, implies that if he chooses, he can leave the TV on. When your child does have a choice, be very clear about it. "If you want to..." or "Would you like to..." statements clearly give the child a choice. On the other hand, if he has no choice, be sure to state it as a clear direction.

You may be able to give fewer directions if you **redirect the child to a new activity rather than giving a direction**. (*Refer parents to example two on the Example Sheet.*) Here's an example:



Casey was spinning a metal lid on the kitchen floor. This behavior was beginning to annoy his mother and she wanted it to stop. She knew, however, that if she told him to stop and removed the lid that he would cry and have a tantrum for a long time. Instead, she got out his favorite musical instrument toys and placed them on the floor near him. When Casey began to play with them, his mother removed the lid and placed it out of reach.

In this example, Casey's mother never needed to give a direction. She avoided a tantrum and made the situation easier to handle. Redirection is a strategy that can work in a number of situations. The key is to make the new activity or object more fun than what the child is currently doing.



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Directions that are Difficult for Children

The most difficult directions for children to follow are often ones that end an activity that is very enjoyable or begin an activity that they really don't like. Many children will cry, sit on the ground, have a tantrum, or simply ignore a direction they don't want to follow. Think for a moment about the difficulty children have leaving a park or a playground, as in the earlier example about Alex. There are some ways to make this type of situation a little easier and more positive. The first thing to think about is how you can ***make the direction or the transition from one activity to another more fun***. The transition from the park to home may be a lot more fun for Alex if there is a stop at the ice cream store in between. Can anyone think of another way Alex's father could make the direction to go to the car more fun? (*Possible responses: "Do somersaults to the car," "Ride on father's shoulders to the car," or "Have a favorite toy or snack in the car."*)

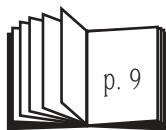
When you anticipate a difficult direction or transition, ***tell the child ahead of time what is going to happen***. Simply letting a child know that there are just five more minutes before you'll have to leave, or that it's bedtime as soon as a certain TV program is over, makes it easier for a child to be ready when you do give the direction.

Your child may be more willing to follow a direction if you ***wait until she finishes or has had some time to enjoy the activity she is involved in***. You may not always be able to wait to give an important direction, or to allow your child as much time as she wants at a certain activity. However, if the child is very intent on an activity or has just become interested in a certain toy, it may be best to wait a few minutes before giving a direction.

After the Direction is Given

When you give a child a direction, two things can happen. He follows your direction (or at least tries to) or he doesn't follow your direction. Either way, you have to be ready to respond. (*Refer parents to example three on the Example Sheet.*) Listen to this example:

Paula said, "Jeremy, please put your clothes in the hamper." Jeremy immediately stood up, picked up his clothes, and put them in the hamper.





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How should Paula respond? (*Possible response: Praise or hug Jeremy.*)
When a child responds appropriately to your directions, it is important to **reward the child for following directions**. Whenever a child follows a direction, or tries to follow it, let him know that you are pleased. Praise, a hug, or a smile will teach the child that following your directions is something that he should continue to do to get positive attention from you.

To give a child the best chance to get that positive attention, be sure that you **give the child plenty of time to follow a direction**. For preschool children, this means to wait at least five seconds after you give a direction before you expect the child to begin to respond.

What if Jeremy, in the previous example, didn't follow the direction? It is important to be ready with a consistent response. **One important thing to remember is to not repeat your direction**. Repeating the same direction several times may teach the child that he doesn't have to do it the first time. If your child does not follow the direction the first time, gently guide him to complete what you asked.

Physical guidance means that you put your hand on your child's hand and help him follow your direction. Use only the amount of guidance needed for the child to complete the direction. Physical guidance can be a nudge to the hand or arm or full, hand-over-hand assistance. This physical guidance works in several ways. If your child does not want to follow a direction, he learns that he needs to do what you ask. If he wants the extra attention of repeated directions or verbal discussion, you will help him do it without the extra attention. One way or another it will end up that he has followed the direction.

Finally, if your child did not hear the direction or didn't understand what you asked, the physical guidance will help teach your child what the words you say mean. You don't really have to think too hard about why your child didn't follow a particular direction because the physical guidance will be a good consequence either way.

Conclusion

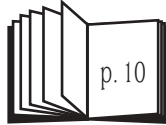
One of the most important things to remember when teaching children to follow directions is to **pick your battles**. It is more important to consistently follow through on a few, very important directions than to struggle with the child on many minor issues. If you have decided a



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direction is not important, make sure you choose your words carefully, giving suggestions or descriptions of what the child is doing. When it is important that the child follow a direction, such as staying in the yard or coming when you call, follow the guidelines that have been mentioned in this module. Stop before you give a direction and ask yourself, “Is it important and am I willing and able to follow through?”

Bringing It Home

Refer parents to the “Bringing it Home” handout on page 10 of the Parent’s Workbook. Review the directions and discuss responses of those parents who wish to share the information.

Summary

Summarize the session by reviewing the following.

1. Children may not follow a direction if:
 - a) They don’t understand what it means
 - b) They don’t hear it
 - c) They don’t want to do it
 - d) They expect extra attention
2. Some guidelines for giving directions to young children are:
 - a) Give one at a time
 - b) Give short, simple directions
 - c) Be specific
 - d) State it positively
 - e) Make sure the child is paying attention
 - f) Give extra assistance, if necessary
 - g) Tell, don’t ask



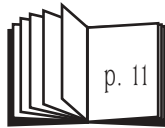
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3. It is important to try to not to give too many directions to young children.
4. Directions to end a fun activity or begin an activity that a child dislikes are difficult directions for a child to follow. Try to make the directions easier and more fun.
5. Give your child plenty of time to follow a direction and praise him when he does. If the child does not follow a direction, do not repeat it. Instead, physically guide him to complete it.
6. And remember, pick your battles. Give directions that are important to you and that you are willing to follow through on.

In a Nutshell



Refer parents to the “In a Nutshell” handout on page 11 of the Parent’s Workbook. Suggest to parents that they read the handout as an additional review and that they share the information with family members, other caregivers, and interested friends. There is an extra page to the “In a Nutshell” handout for this session with some simple reminders for giving directions. Parents may want to keep this page handy or post it somewhere in their home to refer to daily.