

PARENT HANDOUT: EFFECTIVE DIRECTIONS



WHAT IS GIVING EFFECTIVE DIRECTIONS?

- ▶ Effective Directions are instructions you give your child that are simple, clear, and direct. They are given when your child's response is important to you and when you are willing to see that your directions are followed.
- ▶ This skill is effective with children of all ages, as well as for many different kinds of misbehavior.

HOW TO GIVE EFFECTIVE DIRECTIONS AT HOME

- 1 Only give directions if you are willing to see them through.** Don't give an instruction you don't care much about or don't intend to back up with consequences if your child does not follow it.
- 2 Reduce distractions before giving directions.** Turn off the TV, stop video games, put away toys, etc. before giving instructions. You may need to help your child transition from one activity to another to reduce distraction (e.g., "In five minutes, it is time to put the phone down"). This is especially helpful if your child is engaged in a task they really enjoy, like screen time.
- 3 Make statements instead of asking questions.** You are not asking your child for a favor or letting them choose to do what you want. Instead, clearly and directly state what you would like your child to do (e.g., "Please do your homework"; "Please put your phone away"). Try to focus on the behavior you want your child to *do*, instead of what you want them to avoid doing (e.g., say, "Please use a quiet voice" instead of "Don't yell"). Asking your child to do something provides an opportunity for them to say no.
- 4 Give simple and specific commands.** Younger children or those with attention challenges often have difficulty remembering "to do lists". Wait until one instruction has been followed, then give another one. Older children may be better able to keep multiple or multi-step directions in mind.
- 5 Make eye contact while talking.** This will ensure that your child heard your directions and is giving you their undivided attention when you are talking.
- 6 Speak in a calm, business-like voice.** Let your child know you are serious about the instruction(s), but don't let your frustration show. This helps both you and your child stay calm and decreases your child's chances of getting upset in response to your directions.
- 7 Have your child repeat back your directions.** This lets you know they heard you correctly and helps them remember what to do. This is especially helpful for children who have difficulty paying attention, or for older children if you give multiple instructions at once.
- 8 Set a time limit.** Tell your child *when* they need to follow through on your instructions, as well as the *consequences* they will receive if they do not meet that time limit.

You should also **avoid less effective ways of giving directions**, such as:

- Giving *multiple instructions* at a time (e.g., "Get out of bed, brush your teeth, and eat breakfast").
- Repeating instructions*, which may make your child more likely to tune you out. Give a direction one time, then give a warning about the consequences for not listening.
- Not giving consequences* like you said you would. If your child knows you don't mean it, they are less likely to follow the rules.

PARENT HANDOUT: EFFECTIVE DIRECTIONS TIPS



HOW CAN GIVING EFFECTIVE DIRECTIONS HELP MY FAMILY?

- ▶ Parents often find it frustrating when their children do not follow directions. In fact, children who misbehave typically get *more* directions a day than the average child. This means they may be used to “tuning them out”.
- ▶ Giving Effective Directions teaches you new ways of giving instructions that maximize the chances your child will follow them.
- ▶ This strategy is one of the easiest and most powerful ways to improve your child’s behavior. By making simple changes in the way you give your child directions, you can significantly improve your child’s behavior.

COMMON PARENT CONCERNS

This doesn’t work! My child just doesn’t listen.

Some children may not respond to Effective Directions right away. Keep trying! Over time, children often notice that parents are telling them to do things in a different way, which will make them more likely to respond the way you’d like. You can also combine this skill with other strategies in this guide like Praising Good Behavior (Disruptive Behavior Skill 2) and Shifting Attention (Disruptive Behavior Skill 3) to increase the chances your child will behave.

I feel uncomfortable telling my child what to do instead of asking. It seems rude.

Some parents find this method of giving instructions different or awkward. Remember that you are trying to give directions in a way that makes it clear you are telling your child to do something, not asking or giving them the option to say no. Start your sentences with “please” and use a calm tone of voice. You can be kind but firm!

What if I need my child to complete a bigger or longer task and can’t give directions one at a time?

Ask your child to repeat your directions back to you, which will ensure they heard and understood you correctly. Some children benefit from having a “chore card” that lists the steps involved in a multi-step task. For example, your child can carry around a card that lists the steps to cleaning a room.

When I give my child instructions, they act out in serious ways. What should I do?

If your child’s misbehavior feels uncontrollable or extreme, you may need additional support to manage and change their behaviors. Talk to your child’s primary care provider. They can connect you to a behavioral health specialist who can help.

