

Disobedience II

When parents have reasonable expectations and set fair limits, children are more likely to be cooperative and well adjusted. Children need limits and simple rules for their own safety and to get along with others. Parents who teach their children to accept limits and do as they are told often find parenting easier. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you teach your preschooler to accept limits and follow instructions.

It is unrealistic to expect children to always do as they are told. Preschoolers are becoming more independent and want to make some of their own choices and decisions. Disobedience only becomes a problem when it occurs frequently, such as when a child follows less than half the instructions given to them.

WHY ARE CHILDREN DISOBEDIENT?

Disobedience is likely to occur if it gets children what they want. Children may also learn to be disobedient if it gets them out of doing something they do not want to do.

Parents may sometimes accidentally reward children by giving them extra attention when they do not do as they are told. This attention may be reasoning, discussing, arguing, nagging or repeating instructions over and over.

Sometimes parents are not consistent in how they deal with disobedience. They may allow disobedience one day and then expect their child to follow instructions the next day. If children learn that instructions are not always backed up, they are less likely to do as they are told.

The way parents give instructions can influence whether or not children do as they are told. Some common problems with instructions include:

- *Too many.* Every time an instruction is given there is an opportunity for children to be disobedient. Children may feel picked on when they are given too many instructions.
- *Too few.* Children sometimes seem disobedient because no-one has taken the time to give them clear instructions about what is expected. For example, a child may have poor table manners because they have not been given enough instructions on how to use a knife and fork.
- *Too hard.* Children may be disobedient when parents expect too much and give instructions that are beyond their child's

abilities, such as asking a 3-year-old to clean up a very messy room.

- *Poorly timed.* Instructions given when a child is busy doing something, such as watching a favorite television show, are likely to be ignored.
- *Too vague.* Children may not follow instructions that are unclear — *Kevin!* or *Don't be silly* — or instructions that are expressed as questions — *Would you like to go to bed now?* If you give your child a choice, be prepared for them to say *No*.
- *Body language.* Sometimes a parent's body language says something different to the instruction, such as laughing or smiling while telling a child to stop what they are doing. This can confuse children. Also, children often ignore instructions shouted from one room to another, because parents are not there to back up the instruction.



HOW TO TEACH YOUR CHILD TO DO AS THEY ARE TOLD

▼ Think About Your Instructions

It is important to give children instructions that are clear and direct. Only give instructions that are necessary and that you are prepared to back up. It is not reasonable to always insist on instant obedience. When you want your child to start a new task, where possible, let your child finish what they are doing or wait for a break in their activity before giving an instruction. If a problem behavior is occurring, act immediately.

▼ Get Close and Gain Your Child's Attention

Stop what you are doing and move to within an arm's length of your child. Bend down to their eye level and use your child's name to gain their attention.

▼ Tell Your Child What To Do

Be specific, say exactly what you want your child to do — *Elise, it's nearly bedtime. Go and put your pajamas on, please.* If you want your child to stop doing something, be sure to tell them what to do instead — *Frank, stop climbing on the furniture. Please sit on the chair to watch television.*

▼ Give Your Child Time To Cooperate

Pause briefly to give your child time to start to do what you have asked. Around 5 seconds is enough. Stay close and watch your child.

▼ Praise Your Child for Cooperating

Praise your child if they do as you ask — *Rosie, thank you for doing as I asked right away* or *Eddie, thank you for cleaning up when I asked you to.*

▼ Repeat Your Instruction

If your instruction was to start a new task, such as getting ready for bed, repeat the instruction once if your child does not cooperate within 5 seconds. If you have asked your child to stop doing something, do not repeat the instruction.

HOW TO MANAGE DISOBEDIENCE

▼ Back Up Your Instruction With a Logical Consequence

If your child does not do as you ask within 5 seconds, use a logical consequence. Choose a consequence that fits the situation. Where possible, remove the activity or toy that is at the center of the problem. Explain why you are doing it — *Frank, you have not done as I asked. TV is off for 10 minutes.* Five to 10 minutes of missing out on the activity is usually long enough. Ignore protests or complaints. Do not debate or argue the point with your child. Simply carry out the consequence.

▼ Return the Activity

Return the toy or activity once the time is up, to give your child the chance to practice behaving well. If the problem behavior continues or occurs again within the next hour after giving the toy or activity back, repeat the logical consequence for a longer period, such as the rest of the day, or use quiet time (see below).

▼ If Necessary, Use Quiet Time or Time-Out

Sometimes when you want your child to start a new task, it is difficult to use a logical consequence, such as when you want your child to get ready for bed and they refuse. If you cannot use a logical consequence or the problem behavior continues, use quiet time. Tell your child what they have done wrong — *Elise, you have not done as I asked* — and the consequence — *now go to quiet time.* Quiet time involves removing your attention from your child and having them sit quietly on the edge of the activity for a short time. Sit your child on a chair away

from others. Tell your child they must be quiet for 2 minutes before they can come out of quiet time.

If your child does not sit quietly, use time-out. Say something like *You are not being quiet in quiet time, now you must go to time-out.* Time-out involves taking your child away from the situation where a problem has occurred and having them be quiet for a short time. Take your child to an uninteresting but safe room or space. Tell your child they must be quiet for 2 minutes before they can come out of time-out. Give this reminder even though your child might be upset or angry.

▼ Return Your Child to Where They Were

When your child has been quiet for 2 minutes in quiet time or time-out, return them to where they were. If your instruction was to start a new task, tell your child again what you want them to do — *Elise, please go and put your pajamas on now.* Praise

your child for doing as you asked. If they do not do as you ask within 5 seconds, repeat quiet time or time-out (the same consequence as the last time). You may need to repeat quiet time or time-out a number of times before your child does as you ask.

If your instruction was to stop a problem behavior, do not repeat the instruction. Set your child up in an activity after quiet time or time-out. Praise your child for behaving well.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

Reasoning with a child who is refusing to do as they are told is unlikely to work. Reasoning gives children extra attention and may accidentally reward disobedience. Parents do not need to explain all of their instructions to children.

To give your child more independence, give them options to choose from when possible. However, make the difference between choices and instructions clear. Try not to give too many choices about everyday routines.

FOR FURTHER HELP See the *Positive Parenting* booklet for more information on positive parenting strategies. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the service where you were given this tip sheet or contact:

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KEY STEPS

- Try to let your child finish an activity before giving an instruction.
- Get close to your child, gain their attention and tell them exactly what to do.
- Praise your child for doing as you asked.
- Act immediately when your child is disobedient.
- Use logical consequences, quiet time or time-out to back up your instruction.
- Where appropriate, return your child to where they were and repeat the instruction.