

Following Directions Age 17 Summary

Why Following Directions?


When your fifteen-year-old can't seem to remember to turn in their homework assignments without multiple reminders or your seventeen-year-old appears to forget what you've asked them to do the moment they leave your sight, these situations are opportunities to support your teen in following directions.

STEP 1  **GET INPUT** **Get Your Teen Thinking by Getting Their Input**

Ask your teen:

- *Have you done this task before? If not, do you need to practice together or other support while trying it out?*
- *If they have done it before, what was your experience last time you did this task? How did you feel about it?*
- *Can you recall the three steps I asked you to take?*
- *How do you feel about doing this task?*

Tip: Be sure to co-create family rules and routines around smartphones and devices. Be sure you have a daily designated time when all will be silent or powered down to entirely focus on connecting.

STEP 2  **TEACH** **Teach New Skills**

- Teach your teen the skills required to follow your directions. Did you ask him to mow the lawn? Demonstrate first (watching you enact the skill increases their ability to perform the action!).
- If there are written directions, read them together and follow the steps together. If you ask your teen to perform a task for the first time, do it together to ensure they feel competent the next time you ask.
- If you are trying to establish a routine, ask your teen if a checklist would help them remember the steps.

- Model active listening while interacting with your teen. Modeling listening skills can be one of the greatest teaching tools and impact students' school performance.
- Try out active listening together. Ask your teen to tell you one funny thing that happened at school. Listen carefully without distraction to fully understand what they are saying, and wait until they are finished talking before responding.
- Set a goal for yourself. Pick a time of day when you know that you and your teen will be talking. Then, notice your body language.
- Listen for thought and feeling. In addition to listening to what your teen says, see if you can identify the unspoken thought and feeling behind the content, in other words, the context.
- Paraphrase. Try out the skill of paraphrasing by repeating to the speaker a summary of what they've said to check your listening accuracy and confirm to the speaker that you have heard them. You might start by saying, "*I heard you say that...*" Model it, and then have your teen try it.
- Seek clarification. Mainly, if you are listening to learn something from the speaker, it is important to seek clarification on details to ensure you understand. Model seeking clarification by asking questions like, "*What did you mean when you said you weren't happy this morning? What happened?*" After you model this, allow your teen to try it out.
- Work on your family feelings vocabulary. Teens ages fifteen to nineteen are still learning about feelings—notice and name feelings when a family member shows an expression to offer plenty of practice. Ask, don't tell. "*Dad, you look sad. Is that right?*" Being able to identify feelings is the first step in successfully managing emotions.
- Model assertive communication through "I-messages." Here's an example: "*I feel* (insert feeling word) *when you* (name the words or actions that upset you) *because* (state the impact)." Here's another example: "*I feel sad when you say hurtful things to your brother. It hurts his feelings.*" This helps you take responsibility for your feelings while avoiding blaming language like "*You did...*" (which closes down the mind and ears of the other). It helps communicate the problem constructively.

Tip: Teens still need their parent's attention to thrive. Try to build a sacred time into your routine when you are fully present to listen to what your teen has to tell you. Turn your phone off. Set a timer if you need to. You'll model vital focusing and listening skills while building your trusting relationship. Car rides are a perfect time to connect.

**STEP
3****Practice to Grow Skills and Develop Habits**

- Communicate directions in ways that can be well-heard and understood. Make eye contact. Use the action verb first in a direct, simple sentence. *“Rinse out your bowl and then put it in the dishwasher.”* Use visuals like motions, hand signals, drawings, or written lists.
- Work up to multi-step directions. Practice a two-step direction and see how it goes. If successful, move up to a three-step direction.
- Accept all feelings. They will play a role in whether or not your teen is motivated to follow your directions. If you will help them manage their biggest feelings, it is essential to acknowledge and accept their feelings -- even ones you don't like.
- Use “Show me...” statements with a positive tone and body language to express excitement and curiosity. When teens learn a new ability, they are eager to show it off! Give them that chance. Say, *“Show me how you can make your bed, get breakfast, and put on shoes in the morning on time today.”* This practice will offer valuable practice in enacting a multi-step routine.
- Offer limited and authentic choices when communicating directions. Offering them an option, even if small - *“Do you want to do your homework sitting at the kitchen counter or the dining room table?”* - can return a sense of control to their lives. It also offers valuable practice in responsible decision-making.
- Recognize effort using “I notice...” statements like, *“I notice how you listened to the full directions, and you remembered what to do. That’s excellent!”*
- Follow through on repairing harm. When your teen has caused harm by not following your directions, they need your guidance, encouragement, and support to repair it. They may need your guidance through that process, and that’s okay! They are learning the invaluable skill of responsible decision-making.

**STEP
4****Support Your Teen’s Development and Success**

- Ask questions to support their skills. For example, *“How are you feeling about school today? What will help you focus?”*
- Learn about development. Each new age and stage will present differing challenges, including stress, frustration, and anger. We, as adults, can be more empathetic and patient when we understand what our teens are attempting to learn.
- Promote an “I can” belief. Teens need to hear that you believe in their ability to learn anything with time and hard work.

- Foster a safe, trusting relationship. When your teen does not follow directions, be sure you assume that they have more learning to do instead of assuming defiance. Get curious and find out what's going on for them.
- Stay engaged. Work together on ideas for new and different ways to communicate directions or instructions. That can offer additional support and motivation for your teen when challenging issues arise.

Tip: After working with your teen on these steps, it may be time to seek support if they find multi-step directions challenging. This can impact family cooperation and school success. A school counselor or a child psychologist can offer support.

STEP
5



RECOGNIZE

Recognize Efforts

- Recognize and call out when things are going well. It may seem obvious, but it's easy not to notice when everything moves smoothly. Noticing and naming the behavior provides the necessary reinforcement that you see and value your teen's choice. For example, when teens complete their homework on time, a short, specific call out is all that's needed: *"I notice you completed your homework today on your own in the time we agreed upon. Excellent."*
- Recognize small steps along the way. Don't wait for significant accomplishments—like the whole bedtime routine going smoothly—to recognize effort. Remember that your recognition can work as a tool to promote more positive behaviors. Find small ways your child is making an effort and let them know you see them.
- Build celebrations into your routine. For example, after you've completed your bedtime routine, snuggle and read before bed. Or, in the morning, once you're ready for school, take a few minutes to listen to music together.

Trap: It can be easy to resort to bribes when recognition and occasional rewards are underutilized. If parents or those in a parenting role frequently resort to bribes, it is likely time to revisit the five-step process.

Recommended Citation: Center for Health and Safety Culture. (2024). *Following Directions Age 17 Summary*. Retrieved from <https://www.ToolsforYourChildsSuccess.org>

This content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Tools for Your Child's Success communities, financial supporters, contributors, SAMHSA, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.