

Following Directions Age 5 Summary

Why Following Directions?

When your five-year-old can't seem to remember to brush their teeth before bedtime without multiple reminders, or your seven-year-old seems to forget what you've asked them to do the moment they leave your sight, or your ten-year-old is refusing to go to bed, these situations are opportunities to support your child in following directions.

STEP 1

GET INPUT

Get Your Child Thinking by Getting Their Input

You might ask your child:

- *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?*

Trap: Avoid letting questions turn into an accusation. Remember to stay calm and that the goal of the question is to help the child uncover feelings.

STEP 2

TEACH

Teach New Skills

- Teach your child the skills required to follow your directions. Did you ask him to pull weeds in the garden? Demonstrate first.
- If there are written directions, read them together and take the steps together to follow them through. Or, if you are asking your child to perform a task for the first time, do it together to ensure they feel competent on their own the next time you ask.
- Model active listening while interacting with your child. Modeling listening skills can be one of the greatest teaching tools.

- If you are trying to establish a routine, consider using a picture list or another visual reminder. Engage your child in the creation of the routine chart. Get their input on the order in which they would like to do tasks.
- Paraphrase. Try out the skill of paraphrasing by repeating to the speaker a summary of what they've said to check how accurate your listening is 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 child 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 child to try it out.
- Work on your family's feelings vocabulary. Children ages five to ten 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: Children need their parents' attention to thrive. Try to build a sacred time into your routine when you are fully present to listen to what your child tells you. Turn your phone off. Set a timer if you need to. You'll be modeling a vital skill while building your trusting relationship.

STEP
3



Practice to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- Communicate directions in ways that can be well-heard and understood. Get physically on your child's level. Make eye contact. Use the action verb first in a direct, simple sentence. *"Put your plate 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 child is motivated to follow your directions. If you will help your child manage their biggest feelings, it is essential to acknowledge and accept their feelings -- even ones you don't like. When your child is upset, consider your response. Instead of focusing on their actions or the problem, focus

on their feelings FIRST. You could say, *“I hear you’re upset. What can you do to help yourself feel better? Would your calm down space help you feel better?”* Then, try the directions again after the calm-down space has helped.

- Use “Show me...” statements with a positive tone and body language to express excitement and curiosity. When a child learns 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.”* This practice will offer valuable practice in enacting a multi-step routine.
- Offer limited and authentic choices when communicating directions. Offering them a choice, 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 child has caused harm by not following your directions, they need your guidance, encouragement, and support to repair it. They may need to hold your hand through that process, and that’s okay! They are learning the invaluable skill of responsible decision-making.

STEP 4



Support Your Child’s Development and Success

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

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

**STEP
5**

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 child's choice. For example, when children 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.

Tip: 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.

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