

## Following Directions

### Introduction

Following directions is a skill that a child uses to show that they understand the meaning of words and sentences. Directions are given in day to day activities at home and at school. Teaching a child how to follow verbal directions will begin with learning to pay attention to what is said and what is seen and then responding in an expected way. Following directions is a skill that children learn over time. At first, children can hear what you are saying, and may pay attention to your visual cues, but cannot understand the words or the meaning of those words. Next, they may understand one or two key words in a sentence. And finally, children understand all the words in a sentence, and can make the connection between your words, and their actions.

Most children with autism have difficulty developing language skills. Their language skills may be delayed, or develop differently from typically developing children. They may seem to be able to express themselves better than they can understand other's words and directions. This is especially true for children who learn language through echoing. For example, a child might repeat parts of a movie dialogue or phrases they hear you say at home. When children are taught language in a scripted manner, it may also seem like they understand all the words they are using, but this in fact, may not be true.

### Teaching Children to Follow Directions

Teaching a child to follow a simple, one-part direction:

- 1) Choose activities you do every day and choose words that clearly describe what you want your child to do. Your direction should have at least two key words - an action word and an object label. For example, you can use words like give, get, throw or brush for action words, and use object labels such as cup, shoe, ball or teeth.
- 2) Put them together in a simple phrase such as "Get cup" or "Brush teeth". Once you have given an instruction, wait for them to respond and process the instruction.
- 3) Use prompts to help your child learn the simple direction. You can use your hands to point or touch the object you want your child to pay attention to. For example, if you want your child to "brush teeth", you can say "brush teeth" and at the same time, touch their

toothbrush. If needed, you can also model or mimic the action, or guide their hand to the object. The end goal is always to reduce the need for prompts, and for your child to be able to follow directions simply by hearing you say them.

- 4) Once your child has learned to follow the two word direction, you can expand it to be more descriptive. For example, you can say, "Give Daddy the cup" or "Brush your teeth".
- 5) Reinforce desired behavior by rewarding them with verbal praise, such as "Yay! You brushed your teeth!" You can also give them stickers, or other tokens such as food, desired items or a special privilege.

### Tips to Keep in Mind

- 1) Make sure your child has frequent opportunities to practice the skill you are teaching them. You can do this as a specific activity during the day, or as part of their play.
- 2) You can call your child's name to get their attention before you begin.
- 3) Give one direction at a time. If you have something that requires multiple steps, separate them into single steps to begin with.
- 4) Use visual aids for children who are not yet verbal, or who may benefit from seeing a task represented visually.

### Conclusion

Teaching your child to follow directions is a skill that can take years for a child to learn. Most children will learn more complex tasks as they achieve their developmental milestones. Having patience to repeat yourself many times will help, as each set of directions will require practice. Build their receptive vocabulary through describing what you both are doing throughout the day, what is happening in the environment, and by describing actions in videos and in books. You can find additional resources on our website, [www.porchlighteducation.org](http://www.porchlighteducation.org).