



# GIVING COMMANDS TO YOUNG CHILDREN<sup>1</sup>

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Please note that resources such as this are intended to offer guidance and suggestions. However, no claim is made that the information provided is appropriate for any specific child or family. Many families will find this information helpful and sufficient for addressing child rearing issues. Others will not. Parents are encouraged to talk with their child's pediatrician or seek help from a mental health therapist if needed.

**Purpose:** Teaching your child to be compliant involves several steps. Perhaps one of the most important steps is the use of good commands. Stating a command in an effective manner makes it more likely that your child will listen. Also, giving effective commands teaches your child to follow instructions that are provided in a calm, matter-of-fact tone, rather than when you are yelling. This reduces parental stress and helps strengthen the parent-child bond.

## **Tips for giving effective commands:**

- 1) **Direct not indirect:** Use commands that make it clear to your child what you want done (avoid commands such as “Let’s clean up your toys” or “How about putting on your coat?”). If the child thinks a parent is merely suggesting that s/he do something that s/he doesn’t want to do, it is unlikely that s/he will obey. *Direct commands should be used when it is important that the child do the requested behavior.* If it is not necessarily important that your child obeys, then suggestions are fine—and there should be no punishment if your child does not follow through with what was suggested.
- 2) **Positively stated:** Tell your child what to do, rather than what not to do. Replace “Don’t . . .” and “Stop . . .” commands with commands instructing him/her to do something that interferes with problem behavior (e.g., instead of saying “Don’t climb on the furniture,” you should say “Please get off of the table.”).
- 3) **Single rather than compound:** Give commands one at a time rather than putting several together. Break large commands down into smaller parts (e.g., Instead of “Clean up your room,” use several smaller commands such as “Put your blocks in the box,” “Please put your shoes in the closet.”)
- 4) **Specific not vague:** Tell your child exactly what to do. Replace commands such as “Be good” or “Act right” with more specific commands such as “Use your indoor voice” or “Please sit down at the table.”
- 5) **Use a neutral, but firm, tone of voice:** Your child should learn to respond to commands issued in a normal conversational tone of voice rather than given in a loud, overly demanding fashion or using a pleading tone of voice.
- 6) **Polite and respectful:** Commands should be direct and clear without being disrespectful to your child. It is helpful to start commands with “Please.” This also shows your child how to be polite

7) **Use only when necessary:** Direct commands should be reserved for times when it is important that your child obey. You should make sure that direct commands are used only when you are willing to follow through with a consequence if your child disobeys.

8) **Incorporate choices when appropriate:** It is helpful for children's development of independence and decision-making if they are given choices between doing two appropriate behaviors or activities. "Choice" commands should be very simple and issued at the level consistent with your child's abilities to understand. For example, at bedtime the child could choose whether to first brush his/her teeth, or put on his/her pajamas.

9) **Accompanied by a rationale:** Sometimes (not always) it is helpful to give an explanation for why your child should do the requested behavior. This rationale should either occur before the command or be provided after your child has obeyed. It should not come after the command but before your child obeys because the child may argue about the reason rather than obeying.

10) **Compliance** must be consistently followed by a specific "labeled" praise such as, "I really like it when you do what I ask right away." Be enthusiastic with your praise.

11) **Noncompliance** should always be followed by an appropriate consequence (e.g., time out, loss of privilege). For young children, a brief (i.e., 3 minute) time out can work, as long as they are required to come back and do the task after time out is up. Children must never be threatened with a consequence without follow through or they will learn that it is not important to listen.

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Hebreer-Kigen, T. L., & McNeil, C. B. (1995). *Parent-child interaction therapy*. New York: Plenum Press.