How To Get A Child Following Directions

Do your child’s language delays cause him to have difficulty following directions?  This can make it very hard to get through your daily routines and get through errands without meltdowns and problems.  Follow these steps to help teach your child to follow directions at home and in public.

1. Make a List of Common Directions you Give Your Child

Throughout the course of a day or a week, write down all of the directions that you commonly give your child.  Take notes on your phone or on a piece of paper you carry around with you.   Try to capture the meaning of the direction in as few words as possible.  For example, if you give your child the direction “Honey, would you mind going to get your shoes for me please?”, just write down “get shoes”.  That will be the direction you will give your child while teaching her these directions.  You may have a list of directions like “come here”, “stop”, “go”, “walk”, “stand up”, “sit down”, “stay here”, “hold my hand”, etc.  If you’re having trouble picking directions, try thinking about what times of the day or during which activities your child has the most trouble following directions.

2. Take/Make Pictures of Those Directions

Choose about 15-20 of the most common directions.  You’ll want to start by just teaching your child a few of those, but you may as well make all of the pictures now so you have them when you need them.  Now you’ll need to create a visual cue for each direction.  You can do this a couple of ways.  You could take a picture of your child doing each of those things and print them out with the direction written on or under the picture. You could also go on google image search and find pictures of other kids or people following directions to complete those actions.  Finally, you could always just draw stick figures on a card for each direction, though depending on your artistic abilities and your child’s ability to decipher your drawings, you may be better off with real photos. 🙂  Once you print the directions off, cut them out so each direction is on its own card.

3. Following Directions: Teaching the directions

Your child will need to be taught what each of these cards means.  You can do this by playing Simon Says using the cards.  For those of you who don’t know, Simon Says is a game where one person is chosen to be the leader, “Simon”, and everyone else must do what Simon Says.  However, the leader must say “Simon Says” before each direction is given.  If the leader does not say “Simon Says” and the followers complete the direction anyway, they lose.  With young children, I disregard that last part about losing.  I just always say “Simon Says” and then after a while we switch and let someone else be leader.  For that matter, you don’t even have to say Simon Says, just tell your child it’s a game and he’ll probably be happy.  Each time you give a direction, show your child the picture along with it.  At first, you will need to help your child do each one until she is able to do it on her own.  After she completes the action, whether she did it on her own or you had to help her, clap and get very excited for her.  This will help reinforce that she’s doing something great by following directions!  You may want to start with just a few directions until your child learns those well and then add in more.

\*\*\* Adaptation for children with autism:  Many children with autism won’t understand the whole “game” aspect of making this fun.  For these children, you will want to find something that they really enjoy so they have something to work for.  For example, if he really likes that toy that lights up, hide it for a while before you do this activity and every time your child follows a direction (even if you have to help him do it), give him the toy as a reinforcer.  If your child isn’t very motivated by objects, you may have to try giving him a small piece of his favorite food or drink after each direction.

4. Working Following Directions into Daily Routines

Once your child can follow the set of directions during these games and play sessions with you, start using the directions during your daily routines.  Whenever you need to give your child one of those directions, show her the picture card as you do.  Then, help her complete the direction and get excited for her just as you did before.  For children with autism or children that have a lot of trouble with this, you may need to give a small reinforcer after they complete the direction until they get the hang of it.  Mini M&Ms are great for this because they’re small and won’t ruin your child’s appetite.  You may want to consider hanging a set of the following directions pictures from your belt loop so that you have them nearby.  At my school, I have a set of picture directions on a ring that is clipped to my belt with one of those retractable keychains so I can whip it out whenever necessary.  Keep doing this until your child is following directions with the picture cue throughout your daily routine (that may take a while, be patient!)

5. Fading the Picture Cue

Once your child can follow the directions with the picture cue, you will want to fade the use of the picture so that your child can follow the verbal direction without needing a picture.  To do this, try giving the direction verbally first without using the picture.  Pause for a moment and see if your child will do it.  You can try nudging him in the right direction or making a small gesture toward the desired action.  If your child is not able to do it, give the direction again but this time use the picture.  Try a variety of different cues, such as laying your hand on your child, pointing at what he needs to do, etc.  Vary your reinforcement so that when your child follows the direction with fewer cues, you give more praise and get more excited for your child than when you have to give him a lot of cues.  If you keep doing this long enough, your child should be able to follow the directions without needing too many additional cues.

6. Work on Following Directions with More than One Step

Once your child is able to follow single-step directions using this method, you can use the same approach to teach multiple-step directions.  For this, you will want to do the following directions game with two pictures and teach her how to follow both parts of the direction.  You could even use [a first, then board as described on the Expressly Speaking Blog](http://expresslyspeaking.wordpress.com/2013/02/13/another-visual-aide/) to help her understand the order of the directions.  Follow the same procedure for fading off the visuals and working it into daily routines.

PS. If you have patience and continue to use this method consistently throughout your day, you will see great changes in your child’s ability to follow your directions.  Just make sure to keep it fun and light and provide tons of encouragement!  If you are looking for materials that you can use to teach your child to follow directions, download my [sequencing board with following directions card set](http://www.speechandlanguagekids.com/sequencing-game-following-directions/) that you can print for free and use at your house or in your therapy setting!



Where to Find More Info:

This guide, along with 38 others, is included in Ms. Carrie’s E-Book: [Speech and Language Therapy Guide: Step-By-Step Speech Therapy Activities to Teach Speech and Language Skills At Home or In Therapy](http://www.speechandlanguagekids.com/speech-language-therapy-guide/).  This guide includes detailed information on teaching various speech and language skills, including this one, along with worksheets, handouts, sample IEP goals, data collection, and video demonstrations.  For more information, click the button below:

https://www.speechandlanguagekids.com/how-to-get-your-child-to-follow-directions/