



12. Give effective instructions

Children can fail to do what parents want because they don't understand what it is that their parent actually wants.

It is very easy for parents to fall into giving **ineffective instructions**, like:

- **chain instructions** ("Do this, then this, then this", etc.) By the time you give the last one, the child has forgotten the first (and second, and...)
- **vague instructions** ("Behave yourself") Does this mean "Play quietly", or "Don't hit your sister", or "Do what Grandma tells you", or "Don't make a mess", or ...? The child may not know what he or she is supposed to do.
- **question instructions** ("Would you like to pick up your toys now?"), or **"let's....." instructions** ("Let's pick up the toys now") Children don't understand that you're being polite but you really mean "Do it!" and think they have the option of answering "No" or "OK, you pick up the first one".
- **instruction then explanation or talk** ("Pick up your toys because Grandma is coming and she might fall over them and hurt herself. You know Grandma isn't very well.") Your child is caught between two contradictory instructions – the spoken "Pick up your toys" and the unspoken "Stay here and listen to me talking to you" – and doesn't know which one to do first. Besides, by the time you finish talking, your child may forget the instruction.

Instead of these, try to use **effective instructions**:

- Only instruct if you can follow through. Just before the school bus is due is not a good time to tell your children to clean up their rooms.
- Get your children's attention first. If they don't hear you, they can't do what you ask.
- Be Direct:
 - One instruction at a time
 - Make it constructive, **pointing** your child **towards** what you want
 - Make it **short and simple** ("[Name], put the toys in the box").
- Explain beforehand, then stop talking after the instruction. The last thing your child should hear is the "do it" part. ("We're going out, so put the toys in the box.")
- Give your child time to comply. Some children take a while to work out what to do and how to do it. Wait at least 30 seconds (count under your breath) before saying anything else. If you have to **remind** ([See Tip 10 - Using reminders to get cooperation](#)) your child to do what you asked, do it calmly and quietly with a minimum of fuss.