

Telling Kids What to Do

Professor Matt Sanders

As children grow up they need to learn to follow instructions and requests. After all, one of the most basic human communication skills that we learn through childhood is to respond to instructions and rules appropriately. As adults this ability helps us learn new skills, keep out of dangerous situations, abide by the laws of our community, and carry out tasks on behalf of others.

The instructions we give to children can be used to stop particular behaviour, such as “Stop pulling the dog’s tail” or used to initiate some action, such as “Pat the dog gently instead like this”.

So why is it that I sometimes see parents who describe their children as ‘stubborn’, ‘headstrong’, or ‘determined’ and for whom every bath, mealtime, family outing, shopping trip or car ride is a stressful battle of wills with raised voices and frayed tempers?

When children refuse to cooperate with parental requests, the reason can be related to how those instructions have been given. Over time, a certain pattern of instruction giving and responding may develop that will virtually ensure a child will refuse to follow instructions most of the time.

IF THIS HAPPENS, YOU MAY NEED TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP. TO PREVENT IT HAPPENING, PARENTS SHOULD BE CAREFUL NOT TO FALL INTO SEVERAL COMMON TRAPS WHEN GIVING INSTRUCTIONS:

Too many. The more instructions you give, the more opportunities to disobey. Apart from making the child feel picked on, giving too many instructions is also exhausting for parents.

Too few. Children may sometimes seem disobedient because no one has taken the time to give them clear information on what is expected.

Too hard. Don’t expect a 3-year-old to tidy up a very messy room on their own — they just aren’t old enough.

Too vague. Shouting your child’s name, then pausing and frowning at them because they are jumping on the couch might not be of much help if they have also just teased their sister and hit their brother. Your child will be unclear as to what behaviour you actually consider a problem. It is also not a good idea to phrase an instruction as a question. If you ask “Would you like to go to bed now?” when you really aren’t giving your child a choice, be prepared for them to say “No”.

Poorly timed. Asking your child to do something while they are busy watching their favourite television show will probably result in them ignoring the instruction.

Shouting from a distance. Instructions shouted from one room to another are often ignored simply because parents are not there to back up the instruction.

Emotionally laden. Children are greatly affected by the emotional tone of what parents say to them. Calling children “stupid” or an “idiot” shows disapproval of the child rather than the child’s behaviour. Although at times it can be difficult, parents should work to control expressions of anger when giving children instructions.

Say exactly what you want your child to do. If you want them to stop doing something, be sure to tell them what to do instead as well as the consequences of disobeying. Give your child time to cooperate and praise them when they do so, or carry out the consequence if they refuse.

So what’s the alternative?

Try approaching the whole issue of instructions by first thinking about what you actually want your child to do in a given situation. Make sure you distinguish between situations where children have a choice and when they do not. Choose words that are clear and direct and make sure you have your child’s attention before you begin. With younger children, bend down to their eye level within an arm’s length away.

Find more parenting tips at: manitoba.ca/triplep or call 945-4777 in Winnipeg or toll-free 1-877-945-4777.

Professor Matt Sanders is founder of the Triple P - Positive Parenting Program.