

Giving Effective Commands

In our work with many behavior problem children, we have noticed that if parents simply change the way they give commands to their children, they can often achieve significant improvements in the child's compliance. When you are about to give a command or instruction to your child, be sure that you do the following:

1. *Make sure you mean it!* That is, never give a command that you do not intend to see followed to its completion. When you make a request, plan on backing it up with appropriate consequences, positive or negative, to show that you meant what you said.
2. *Do not present the command as a question or favor.* State the command simply, directly, and in a businesslike tone of voice.
3. *Do not give too many commands at once.* Most children are able to follow only one or two instructions at a time. For now, try giving only one specific instruction at a time. If a task you want your child to do is complicated, then break it down into smaller steps and give only one step at a time.
4. *Make sure the child is paying attention to you.* Be sure that you have eye contact with the child. If necessary, gently turn the child's face toward yours to ensure that he or she is listening and watching when the command is given.
5. *Reduce all distractions before giving the command.* This is a very common mistake that parents make. Often, parents try to give instructions while a television, stereo, or video game is on. Parents cannot expect children to attend to them when something more entertaining is going on in the room. Either turn off these distractions yourself or tell the child to turn them off before giving the command.
6. *Ask the child to repeat the command.* This need not be done with each request, but can be done if you are not sure your child heard or understood the command. Also, for children with a short attention span, having them repeat the command appears to increase the likelihood they will follow it through.
7. *Make up chore cards.* If your child is old enough to have jobs to do about the home, then you may find it useful to make up a chore card for each job. This can simply be a 3 × 5 file card. Listed on it are the steps involved in correctly doing that chore. Then, when you want your child to do the chore, simply hand the child the card and state that this is what you want done. Of course, chore cards are only for children who are old enough to read. These cards can greatly reduce the amount of arguing that occurs about whether a child has done a job or chore properly. You might also indicate on the card how much time it should take to be done and then set your kitchen timer for this time period so the child knows exactly when it is to be done.

If you follow these seven steps, you will find some improvement in your child's compliance with your requests. When used with the other methods your therapist will teach you, remarkable improvements can occur in how well your child listens and behaves.