

How to Give Effective Commands

In our work with many teenagers with behavior problems, we have noticed that if parents simply change the way they give commands to their teen, they can often achieve significant improvements in the teen's compliance. When you are about to give a command or instruction to your teen, 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 either completed or followed up with a consequence if not completed. When you make a request, plan on backing it up with appropriate consequences, either positive or negative, to show that you mean what you have said.
2. *Do not present the command as a question or favor.* State the command simply, directly, and in a businesslike tone of voice. However, if you truly mean to give the teen a choice, be clear (for example, "Would you like to do your homework now or after supper?" is a legitimate choice; "Would you like to do your homework?" when you mean "Do your homework" is not a legitimate choice).
3. *Do not give too many commands at once.* Many teens with ADHD have trouble with multistep commands. If a task you want your teen to do is complicated, then break it down into smaller steps and give only one step at a time.
4. *Tell the teen what **to do** rather than what **not to do**.* If you state your request in such a way that it provides the teen with information about what his/her next step should be, he/she will be much more likely to comply.
5. *Avoid competing distractions when giving commands.* A very common mistake that parents make is to try to give instructions while a TV, stereo, or video game is on. Parents cannot expect the teen to pay attention to them when something more entertaining is going on in the room. Either turn off these distractions yourself or tell the teen to turn them off before giving the command.
6. *Be cautious of commands that involve the concept of time.* By definition, teens with ADHD experience an impaired perception of time. If parents make requests such as "Have your room cleaned in 1 hour" or "You have 15 minutes to get ready for school," the teen will probably need some external time marker such as a digital clock a timer set to go off, and the like.

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