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Children More Likely to Comply if Instructions are Clear

Parents often complain that children won't do what they are told. Before assuming the problem is with the child, parents should make sure they are giving directives the best way to increase the likelihood the child will comply. There are four basic principles that are important when giving directives to children:

(1) Make your directive a statement instead of a question. Often, parents ask a question instead of clearly stating what they want the child to do. For example, instead of saying, "Go take your bath," the parent says, "Don't you think it's time for your bath?" The child might genuinely believe the answer is "No." Parents should not ask questions if they are not prepared to accept the answer. Instead, give a clear statement.

(2) Make the directive five words or less. Often parents get into too much explaining. Children's attention spans are limited, and the longer a parent spends giving explanations and details, the more lost the child gets and the more the child tunes the parent out. Thus, directives need to be short and to the point. For example, "Go take your bath," "Turn off the computer," and so on. When you've said the sixth word, you've said too much.

(3) Tell the child what to do instead of what not to do. Parents frequently get into the habit of saying, "Don't do that!" The trouble with this is that kids get sick of hearing the word "don't" as much as parents get sick of saying it. "Don't" is negative. It is much better to be positive by telling the child what to do instead of what not to do. For example, if a child is running through the house, instead of saying, "Don't run in the house," say, "Slow down, walk." You can always say it positively - it just takes practice.

(4) When giving directives, stay calm and unemotional. Parents often mistakenly believe that if they become emotional by raising their voice it will provide the necessary emphasis for children to know they really mean business. Instead, what it does most often is escalate hostility and negativity. Parents must model for children what they want their children to do. Upset parents will not be effective when telling their children to calm down. Becoming emotional when dealing with a child's misbehavior is like trying to put out a fire by pouring gasoline on it! The best way to discipline is to give directives in a business-like manner, one which is respectful, calm, unemotional and in control.

In summary, remember to make statements, no longer than five words, telling the child what to do (instead of what not to do), and remain calm and unemotional. Following these four principles will increase compliance in the child and produce a more positive emotional atmosphere in the home.