

11 Tips for Effective Commands

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? **DO YOU FEEL LIKE YOUR CHILD DOESN'T LISTEN?**

? **DO YOU FIND YOURSELF REPEATING YOURSELF TEN, TWENTY, FIFTY TIMES?**

? **DO YOU HAVE TO RAISE YOUR VOICE IN ORDER FOR YOUR CHILD TO COMPLY?**

It's typical for children to be noncompliant. Some are passively noncompliant, where the child may ignore you, stall, or dismiss you when you make a request. Others are outright defiant with a clear "no!" or "you can't make me!" Some kids respond to parent demands by becoming verbally or physically aggressive - or are set off into a full-blown tantrum. These more extreme negative responses are generally less typical and can signal a need to incorporate new strategies. A child's temperament has a lot to do with level of compliance. Some kids are easy and agreeable, while others come into this world wired to be more reactive and irritable. Regardless of your child's temperament, there are factors to keep in mind that will help you to be more successful in gaining your child's cooperation.

If I had to pick a single tip:

Before you make a request of your child, be sure that you are **within arm's length of your child**. Why? Because you can expect about a 50% uptick in cooperation with just this one strategy. When you are at arm's length, you are more likely to have your child's attention. It's easier to convey that you are going to follow through with your request. Also - you are more likely to notice that maybe this isn't a good time to make a request of your child. You might be more effective if you wait for your child to finish what they are doing before placing a demand. Or maybe you can see that they are having a hard day and that a request to clean the cat box will put them over the edge.

Caveats: When it comes to tweens and teens, it's probably sufficient if you are simply in the same room and not so close as an arm's length. Another caveat is if your child is already escalated, it may best to disengage rath-

er than to move in close with a command. Adult proximity can set off physical aggression in some children if they are already frustrated.

Here are ten additional strategies to improve the chances that your child will listen to you:

1) USE A COMMAND, NOT A QUESTION. If it's important for your child to comply, phrase the request as a command. While the word "command" may feel at odds with your parenting style, you should know that your tone and sentence structure will cue your child as to when you mean business. If it's important to you that your child comply, phrase your request as a command: "Please take your plate to the sink."

When communicating a command, avoid the traps of having to explain yourself or argue your case. Give the reason before you give the command ("We have leave in five minutes, so it's time to put on your shoes.") If your child protests and then you give the reason, it's an invitation for your child to argue, debate, and negotiate. I expand on these traps in the article, [How to Reason With Your Child](#).

2) USE YOUR CHILD'S NAME. "Carlos, please take your plate to the sink."

3) BE SPECIFIC. Instead of, "clean up these toys," try, "put the Legos back in the bin." It's best to avoid "chain commands." Chain commands are when you list multiple tasks at once. Keep your commands to one task at a time. An exception is if you feel confident that your child knows the steps and is capable of following them without your guidance. For example, it's okay to say "get ready for bed" if your child can self-manage each step. Otherwise, you'll



have to break it down one step at a time. The degree of specificity that you need to offer will depend on your child's developmental level and self-management skills.

4) REDUCE THE NUMBER OF COMMANDS AND REQUESTS THAT YOU MAKE OF YOUR CHILD. Keep a mental tally of how many requests you make of your child in a day. If you are in the double digits, step back and consider what you would like to prioritize. Some children perceive frequent requests as an onslaught and get really good at tuning out their parents. Also, it's hard to follow through if you are issuing dozens of commands a day to your child. You risk training your child that they don't need to take what you say seriously.



When my kids were young and I picked them up from playdates, I announced to them on arrival that it was time to go. They quickly learned that although I said this, I reliably spent the next 30 minutes socializing with the other parent. In essence, I trained my kids to ignore my instructions about ending the playdate. It would have been better if I had waited until I was done socializing to tell them that we were leaving.

5) USE "START COMMANDS" INSTEAD OF "STOP COMMANDS." Imagine that your child is bouncing a ball in the house. Your head feels like it's about to explode if that bouncing doesn't stop. Instead of "knock it off" or, "stop bouncing that ball," it usually works better to tell your child what you **DO** want them to do. You can say, "put the ball back in the garage." It can work even better to be creative with a non-sequitur: "Go tell your sister that dinner is ready."



I'll never forget the time when my son discovered that the kitchen light switch was in reach of his seat at mealtime. He repeatedly switched the light off and on. I fell into all of the usual traps – "knock it off... stop it... that's annoying." He ignored me. Then I reminded myself to think like a behaviorist. I said, "hey bud, do me a favor and check to see if we're running low on toilet paper in the powder room." He gave me a bemused, puzzled look but went to check. He cheerfully returned to say, "looks good!" The light switching was over.



6) CUE YOUR CHILD. Let your child know that you are about to ask them to do something and, in a sense, cheerlead

them to comply: "Hey Amanda, I'm about to ask you to do something and I'm looking for good listening on the first ask!" When you give the command, it's important that you not raise your voice, but it's okay to alter your tone a bit to cue your child's attention (perhaps by enunciating and emphasizing your words) – still, though, keep your tone neutral.

7) PRAISE COMPLIANCE, EVEN IF YOUR CHILD IS RUDE.

A lot of parents get tripped up on this one. It's easy to get distracted by a child's grumbling, "attitude," or back-talk. Ignore the nasty tones or verbalizations. If your child yells, "I'm sick of you always telling me what to do!" as they leave to take out the garbage, then say – "Thanks for helping out. I really appreciate it!" Social praise is great to offer whenever your child does what you say, regardless of any negativity. Of course, you'll want to express appreciation of your child's positive attitude when it's there!



8) USE A REWARD SYSTEM (BEYOND PRAISE). This is not a long-term solution, but it can help to create a more positive tone if there has been tension and negativity related to your child's noncompliance. The effective use of rewards is a science and an art. You might find the articles on [myths about rewards](#), [avoiding the pitfalls of reward systems](#), and [putting a reward system into action to be helpful](#).

9) SAY IT ONCE. If you find that your child jumps into action only after you've repeated yourself ten (or more) times, then you have probably trained your child not to listen to you. Most parents find that they have to raise their voice



before their child will comply. This is an incredibly common cycle. If you don't plan to follow through, then don't give a command. Instead, ask your child to do something, phrasing it as a question, and drop it they don't comply.

If you do plan to follow through, then phrase your request as a command. The reason to make the distinction between a question and a command is that your child will

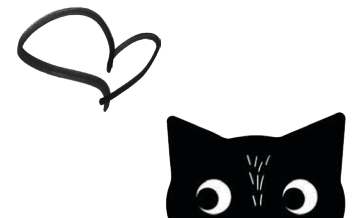


learn that a command signals that you mean business. Stay close to your child and stare at them until they comply (do not glare – you must keep your affect soft; this is not about intimidation). Your child may find this awkward and comply just so that you'll move on.

10) USE CONSEQUENCES FOR NONCOMPLIANCE. Consequences are a form of mild punishment. Punishment is commonly overused and can make a situation worse. The effective use of consequences is an extensive topic. It's best to work with a trained professional on how to



be successful with consequences and avoid the ways that consequences can backfire. Try to prioritize the other strategies discussed in this article with the understanding that some children really do need a structured system of consequences. If you choose to use consequences, then you will be looking for compliance within five to ten seconds. It's a lot of work to teach your child that you will follow through with a consequence, so it's best to start this on a quiet weekend afternoon and not when you are rushed to get out the door in the morning.



Even if you follow these strategies to a tee, it's unlikely that your child will be perfectly compliant. For example, most strong-willed children struggle a great deal when their parents instruct them to transition away from a screen device (or, for avid readers, a book). These situations may require a more specialized set of strategies than what was covered in this article. In general, the aim is for you to feel that you are communicating more effectively and to reduce conflict and frustration in your household. Effective commands are a key strategy but are only one aspect of improving household harmony and child behavior.