



Center for Psychotherapy, Education & Spiritual Growth, Inc.

Parenting – Increasing Compliance

Most parents get tired of feeling like they have to repeat themselves multiple times, or gradually raise their voices in order to get their child to listen and comply with instructions. Sometimes what starts out as a simple request to put on one's shoes can turn into a fierce battle resulting in heightened blood pressure and guilt feelings for having lost your temper with your child. Somewhere quickly after you say, "Would you please put on your tennis shoes?", and your child retorts, "But why do I need to put on my shoes?", or "I will in a minute," things begin to get heated and take a quick nose dive. Although, there is no magical incantation or psychological trick that will result in your child minding every time on the first request with all smiles, there are things parents can do to increase the chances of compliance by strengthening the effectiveness of their commands.

First, state the command directly, not indirectly. "Please, put your coat in the closet," rather than, "Would you put your coat away?" When commands are put in the form of a question, then technically, a person can respond with no. I remember when I was a teenager and my aunt had a four year old daughter who had a strong will of her own. My aunt came into the living room and asked her daughter, "Are you ready to go take a bath?" My four year old cousin answered honestly, "No." I remember thinking, "Well, she asked her. Now what is she (my aunt) going to do?" Another phrase that adults and parents say a lot when trying to get a child to follow a direction is "Let's ... okay?" Rather than "Let's go clean up your Legos okay?", "Please put your Legos back into their container." Commands should be direct with no ambiguity about who is supposed to be doing the task.

Second, avoid stringing commands together. It is difficult to praise a child for minding when he followed through with two of the commands, but not the others. Also developmentally, children have a difficult time recalling a string of commands. Often they may remember the first and last ones, but have forgotten those in between. Rather than, "Please go get on your pajamas, brush your teeth, pick up your toys, and come tell me goodnight," these commands are more effective when broken up into separate requests. This is even more pertinent in children who have difficulty with their attention span.

Third, use a respectful and neutral tone of voice. Increasing the volume of your voice or the anger in your tone is not the only way to get children to listen. Often most parents and teachers also find that the necessary volume and angst in their voice required to engender compliance seems to increase more and more. In the opposite direction, pleading, bargaining, and begging are not effective in gaining compliance.



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Fourth, state commands positively, telling a child what to do rather than what not to do. “I said, don’t hit your brother.” A few minutes later, the brother begins to cry again. His brother pinched him, but he didn’t hit. So did the child mind or didn’t he? Tell children what we want them to do so there is no illusion of uncertainty. “No hurting.”

Fifth, be specific and not vague with commands. “Be a good girl when we go into the store.” “Act nicely when company is here.” Exactly what does it mean or look like to be a good girl or to act nicely. Commands are strengthened when they are more specific. “Use your inside voice when we are in the store, and keep your hand on the cart.” “Take turns when you are playing the game.”

Sixth, provide a brief rationale prior to the command and avoid arguing or discussing once the command is given. Often children who ask why they need to do something are doing so out of a stall tactic. Explanations and questions can be addressed once the command is followed. Amazingly once a child has complied with the request his curiosity and questions about the command often disappear. “It is cold outside. Please put on you coat.” “It is dinner time, go wash your hands.” After a few seconds from the command, if the child hasn’t moved to begin to obey, remind them of the request and tell them of the consequence if they don’t comply.

Seventh, avoid giving too many commands. Not even adults like to be told what to do all the time. Make sure the command is important. One day while in a waiting room, I saw a father and his 5 year old son walking toward the exit doors. The father told his son not to hit the button for the handicap door. The child, curious and excited hit the button. The father stated, “I told you not to hit that button.” Then both of them exited through the handicap door. I have to wonder if that was a necessary command. Even adults, me included sometimes hit the handicap button if no one is coming or using it. Also, if the command was given then the parent should have followed it through and not allowed them both to walk through the banned door. Battles should be chosen wisely.

Parents have a difficult job of helping their children learn to make good choices and learn to control themselves. Although, commands are only a part of the task, increasing the effectiveness of commands can be another step in the direction of increasing compliance.