

A RECIPE FOR ADDRESSING Not Following Directions

Serves: 1 distracted preschooler | Prep time: ongoing, all year | Best made calmly

INGREDIENTS

- Physical proximity (not calling across the room)
- Gentle, positive affect (no one wants to follow directions from a meanie Miss Trunchbull!)
- Eye contact before you speak
- One clear, positive direction at a time
- A few seconds of silent wait time
- A limited, genuine choice when possible
- Rehearsal throughout the day, every day

PREP (BEFORE IT HAPPENS)

- Build predictable routines so directions are rarely a surprise; be sure to have corresponding visual supports
- Practice “listening games” during calm, connected moments
- Phrase rules positively (“walking feet”) rather than as negatives (“no running”)
- Give warnings before a direction requires stopping a preferred activity
- Bank connection all day — children follow adults they feel safe with; reinforce the times that they do follow directions

DIRECTIONS (IN THE MOMENT)

- 1. Get close and get attention** — Move to the child, get to their eye level, and make sure you have their attention before speaking.
Why this works: Young children have limited divided attention. A direction given from across the room competes with whatever already has their focus and is easily missed, not ignored on purpose.
- 2. Give one direction, stated positively** — Say what to do, not what to stop: "Walking feet" rather than "Don't run.", “Quiet voices” vs “Stop yelling”. Don’t underestimate the need for gentle, positive affect.
Why this works: The developing brain processes a positive instruction faster than a negation — “don't run” requires first picturing running, then suppressing it, which is a harder cognitive task for an immature prefrontal cortex. The positive instruction is also what we want them to “do” and should be emphasized.
- 3. Pause and give processing time** — Wait silently for a several-second count before repeating or adding anything. Don’t tower over the student. Be sure you have a gentle, composed nonverbal behaviors.
Why this works: Auditory processing speed in preschoolers is genuinely slower than in adults. What looks like defiance is often just the brain still working on the request.
- 4. Offer a limited choice if there's resistance** — "Do you want to clean up the blocks or the books first?" keeps the limit while offering some control.
Why this works: A sense of autonomy lowers resistance because it engages the child's own decision-making rather than triggering a power struggle, without changing the actual expectation.
- 5. Follow through calmly** — If needed, gently guide the child through the direction rather than repeating it louder or threatening consequences. Model how to put away blocks and give some to the child to put away.
Why this works: Consistent follow-through — not volume — is what teaches the brain that directions are meaningful and part of life. Repeated empty requests actually train children to wait for the fifth ask.
- 6. Notice the cooperation** — Briefly acknowledge it when the child follows through: "You heard me and you did it." This the “catch them doing it” strategy that we often under-utilize.
Why this works: Specific, genuine acknowledgment reinforces the neural pathways tied to cooperation, making the behavior more likely to repeat — far more effectively than criticism reduces the unwanted one.

THE SCIENCE IN BRIEF

- Not following directions is usually a skill gap (attention, processing speed, working memory), not defiance — these executive function skills are still under construction in the preschool years. These skills take years to develop.
- Multi-step or negatively phrased directions place a heavy load on a prefrontal cortex that isn't fully developed yet, making them easy to lose partway through.
- Negatively phrased directions also inadvertently increase the stress cycle, impacting attention and cooperation.
- Children generally need a few extra seconds to process and respond to verbal requests compared to adults — what feels like ignoring is often just processing lag.
- A warm, connected relationship with the adult giving the direction is one of the strongest predictors of a young child's cooperation.

CHEF'S NOTES

- Avoid: stacking multiple directions at once, repeating louder, threats, or counting as a punishment cue.
- Consistency matters more than intensity — the same calm, helpful follow-through, every time.
- Watch for patterns: is it always transitions, always group time, always the same time of day?
- Expect for kids to struggle following directions. This is not them being manipulative or testing. It's development.
- If a child consistently can't follow even simple single-step directions, loop in your team to screen for a possible processing or hearing need.

INSTEAD OF SAYING...	TRY SAYING...
<i>"How many times do I have to tell you?"</i>	"Let's try that direction one more time, together."
<i>"You're not listening to me."</i>	"I need your eyes and ears. Let's try again."
<i>"I already told you what to do!"</i>	"Let's break it into one step at a time."
<i>"Why can't you just do what I say?"</i>	"That was a lot to remember. Let's start with just the first part."
<i>"Stop ignoring me."</i>	"I'm going to come closer so it's easier to hear me."
<i>"Do it now, no excuses."</i>	"Show me the first step, then we'll do the next one."
<i>"You never listen the first time."</i>	"Let's practice listening the first time — ready?"
<i>"I'm not going to say it again."</i>	"I'll wait right here while you get started."

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