



Guide to PROVIDING EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTIONS



SCHOOL of EDUCATION
and HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
CASTL

WHAT IS IT?

Effective instructions are *simple* and *clear* directives about a behavioral expectation. Effective instructions obtain children's attention, provide only one directive at a time, and are stated specifically, positively, and assertively.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

A child, excited about their drawing, is running across the room to show the drawing to some friends. The teacher walks over to them, kneels down, and makes sure they have the child's attention. In a calm, firm tone the teacher says, "Walking feet please. We use walking feet to keep each other safe."

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

There are many reasons why a child may not follow a directive. For example, they may...

- Not hear or realize the instruction was directed toward them.
- Think the instruction is optional (e.g., "Are you ready to put the books away?").
- The instruction is too complicated or unclear.

Using effective instructions is important to make sure that your directive is clear, while emphasizing that it is not meant to be optional.

Characteristics of Effective Instructions

The way that you give an instruction can make a big difference in a child's likelihood of following it. Instructions are "effective" when they...

Get the child's attention

It's hard for children to comply with your directive when they didn't hear it or realize you were talking to them. Make sure you have their attention before you give an instruction.

Include only *one* step at a time

When instructions are too complicated or have too many steps, children may have a hard time remembering what's expected of them. Limit instructions to only *one* directive at a time.

Are stated specifically, assertively, and positively

Often times, children may not fully understand what it is that you expect of them. Make sure that your instruction is specific, given as a statement, and tells them what *to do* rather than what *not* to do.

- **Specific:** "It's clean-up time! Put the books in the box," *instead of*, "It's clean-up time!"
- **Assertive:** "Okay, please go inside now," *instead of*, "Are you ready to go inside?"
- **Positive:** "Walk, please!" *instead of*, "Stop running!"



TIPS FOR PROVIDING EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTIONS

1. BEFORE giving an instruction, make sure that you have children's attention. For example:

- Make eye contact or stand close to them.
- Be at their face-level (i.e., squat, kneel, bend down).
- Address them by name.

2. WHEN giving an instruction, make sure that your instruction...

- Includes only *one* step at a time.
- Tells children what *to* do (instead of what *not* to do).
- Is given as a statement (not a question).
- Is stated in a firm, yet warm tone.
- Uses a visual cue when necessary.

3. AFTER giving an instruction, make sure to allow enough time (5-10 seconds) to respond.

- If the child follows the instruction → Immediately reinforce!
- If the child does not follow the instruction → Repeat the instruction *one* time and explain what the outcomes will be if they do or do not follow the instruction.
 - See the *Linking Behaviors and Outcomes* strategy handout for guidance on identifying logical and developmentally appropriate outcomes.
 - Make sure the outcome does not involve escape from displaying the expected behavior, or exclude the child from opportunities to learn. Work with the child to ensure they complete what you are asking of them, even if they must eventually return to it later to do so.

4. Look for an opportunity to acknowledge the child for their positive behaviors as soon as possible!

- Remember to continue praising or otherwise reinforcing the child for any displays of positive behavior.

RESOURCES THAT SUPPORT USING EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTIONS

Communication is the Key

[Available as PDF](#)

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