

Following Directions Age 12 Summary

Why Following Directions?

When your eleven-year-old can't seem to remember to brush their teeth before bedtime without multiple reminders or your thirteen-year-old appears to forget what you've asked them or to do the moment they leave your sight, these situations are opportunities to support your child/teen in following directions.


STEP 1	 GET INPUT	Get Your Child/Teen Thinking by Getting Their Input
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You might ask your child/teen:

- *Have you done this task before? If not, do you need to practice together or other support while trying it out?*
- *If they have done it before, what was your experience last time you did this task? How did you feel about it?*
- *Can you recall the three steps I asked you to take?*
- *How do you feel about doing this task?*

Trap: Avoid letting questions turn into an accusation. Remember to stay calm and that the goal of the question is to help the child/teen uncover feelings.

Trap: It can be easy for parents or those in a parenting role to immediately address the underlying feelings with a simple “No” or other way of shutting it down. Remember, all feelings are valid and need to be accepted. All reactions to feelings may not be acceptable.

STEP 2	 TEACH	Teach New Skills
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- Teach your child/teen the skills required to follow your directions. Did you ask him to pull weeds in the garden? Demonstrate first (watching you enact the skill increases their ability to act!).
- If there are written directions, read them together and follow the steps together. Or, if you are asking your child/teen to perform a task for the first time, do it together to ensure they feel competent on their own the next time you ask.

- If you are trying to establish a routine, ask your child/teen if a checklist would help them remember the steps.
- Model active listening while interacting with your child/teen. Modeling listening skills can be one of the greatest teaching tools.
- Try out active listening together. Ask your child/teen to tell you one thing that was funny at school. Listen carefully without distraction to fully understand what they are saying, and wait until they are finished talking before responding. A response could be a simple “I get it.” or “I hear you.” Make eye contact and practice placing your entire focus on the speaker. Now switch and have your child/teen ask about one funny thing at work and listen to you.
- Set a goal for yourself. Pick a time of day when you know that you and your child/teen will be talking. Then, notice your body language. Ask yourself: “What is my body communicating, and how am I demonstrating that I’m listening?”
- Listen for thought and feeling. In addition to listening to the content of what your child/teen says, also see if you can identify the unspoken thought and feeling behind the content, in other words, the context.
- Seek clarification. Mainly, if you are listening to learn something from the speaker, it is important to seek clarification on details to ensure you understand. Model seeking clarification by asking questions like, “*What did you mean when you said you weren’t happy this morning? What happened?*” After you model this, allow your child/teen to try it out.
- Demonstrate poor listening and good listening. You can make it a fun acting skit showing what poor listening and good listening look like. Start by having one person act out what poor listening skills look like. Exaggerate and make it funny! Then, reflect and ask: “*What did you notice about their body language?*” Next, another person should model good listening skills. Then, reflect and ask questions like: “*What did they do? How did their body change?*”
- Work on your family's feelings vocabulary. Children/teens ages eleven to fourteen are still learning about feelings—notice and name feelings when a family member shows an expression to offer plenty of practice. Ask, don’t tell. “*Dad, you look sad. Is that right?*” Being able to identify feelings is the first step in successfully managing emotions.
- Model assertive communication through “I-messages.” Here’s an example: “*I feel (insert feeling word) when you (name the words or actions that upset you) because (state the impact).*” Here’s another example: “*I feel sad when you say hurtful things to your brother. It hurts his feelings.*” This helps you take responsibility for your feelings while avoiding blaming language like “*You did...*” (which closes down the mind and ears of the other). It helps communicate the problem constructively.

Tip: Children/teens need their parents' attention to thrive. Why not build a sacred time into your routine when you are fully present to listen to what your child/teen has to tell you? Turn your phone off. Set a timer if you need to. You'll model vital focusing and listening skills while building your trusting relationship.

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Practice to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- Communicate directions in ways that can be well-heard and understood. Get physically on your child's/teen's level. Make eye contact. Use the action verb first in a direct, simple sentence. *"Rinse out your bowl and then put it in the dishwasher."* Use visuals like motions, hand signals, drawings, or written lists.
- Work up to multi-step directions. Practice a two-step direction and see how it goes. If successful, move up to a three-step direction.
- Use "Show me..." statements with a positive tone and body language to express excitement and curiosity. When a child/teen learns a new ability, they are eager to show it off! Give them that chance. Say, *"Show me how you can make your bed, get breakfast, and put on shoes in the morning on time."* This practice will offer valuable practice in enacting a multi-step routine.
- Offer limited and authentic choices when communicating directions. Offering them an option, even if small - *"Do you want to do your homework sitting at the kitchen counter or the dining room table?"* - can return a sense of control to their lives. It also offers valuable practice in responsible decision-making.
- Recognize effort using "I notice..." statements like, *"I notice how you listened to the full directions, and you remembered what to do. That's excellent!"*
- Follow through on repairing harm. When your child/teen has caused harm by not following your directions, they need your guidance, encouragement, and support to repair it. They may need your guidance through that process, and that's okay! They are learning the invaluable skill of responsible decision-making.

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Support Your Child's/Teen's Development and Success

- Ask key questions to support their skills. For example, *"How are you feeling about school today? What will help you focus on the teacher's directions?"*
- Learn about development. Each new age and stage will present differing challenges, stress, frustration, and anger. We, as adults, can be more empathetic and patient when we understand what our children/teens are attempting to learn.

- Promote an “I can” belief. Children/teens need to hear that you believe in their ability to learn anything with time and hard work.
- Foster a safe, trusting relationship. When your child/teen does not follow directions, be sure you assume that they have more learning to do instead of assuming defiance. Get curious and find out what’s going on for them.

Tip: After working with your child/teen on these steps, it may be time to seek support if they continue to find multi-step directions challenging. This can impact family cooperation and school success. A school counselor or a child psychologist can offer support.

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RECOGNIZE

Recognize Efforts

- Recognize and call out when things are going well. It may seem obvious, but it’s easy not to notice when everything moves smoothly. Noticing and naming the behavior provides the necessary reinforcement that you see and value your child’s/teen’s choice. For example, when children/teens complete their homework on time, a short, specific call out is all that’s needed: *“I notice you completed your homework today on your own in the time we agreed upon. Excellent.”*
- Recognize small steps along the way. Don’t wait for significant accomplishments—like the whole bedtime routine going smoothly—to recognize effort. Remember that your recognition can work as a tool to promote more positive behaviors. Find small ways your child/teen is making an effort and let them know you see them.

Trap: It can be easy to resort to bribes when recognition and occasional rewards are underutilized. If parents or those in a parenting role frequently resort to bribes, it is likely time to revisit the five-step process.

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