

## Following Directions Age 4 Summary

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### Why Following Directions?

Through sensitive, caring interactions with you, children learn about themselves and how they relate to others. These interactions impact their ability to focus and follow directions when needed. Your focus on creating a trusting relationship is essential to developing skills, abilities, and motivations to follow directions.

**Tip:** These steps are best done when you and your child are not tired or in a rush.



You might ask your child:

- *Is this task something you've done before?*
- *If not, can we practice together?*

Additionally, you may ask yourself:

- What kind of support might they need to follow through on the request?
- If they have done it before, what was your experience last time you did this task? How did they feel about it? How did you think about it?

Children ages three to four are still learning to understand their feelings, other people's feelings, and how their actions affect others. So they may not be able to answer how they feel. This feelings list can help. You might say:

*"I noticed your eyebrows are scrunched, and I'm wondering if you are confused?" or "You look frustrated. Is that right?"*

Your young children will need your support to figure this out. When both you and your child are calm, reflect on your child's feelings so you can be prepared to help. Ask yourself:

- "Does my child have an unmet need?" They might need someone to listen or give them attention, some alone time, or some help so they can be successful at something they are trying to do. And you'll often have to guess needs since they are not yet adept at communicating them.
- Use your best listening skills! Listen closely to your child's concerns without projecting your thoughts and feelings. What are they focused on? It helps to use a paraphrasing

technique to ensure you fully understand what your child is communicating. Sometimes, we can identify the feelings behind their words, including a fear of failure.

- Explore the mind-body connection. In calmer moments with your child, ask, *“How does your body feel now?”* See how descriptively they can list their physical signs of well-being. Now, ask, *“How does your body feel when you are frustrated?”* Every person's physical experience will be different. Find out how your child feels and make the connection between those symptoms and the usual feelings they are having.

STEP  
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## Teach New Skills

- Pay attention to HOW you make your request, including:
  - Getting down on your child's level
  - Making eye contact
  - Keeping the request short and direct. Begin your sentence with the action verb you want to be performed. *“Take my hand as we cross the street.”*
  - Moving your body in the direction of the action. If you want your child to avoid a place (like the road), move your body away and beckon them to follow
  - Offering wait time
- Teach your child the skills required to follow your directions. Did you ask him to put his toy away in a particular bin? Demonstrate first (watching you enact the skill increases a child's ability to act!).
- Model active listening while interacting with your child. Modeling listening skills can be one of the greatest teaching tools.
- Pretend play through the instructions together. Laugh and make it enjoyable.
- Listen for thought and feeling. In addition to listening to what your child says, see if you can identify the unspoken thought and feeling behind the content, in other words, the context. Offer feeling words to practice growing their emotional awareness.

**Tip:** Children need their parents' attention to thrive. Try to build a sacred time into your routine when you are fully present to listen to what your child tells you. Turn your phone off. Set a timer if you need to. You'll be modeling a vital skill while building your trusting relationship. This connection will help support cooperation when your child is asked to follow directions.

**Trap:** Don't assume defiance if your child refuses to follow a direction. Get curious and ask questions about the situation and whether the conditions are well-established for them to follow directions. Try again and adjust conditions to be more conducive. Remember, your young child has much to learn to follow through on your requests. Your anger or frustration can negatively impact your relationship with your child.

**STEP  
3****PRACTICE**

## Practice to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- Communicate directions in ways that can be well-heard and understood. Get physically on your child's level. Make eye contact. Use a calm voice. Use the action verb first in a direct, simple sentence. "Put your plate in the sink." Use visuals like motions, hand signals, drawings, or written lists.
- Use pretend play to practice! Engage stuffed friends, dolls, or action figures to act out requests. Have your child demonstrate through those toys.
- 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.
- Accept all feelings. They will play a role in whether or not your child is motivated to follow your directions. If you will help your child manage their biggest feelings, it is essential to acknowledge and accept their feelings -- even ones you don't like. When your child is upset, consider your response. Instead of focusing on their actions or the problem, focus on their feelings FIRST. You could say, *"I hear you're upset. What can you do to help yourself feel better? Would your calm down space help you feel better?"* Then, try the directions again after the calm-down space has helped.
- Use "Show me..." statements with a positive tone and body language to express excitement and curiosity. When a child learns a new ability, they are eager to show it off! Give them that chance. Say, *"Show me how you can brush your teeth."* This practice will offer valuable practice in working up to a multi-step routine.
- Offer limited and authentic choices when communicating directions. Offering them an option, even if small—"Do you want to put the truck in the bin or the top?"—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 remembered what to do. That's excellent!"*
- Follow through on repairing harm. When your child has caused harm by not following your directions, they need your guidance, encouragement, and support to fix it. They also may require more practice. You may need to hold their hand through repairing harm, and that's okay! They are learning the invaluable skill of responsible decision-making.

**STEP  
4****SUPPORT**

## Support Your Child's Development and Success

- Ask critical questions to support their skills. For example, *"How can we make clean up together fun? Maybe we can put on music and dance while we clean?"*
- 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 are attempting to learn.
- Promote an "I can" belief. Children need to hear that you believe in their ability to learn anything with time and hard work.

- Don't move on quickly if your child shows interest in trying something new. Children often need more time to stick with a challenge or pursue a goal. Be sure to wait long enough for your child to show you they are competent. Your waiting could make all the difference in whether they can gain skills over time.
- Reflect on how your child feels when they have mastered a new request. You can offer reflections like:
  - *"I see you put your truck and your bunny in the bins right where they're supposed to go!"* Naming their success will help to grow confidence.
- Foster a safe, trusting relationship. When your child 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.
- Stay engaged. Work together on ideas for new and different ways to communicate directions or instructions. That can offer additional support and motivation for your child when challenging issues arise.



## 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 choice. For example, when children complete their homework on time, a short, specific call out is all that's needed: *"I noticed that when you got frustrated, you took a break, and then we worked together to pick up your room. Excellent."*
- Recognize small steps along the way. Don't wait for significant accomplishments—like the full 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 is making an effort and let them know you see them.
- Build celebrations into your routine. Promote joy and happiness by laughing, singing, dancing, hugging, and snuggling to appreciate one another.

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