



# Encouraging Cooperation

Children's Developmental and Behavioural Supports



Are you feeling frustrated that your child is not listening to you? Do you feel like a broken record saying the same things over and over again? Does your child refuse to do things that you ask them to do or just plain ignore your requests? If this sounds familiar, we might be able to offer some solutions!

## Why won't my child cooperate with me?



While you might feel that your child's behaviour is the result of them just trying to annoy you or push your buttons, there is a good reason for their behaviour.

Your child's behaviour serves a purpose, it helps them achieve a goal. That is why they keep behaving in the same way. Would you stop doing something if it got you what you wanted? The first step to improving cooperation is to understand why your child is not cooperating with you.

### Do they want my attention?

What could their goal be? Maybe to get more of your attention. When your child misbehaves, do they get a little more of your attention? Do you stop what you are doing and focus entirely on them? In your child's mind, getting your attention, whether it's positive or not, may be their goal. Sometimes any attention is better than no attention at all.

### Are they trying to avoid something?

Or maybe their goal is to escape or avoid what you are asking them to do. Maybe the homework from school that was assigned is too hard or overwhelming. Your child might also want to just keep accessing the activity they are doing in that moment. Who really wants to turn off the television or stop playing an awesome video game to clean up their room?

Think about your history of communication with your child. If you often call their name and it follows an instruction or reprimand, they may learn to ignore you. Consider calling their name and giving an instruction that is super fun! E.g., "Hey Oliver...Let's go to the freezer and get ice cream!"





## Is there something else going on?

**Hearing.** If your child seems to consistently “ignore” your requests, it is a good idea to ensure they can hear your request. Just like you take your child to the doctor for a check up, it is also important that you get their hearing assessed, especially if your child is prone to ear infections.

**Understanding.** If you know your child’s hearing is good, and they still seem to struggle with your requests, it is important to know if they understand what you are saying. Children need to develop their understanding of language, also called “receptive language”. If you think your child may struggle with understanding what is said to them, a Speech and Language Pathologist can help you assess their receptive language.

**Attending.** Does your child have difficulty paying attention and staying on task? Some children and adults have more difficulty attending, especially in busy environments. Others take longer to process all the sensory information coming at them, including instructions. If you have concerns about your child’s attention and their ability to process information, it is a good idea to discuss these concerns with your family doctor.

**Skills.** Does your child have the appropriate skills to complete what you are asking them? If you ask them to put their shoes on and they don’t know how to tie their laces, they may avoid the task or become frustrated because it is too difficult. Only ask of them what you know they can do, if they are learning, be sure to help them!

**Well-being.** Sometimes you have to adjust your expectations for your child when they are tired, sick or hungry, just as we might for ourselves. Can you remember a time when you had a rough day or weren’t feeling the greatest? Kids have these days as well, and sometimes just remembering these factors can help lessen your feelings of frustration when your child is being non-compliant.

## Let’s start with communication

Consider the following points to make sure your message is getting across to your child: Let your child know what the next activity would be?

1. **Get your child’s attention:** You need to stop what they are doing, such as pausing the television or setting down the tablet.
2. **Be clear.** Use language that your child understands. Keep it simple and only give one instruction at a time or break down the task into small and manageable steps.
3. **Visual supports.** Your child may benefit from visual supports, such as pictures, gestures, or videos to help show them what you mean.

“Say what you mean; mean what you say, and follow through on what you say you were going to do” – Canadian Paediatric Society (2024)



4. **Don't ask.** Tell your child what you want them to do in a firm voice. If you ask, they might say, "No!"
5. **Say it once.** When you repeat instructions many times, you may make it difficult for your child to process what you are saying, or they may learn to ignore you.
6. **Confirmation.** You can ask your child to repeat back the instruction or to tap a visual to ensure they have heard the instruction.
7. **Follow through.** If your child doesn't complete the task, help them.
8. **Praise for a job well done.** Let your child know exactly what they have done well. Be specific and enthusiastic!



## Instead of saying...Try saying...

**Instead of saying** "Stop", or "No thank you."; **Try saying** "Tell your brother to move over."

**Instead of saying** "Get ready for bed."; **Try saying** "Put your pajamas on and brush your teeth."

**Instead of saying** "Can you turn off the television?"; **Try saying** "It's time to turn off the television."

**Instead of saying** "Good job."; **Try saying** "You put all your clothes in the basket. Amazing!"

**Instead of saying** "Thanks."; **Try saying** "Thank you for taking out the recycling. You are awesome!"

## Prepare them

Below are a few more simple strategies that can help you to improve your child's cooperation:

- **Give a warning** that a change is about to happen. E.g., "In 5 minutes, your breakfast will be ready."
- Let your child know what the **next activity** would be. E.g., "after you brush your teeth, we will get your PJ's on."
- The power of **"First/Then"**. To help motivate them along, use first/then statements. Where the "first" is a difficult task and the "then" is something motivating. E.g., "first get your boots on, then we go to the park."



## Build success and have fun!



**Offer choices.** For example, if you want your child to get dressed for school, ask them, “do you want to wear your purple shirt or your green shirt?”

**Make it easier for them,** by offering help if they need it. For example, if you tell your child to tidy up, help them.

**Mix it up!** If they have multiple tasks to do, mix the easy ones with the more difficult tasks so your child has a chance of success throughout.

**Make the task fun!** Have a race to tidy up, sing a fun song while doing a task, dance your way through the task, pretend to be an animal or superhero. Be creative!

**Set a timer!** Race the clock or offer an extra special reward for finishing your instruction quickly.

## Pick your battles

Have you heard the phrase “Pick your battles?” This is the idea that if you don’t have the strength to follow through, save your energy for when you do. Here are some useful tips when picking battles with your children:

- Only give an instruction when you are prepared to follow through. If you are busy, tired or can’t follow up to make sure your child has completed the task, just wait until you can before you give the instruction.
- Pick your battles before not after the behaviour starts. If you give your child a task and your child put up a fuss, which makes you give up, you have just taught them that when they make a fuss, they do not have to complete the task.
- Think about the importance of the battle. If it is about safety or breaking the law, then you have to “do battle”, but if it is about wearing the dirty shirt for a fourth day in a row, you might let it go.
- Sometimes allowing for a natural consequence to happen is a better lesson than one given by a parent. If they refuse or delay tidying up, they may run out of time to go to the park. If they don’t put their playdough away, it may dry out and they won’t be able to play with it next time.





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## Information

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