



## Getting Your Child to **Listen**



**P**oor listening, or “noncompliance,” is one of the most common concerns expressed by parents of toddlers and school-aged children.

When children are having fun, they want to keep having fun. If a parent makes a request that ends or prevents fun, children may respond with behaviors ranging from whining to complaining to hurricane-force tantrums. Parents often say they need to repeat requests, threaten or raise their voice to get their child to do what they have asked. Behold, a few simple changes in the way you teach your child to listen can make a big difference!

### **Sending Signals**

You are the message-sender, the traffic light for your child. Real traffic lights go predictably from green to yellow to red. Imagine if traffic lights changed at random. You wouldn't know when you were supposed to stop! As a parent, the more predictable your signals are, the more predictable your child's behavior will be.

**When you make a request, your light is GREEN** and children are given the signal to “GO” and complete a task. If they listen, then make their efforts pay off by providing praise, attention, smiles, etc. This will get them GO-ing, and they will eventually learn that the sooner they follow your request, the sooner they can get back to playing and having fun.

**If your child doesn't listen (or comply), then your light goes to YELLOW**, warning of an upcoming consequence: “If you don't do this, then (consequence) will happen.” By predictably showing your children that not listening the first time brings a warning and not just a repeated instruction or nagging, you make it more likely that your child's behaviors will become more compliant and predictable.

**If you give one request and one warning and your child still doesn't listen, then your light should go to RED**, meaning you give a negative consequence like Time-Out or losing a privilege. Once you give the consequence, go back to green and repeat the instruction (the task still needs to get done!).

### **Too Much Green or Flashing Yellow. . .**

Some parents make numerous requests followed by numerous warnings, with consequences occurring unpredictably, late or never. Once a child figures out

[continued >](#)

that a parent's light will stay green or yellow for a long period of time and may never turn red, there is little reason to "GO" on green. When the signals aren't predictable, it encourages children to ignore their parents, become defiant or escalate misbehaviors with the hope of changing their parents' minds.

## Red!

Sometimes a parent can carry predictability and authority too far. Jumping right from making a request that was not followed to a harsh punishment may result in better listening – but only temporarily. Usually when this happens, a child is responding out of fear and may resent the parent because the punishment feels so unfair. Giving a warning allows children to think about their choices, knowing that a specific consequence will happen in response to whatever choice they make.

## Teaching Your Child to Listen

Teaching your child to listen is a process that relies heavily on communication and consistency. The Boys Town Center for Behavioral Health offers the following tips to help you successfully teach your child the importance of listening, the first time:

1. **Stay calm** – Be calm and firm at the same time. Use a neutral tone of voice instead of yelling.
2. **Be direct** – A direct command leaves no question in the child's mind what he or she is being told to do. The choices are clear. For example, say "Sit in the chair, please" and "Pick up your toys" instead of "Could you please sit down now?" and "Mommy likes it when you pick up your toys."
3. **State commands positively** – Tell your child what to "GO" do instead of what not to do. Whenever possible, avoid the use of "No," "Don't," "Stop," "Quit it," etc. For example, say "Keep your feet on the ground" instead of "Stop climbing on the furniture."
4. **Give one command at a time** – Children have a hard time remembering more than one thing at a time. For example, say "Put your toys in the bin" instead of "Put your toys away, wash your hands and come to dinner."
5. **Give age-appropriate instructions** – The instructions you give should be for things your child is developmentally/physically able to do. Remember that many tasks actually have multiple steps. Children may need you to help them break down the instruction into smaller chunks. For example, say "Put the clothes that are on the floor in the hamper" instead of "Clean your room."
6. **Give brief rationales** – For example, say "We are going to the store, so put on your coat." A longer rationale is not needed and only creates confusion.
7. **Be physically present** – Instead of yelling across the room or house, get directly in front of your child, make eye contact and give your instruction with gestures (i.e., show them what you want).
8. **Ask the child to repeat the instruction** – This ensures that your child heard what you said.
9. **Reward compliance** – Immediately acknowledge when your child completes a task by giving praise, attention and affection.
10. **Make sure you mean it** – Never give an instruction that you don't expect your child to complete. Use Time-Out or guided compliance (gently guide the child through the task) as needed.

## Additional Resources

- **Help! There's a Toddler in the House!** by Thomas M. Reimers, Ph.D.
- **I Brake For Meltdowns: How To Handle The Most Exasperating Behavior Of Your 2- To 5-Year-Old** by Michelle Nicholasen and Barbara O'Neal
- **Parenting the Strong-Willed Child: The Clinically Proven Five-Week Program for Parents of Two- to Six-Year-Olds** by Rex Forehand and Nicholas Long

➡ **For more information** or to make an appointment at the Boys Town Center for Behavioral Health, call **531-355-3358**.

Visit **BoysTown.org/Parenting** for more information from the parenting experts at Boys Town.

