

FOLLOWING DIRECTIONS

What is this developmental skill?

Following directions is the ability to understand spoken instructions and carry them out. This skill requires more than listening. Children must attend to the speaker, understand the words, remember the steps, organize their actions, and remain focused long enough to complete the task. Following directions supports daily routines, classroom learning, safety, and increasing independence.

How does this normally develop?

Young children first learn to follow simple, familiar directions such as “Come here” or “Give me the cup.” With practice and support, they begin following directions that involve two or more steps, unfamiliar tasks, time concepts, and changes in sequence. Caregivers help this development by giving clear instructions, demonstrating what to do, repeating directions when necessary, and gradually increasing complexity as the child becomes more capable.

How can neglect interfere with its development?

Neglect can interfere when children receive inconsistent, unclear, or limited guidance. Some children may have had to manage daily life without adults teaching routines step by step. Others may have experienced directions primarily as criticism, threats, or commands delivered during stressful interactions. Chronic stress may also affect attention, working memory, and processing speed, making it difficult to retain and complete instructions. A child may understand part of a direction but lose the rest before acting.

What might this look like?

A child may:

- Complete only the first part of a multi-step direction.
- Forget what they were asked to do.
- Begin a task but become distracted before finishing.
- Watch other children to determine what is expected.
- Need directions repeated or demonstrated.
- Become overwhelmed by several instructions given at once.
- Appear oppositional when they are actually confused.
- Complete tasks incorrectly because they misunderstood the sequence.

The child may perform better during familiar routines than during new or verbally complex tasks.

Parenting Implications

Caregivers can make directions easier to follow by gaining the child's attention first, using short sentences, and giving one or two steps at a time. Visual reminders, gestures, demonstrations, and predictable routines can reduce the amount of language the child must hold in mind. Asking the child to show or explain what comes next is often more useful than asking, “*Did you hear me?*” Caregivers should notice effort and provide support before frustration escalates.

From Understanding to Attunement

Instead of thinking, “*They never do what I ask,*” consider, “*Something may be getting lost between hearing the direction and completing it.*” This perspective helps caregivers respond with structure and support rather than assuming intentional noncompliance.