Helping Children Learn to Follow Directions

Following directions involves several other skills. It requires a child to pay attention, understand what has been asked, remember what has been asked, and to take or stop actions.

First, check how you give directions, then, modify your teaching strategies as needed.

- Make a tape recording of yourself as you teach the children. When you listen to the tape, count how many steps you include in your directions. Are there two, three, or four steps? Are your directions clear or confusing about what you expect children to do?
- Watch out for hidden steps in your directions. When you say, "Wash your hands," are you actually asking them to go to the sink, turn on the water, use the soap, rinse, dry with a paper towel, and throw the towel away?"

Next, observe the children to learn how to focus your teaching on following directions.

- Do several children need to work on following directions or just one? This will guide your decision about providing instruction during small group time or individually.
- When a child seems unable to follow directions, watch carefully to see which part of following directions might be the problem. Is the problem with paying attention, understanding your language and directions, remembering them, or taking action?

Help the children to pay attention. Alert the children that directions are coming and they should listen.

- "Listen. I'm going to tell you what to do. Ready?" Get a book and sit on the carpet."
- Consider using a visual signal, such as putting on a ball cap, to let children know you are going to give directions.

Use visual cues to help understanding and recall.

- Use photos of children doing what you are directing them to do. For example, hold up two photos, one of children putting on their coats and one of children standing in line, to help them follow directions for getting ready to go outside.
- Ask the children to repeat your instructions. "What are we going to do first? Then what?"

Practice remembering.

- Help children use self-talk. That is, children should repeat the directions to themselves to keep the steps in mind.
- Have children help you tell stories, such as The Three Billy Goats Gruff, to work on memory.

Match the number of steps in a direction to the child's development.

- Children, who are learning English, are younger, or have cognitive or language delays may benefit from hearing fewer steps in a direction.

Play games that ask children to remember and start and stop actions.

- Play Simon Says
- Use finger plays and action songs that require listening, remembering and acting.

Activities families can do to help their children learn to follow directions.

- Children can learn to follow directions by helping with chores. They could ask the child to feed the cat and put fresh water in its bowl.
- A child can put away his toys and call his siblings for dinner.

References: