5 steps to obedient children

by Janine Lattimore*

The key to having your children do what you want them to do without bribes, yelling, or sticker charts may be as simple as changing the way you ask for things. Here are five tips for phrasing requests in ways that make it more likely your children will follow your instructions.

1. get close to them

In teaching, this is called "proximity". Basically, it is harder for people to ignore you when you are standing close to them. When you ask your child to do something, at least make sure you are in the same room as them. Shouting instructions from another room means that you have already raised your voice, which creates defensiveness in the listener and increases your stress levels. It also allows your child to use the "I didn't hear you!" excuse. Giving your child your full attention when you give them an instruction makes it more likely that they, in turn, will give you theirs and do as you ask.

2. ask for what you *do* want

Negative qualifier words such as "don't", "never", etc do not effectively register in our subconscious, and it is the subconscious that is the ultimate dictator of behaviour.

Set the focus on what you ***do*** want and programme the correct instruction into the receiver's mind. Phrasing instructions positively also helps to maintain a positive atmosphere. No one likes to be told "no" and "don't" all the time. People are far more responsive when being told what they ***can*** do, and we remain calmer when issuing affirmative instructions.

Here are some examples of things we commonly say to our children and how we can rephrase them to make the request a positive action-based one:

"Don't jump on the furniture."

Alternative: "We only use couches and chairs for sitting on."

"Don't leave your headphones on the table."

Alternative: "When you have finished using your headphones, put them away in your bedroom."

"Don't go on the road."

Alternative: "Stay on the footpath."

3. use their name

Sometimes when we get annoyed with our children, we preface our instruction with their full name: "Janine Kaye Lattimore, go to your room now!" We know that using someone's name gets their attention. However, as per point number two, it is best to say it positively and calmly. Stating the child's name at the beginning of an instruction draws their attention and also clarifies that the instruction is for them. This also undercuts the possible excuse of "I thought you were talking to someone else." For example, "Michael, please put your Lego away in its box now."

4. keep it short

Brain function researcher Andrew Newburg has observed that the brain can only hold onto about four things at a time. If you give too many instructions at once or speak for too long, then the listener will either tune out or be overloaded. Aim to speak for no more than about 30 seconds or just one or two sentences at a time. When you are asking a child to do something, give younger children just one instruction at a time and older children no more than three. If you ask your child to do more than one thing, you can take a practice from Map in *Dora the Explorer* and list the key words at the end of your instruction.

For example, "Sophie, unpack your bag, put your lunchbox and drink bottle on the bench, and hang up your uniform - bag, bench, uniform."

Use the least amount of words possible and keep it clear and task-oriented. Avoid adding emotional tags like "How many times have I told you!" or "Why do you always make such a mess?" When you make statements like this before issuing an instruction, it puts the child (receiver) on the defensive before you have even started to ask for what you want.

Use "please" and "thank you" when you first make your request, but avoid using 'soft' instructions such as "can you", "will you", or "if". Be concise and precise. For example, instead of saying "Can you please not leave your dirty socks by the front door" say "Lucy, when you take your dirty socks off, please put them in the laundry." The first instruction is a negative one and the "can you" makes it sound like you are pleading from a lower position of standing than the person you are talking to. The second instruction is positively phrased and while it is still polite, it has a tone of authority.

Here are some more examples of positive, short instructions:

"Angela, put your soft toys back into their bin, please."

"James, when you are finished eating, please put your plate in the dishwasher."

5. stay on task

Avoid being drawn in if children argue or fail to do as you ask. If they calmly make a valid point or add information that you were not aware of, then it is all right to modify your request to a new positive, short, task-oriented statement. However, if they are just moaning and protesting, then ignore it and simply repeat the initial clear instruction. Repeat the instruction no more than twice. If the child still does not comply, then give a short clear consequence. Make the consequence something meaningful to the child and, especially for young children, something immediate. Make sure it is also something you can easily action. Try to use a calm, low-pitched voice.

For example:

Mum: "Daniel, it's bedtime. Go and put your pyjamas on, please."

Daniel: "No. I'm not tired. I don't want to go to bed."

Mum: "Daniel, go and put your pyjamas on."

Daniel: "I just need to finish playing with my Lego first."

Mum: "Daniel. I am going to count to three. If I get to three and you have not gone to put your pyjamas on, then I will take away your Lego. You will not be allowed to play with it tonight or tomorrow."

Daniel: "But...."

Mum: "1, 2, 3."

Count slowly and calmly. If you get to three, then action the consequence. If the child still has not done as you ask, repeat the instruction with a new consequence and start counting again. If you follow the above tips and keep your requests positive, clear and reasonable, it is unlikely you will need to get to the counting stage. If this system of child management is quite different to what you have been doing, and your child finds it unfamiliar, then it may take a few days of consistently actioning consequences to get to the point where you only need to start counting before they do as they've been asked.

give yourself time

It takes practice and effort to learn to make requests in this way, but the payoff of reduced stress for everyone involved is worth it. Be gentle with yourself as you get used to rephrasing requests in this way. When we are tired, stressed, or rushed, it becomes easy to fall back into old habits of yelling instructions, nagging or lapsing into longer emotional speeches: "Why do I have to tell you this time and time again..." At these times, try to stop for a minute and take a deep breath before you speak. It is always possible to spare just one minute – and that one minute can make a big difference to the levels of calm in your family.

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