

TATS eUpdate
Curriculum and Instruction

Helping Children Follow Directions at School

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To succeed in preschool and kindergarten, young children need to acquire knowledge and skills and use appropriate behaviors to meet their needs. In addition, they must also develop the social skills to interact with adults and other children. Part of these skills include following classroom rules and directions. The ability to remember and follow directions is a developmental skill that helps children successfully function in an educational setting.

Following directions occurs in many different contexts. Some examples of this important skill include following individual directions given by the teacher, responding to group directions (“Class please go to the snack table.”), repeating directions to another, and following directions on a CD (dance steps or movements for instance).

Before giving directions, a teacher should know what is wanted from the child and when it needs to be done. The teacher should have a clear idea of whether compromise is an option. The child should also know if there are choices. There needs to be a few simple classroom rules. These “class developed directions” will have the children’s ownership and help them understand that having rules and following directions give them a sense of routine and consistency.

Best Practice:

Some Things to Think About When Giving Directions

1. Get the child’s attention

Before giving a direction to a child, make sure he/she is looking at the speaker. Calling his name, touching him lightly on the shoulder, or going to the child are some ways to do this. When talking to a group of children, the teacher could say, “I need you all to listen.” Another technique would be to have a pre-arranged signal with the group. For instance when the teacher claps twice, flicks the lights, raises his/her hand, etc. the children understand that everyone should stop what they are doing and pay attention to the teacher.

2. Give clear, positive directions with high expectations

“Give only directions that you want the child to comply with, give directions in a positive way that tells the child specifically what to do, and give the child time to respond before

giving another direction” (CSEFEL Module 1 p. 1.24). Don’t tell them what not to do, but rather what to do. Tell them what is wanted in clear terms. For example, don’t say “Stop running.”, but rather “Please walk.” Let them know there are high expectations for all children and give them sincere praise when they respond. Give children rationales for the directions that they can understand. “If we clear off the table, we can have our snack.” Be specific. Do not say “be careful”, but rather “Please climb down from the ladder.” Do not say “settle down”, but rather, “I need you to sit quietly with your hands in your lap.”

3. Limit the number of directions and steps to directions

Start with simple two-part directions (“Please pick up the doll and put her in the crib.”). Break multi-step directions into smaller steps. Guide the child step-by-step if necessary. Tell the child what you want him to do, then repeat the first step. Give the child time to complete the first step before moving on to another, give the second step and repeat until the feat is accomplished. For instance, if you want the child to get his shoes from his cubby, put them on, and sit down on the rug before going home, the teacher may say, “Please get your shoes out of your cubbies, put them on and then sit on the rug. First, go get your shoes and bring them back here.” When the child gets the shoes and brings them back, then say, “Now put them on.” Once that is accomplished say “Good job! Now please go to the rug and sit down.”

4. Vary the way directions are given

Verbal directions work for most children, but some may need physical touch or picture prompts (Use of a “first, then” picture prompt, or use a visual schedule for the child to follow). Use of games, songs, and music can also help children learn to follow directions (Simon Says, Head, Shoulder, Knees, and Toes).

5. Be Consistent and Follow Through

Do not change the rules. If the children know the drawing area needs to be cleaned up before snack time, make sure this happens every time. This gives children predictability and structure. If the teacher is not consistent, children may get the message that he/she doesn’t don’t always mean what is said. Providing consistency and support helps a child understand that questions are negotiable, directions are not.

6. Offer choices

Offer choices to the child when giving directions, when possible. Young children are more apt to follow directions and will feel more responsible for actions and decisions if they have made a choice. For example: “Do you want to put the paint or the scissors away?” “Do you want to hop or walk to the door?” “Do you want to me to hold your hand or walk to the library by yourself?”

7. When directions are not followed

If a child does not follow direction right away, repeat the direction again. Enforce what is said. Decide before hand what the consequences will be if directions are not followed. Make sure the child knows what these are. Be consistent and loving, but firm. Don't give a warning, but apply the consequences if the direction is not followed the second time.

Sharpening Listening Skills

Here are a few games to use that help children learn to listen carefully and follow directions.

What is that Sound?

Gather a collection of objects that can be used to make noise (a set of keys, measuring spoons, a small bell, a marble or paper clips in a small container, etc.) and a large box or screen. Hide the objects in the box or behind the screen. Ask the child to close his eyes. Make a noise with one of the objects and ask the child to guess what made the sound.

Rhythm Clap

Clap your hands, or tap out a simple rhythm on a drum or the floor. Have the child listen and repeat the same rhythm back to you. Make the rhythms more complicated as the child successfully repeats them. Let the child make up some rhythms for you to follow.

Find It!

Hide a small object (ball, Lego, picture). Give the child directions to find it: "Take three big steps straight ahead. Turn to the left. Go to the box. Lift the lid and look inside." Let the child take a turn hiding the object and give you directions to find it.

Point and Do

Name an object in the room. Ask the child to point to it and give a one or two step direction. Example – "I see a red book. Can you point to the red book? Pick up the book, walk around the circle once, then sit next to me." Children can take turns giving the directions.

Rosie's Walk

Set up an obstacle course with chairs, blocks, cloth tunnels, etc. Read the story *Rosie's Walk* by Pat Hutchins (or any other story line with action prepositions). At the end of the story tell the children they are going to be like Rosie and walk over, around, and through objects. Place a picture of the object in the story (hay stack, beehives) next to the obstacle that it represents (Pile of cushions, stacked cardboard boxes) for more fun. Let two or three children go through the course at a time. Give one direction at a time ("Go over the hay stack.") or give two

directions to follow (“Go over the hay stack and under the bee hives.”) Let them take turns giving directions.

Reflection:

1. Which two of the Things to Think About do you think are most important for helping young children learn to follow directions?
2. How does learning to follow directions contribute to a child’s social skills?

Communication leads to community, that is, to understanding, intimacy and mutual valuing. - Rollo May

References and Resources:

Boyd, J., Barnett, W.S., Bodrova, E., Leong, D.J., & Gomby, D. (2005). Promoting children’s social and emotional development through preschool. NIEER Policy Report. National Institute for Early Education Research. Retrieved on July 22, 2008 from: <http://nieer.org/resources/policyreports/report7.pdf>

The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) Focused improving the social and emotional outcomes of young children. Evidence-based, user-friendly information is available to help early childhood educators meet the needs of children with challenging behaviors and mental health challenges. Products include "What Works Briefs" and 5 training modules. <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/>

Division for Early Childhood (DEC). (2007). *Promoting positive outcomes for children with disabilities: Recommendations for curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation*. Missoula, MT: Author.

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Lentini, R., Vaughn, B.J., & Fox, L. (2004). *Routine based support guide for young children with challenging behavior*. Tampa, Florida: University of South Florida, Early Intervention Positive Behavior Support.

Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children (TACSEI)

Promotes evidence-based practices for improving the social-emotional outcomes for

young children with, or at risk for, delays or disabilities. One product for use in the field is Teaching Tools for Young Children with Challenging Behaviors which was developed to assist teachers in developing a plan to support young children who are having challenging behaviors by using routines and activities that typically occur in early childhood programs. <http://www.challengingbehavior.org>

Technical Assistance & Training System (TATS)

Statewide project providing technical assistance and training to programs in Florida serving prekindergarten children with disabilities. Web site provides information and resources on curriculum and instruction, evaluation and assessment, family involvement, inclusion, program effectiveness/quality, and transition, as well as, linking early childhood partners. www.tats.ucf.edu



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