Does this Sound Familiar?

Teaching Your Child to:

Cooperate With Requests

Kevin and Chelisa are at the end of their rope. They are constantly reminding their three children to pick up toys, to play nicely together, and to help with chores. They would very much like their children (ages 6, 4, and 3) to respond to their requests. However, it often feels as if all three children are uncooperative and out of control. They run in the house, leave toys on the floor, and refuse to sit at the table for meals. On many occasions, the children's failure to follow the rules results in shouting, frustration, and tears. Lately, Kevin and Chelisa have stopped asking their children to follow their directions, because it's just too hard to get them to follow directions.

The Focus

Young children can learn to follow adult expectations, including performing simple chores, if the expectations are developmentally appropriate (meaning they match what can be expected for children at that age) and are taught to the child. Below is information on what you might expect from your preschooler and some tips for helping your child learn and follow your requests.

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What to Expect

Children who are 3 often can

- Put their dirty clothes away
- Put toys or books away
- Put clean clothes away
- Put their shoes away
- Put non-breakable dishes in the sink
- Wipe the table with a sponge
- Put trash in the trash can
- Put napkins on the table
- Wash their hands independently

Children who are 4 often can

- Pick up toys on request
- Put clean clothes away
- Put clothing on independently
- Undress and place clothes away
- Wash self in the bathtub
- Brush teeth independently
- Put silverware on the table
- Put dry pet food in a dish
- Return outdoor toys to their storage spot

Children who are 5 often can

- Remember and restate household rules
- Ask adults' permission to do activities
- Follow established rules and routines without being asked (e.g., wash hands before eating, clean up toys before going to bed)
- Independently do a simple chore (e.g., feed a pet, get the mail, make the bed)
- Help adults with more complex chores (e.g., water plants, fold clothes, wash dishes, dust)
- Be independent with most self-care skills

When children have disabilities, they may need special assistance to meet these expectations. You may want to do the following:

- Expect your child to do only part of the task, while you complete the part that is difficult for him
- Provide help to your child so that she can complete the task
- Provide instructions in different ways (e.g., using a picture or using a gesture) so that your child understands what you are asking

Teaching your child to do simple chores

Are you surprised that young children can manage so many different activities and responsibilities? Are you interested in your child becoming more independent and helpful? If you want your child to be able to do a skill or activity, *you have to teach him or her what to do*. It's really less complicated than it sounds. To teach your child, follow these steps:

1. State clearly what you want your child to do. For example, if you want your child to throw his napkin in the trash, you would say, "Andrew, go put your napkin in the trash can." Sometimes parents do not state their expectations very clearly. For example, a parent might ask, "Where does that go?" or say, "Don't put your trash in the sink." These directions do not tell the child exactly what is wanted and may not produce the expected behavior.

2. If your child seems unsure of what is expected or does not understand the direction, follow your direction with, "Let me show you how to do it" (said in a gentle tone of voice) and provide your child with the minimal amount of help that he needs to do the activity.

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3. When your child attempts to do the activity or carries out the request, immediately praise his effort. You might say, "Look at you! You are a big boy. You can throw the trash in the trash can." The key is to praise with enthusiasm and be specific about what your child did.

4. Be prepared for the possibility that the very first time your child attempts a new activity (e.g., puts silverware on the table, socks in the drawer, toys on the shelf), her efforts may not meet your expectations (e.g., silverware is mixed up or socks are not put away neatly). When your child is first learning an activity, it is very important to encourage her attempts. If you discourage or reprimand your child because she did not do it quite right, she may be less eager to try the activity again.

5. Your child may need to practice the new skill or activity before he can do it independently. If the activity is complicated and you have shown your child how to do it (e.g., putting toys on the shelf), you may want to avoid actually showing your child how to do it and just provide verbal direction instead. Remember that when providing instructions, you should state exactly what you want your child to do (e.g., pick up the blocks and put them in the bucket) and respond with praise when the child completes the task.

Why Do Children Sometimes Refuse to Cooperate?

The preschool years are a time when children are learning how to express themselves and interact with others. Their refusal to cooperate is not always a deliberate refusal to follow your directions, but may be due to other reasons. For example, your child may

- Need a warning that you expect him to stop an activity to comply with your request
- Might be thinking about something else and not hear the request
- Might not clearly understand your request
- Might be more used to receiving negative attention (e.g., yelling, scolding) and may refuse the request to get that attention

By thinking about why your child may not be responding to you, you can determine what your next step should be. For example, you may need to give your child a warning before making a request. If your child has a disability or language delay, you might need to provide a concrete cue that shows your child what you want her to do (e.g., handing your child the toothbrush to indicate that it's time to brush teeth). You might need to get down on your child's level and make sure you have her attention (e.g., make eye contact, touch your child gently) before making a request. If your child seeks negative attention (e.g., misbehaves to get your attention), you might try ignoring the misbehavior (not scolding or talking to your child) and then praising your child when he is doing something appropriate.

What Can You Do When Children Refuse to Follow Instructions or Requests?

When children are very young, they are often eager to learn simple chores and they approach the tasks with enthusiasm. Part of their joy comes from receiving your praise and attention and from the sense of accomplishment they have at being a "big boy" or "big girl." It is important to recognize that once the child is able to do the activity independently, he might be less

motivated to complete the task consistently. (Face it, how many adults take joy in making the bed?). At this point, you should remember that your praise and attention can be a powerful tool to gain your child's cooperation. If your child is reluctant to do a chore that he is capable of completing independently, try the following:

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1. Move closer to your child, get down on his level, and restate your request, stating exactly what you expect in a calm and firm tone of voice. (e.g., "Parker, pick up your books and place them on the shelf.")

2. If your child resists or refuses, take a deep breath (so you can remain calm) and think about why the child might be refusing. After examining the situation, you might

- Tell a child who is reluctant to stop an activity, "I see you want to keep playing. You can play for 3 more minutes. I'll time you. Then you must clean up."
- Tell a child who is angry, "You are telling me you are angry, and you don't want to clean up. The books need to be picked up. Once you are calm, you will need to pick them up." Then wait until your child is calm before restating your direction.
- Tell a child who is slow to begin, "I will help you get started. I will pick up one and then you pick up one."
- Tell a child who may not be aware of the fun activity that will come next, "When the books are on the shelf, you can take your bath with the new bubble bath that we bought today."
- Tell a child who is seeking to have control, "You have a choice. You can put the cups or the silverware on the table. You must help set the table."
- Tell a child who is not enthusiastic about the task, "Let's play beat the clock! I will time you and see how fast you can finish it."

3. As soon as your child begins cooperating with the request, provide praise or feedback. When you praise your child, describe exactly what he or she is doing. For example, "That's great. You are picking up the books. I like how you are cleaning up."

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