

ADDITUDE

For Parents > School & Learning

SCHOOL BEHAVIOR

Following Every Direction, Every Time

Strategies to help children with ADHD hear what you tell them to do — not just “bits and pieces.”

BY ADDITUDE EDITORS

The problem: Difficulty following instructions is a hallmark of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Children may seem to understand and even write down your directions, then turn in the wrong assignment or execute it in the wrong way.

The reason: A student with ADHD has difficulty focusing and sustaining attention. When instructions are given, she may not be “tuned in” at that precise moment. Often she’ll hear the teacher’s first direction, then become distracted by other thoughts or stimuli. She may hear only bits and pieces, or hear and achieve only one of four assigned tasks. Difficulty processing language exacerbates the problem.

The obstacles: A student may leave her class assuming that she heard and “got” everything right. She may have listened as closely as she could, but still missed specific steps or directions. When she turns in work that’s done partially or incorrectly, it’s easy for teachers to become angry and frustrated. But giving poor grades will only make matters worse, since the child may come to believe she is stupid.

[Free Guide: [How Teachers Can Manage Classroom Behavior](#)]

Solutions in the Classroom

Be mindful of the student’s tendency to wander mentally or to lose her place because of slow language processing skills.

- **When giving specific directions to a student with ADHD, establish eye contact.** You may need to pause in your sentence until the student’s eyes meet yours.
- **When giving instructions, be specific and brief.** If possible, provide instructions personally to the child, not to the entire room.
- **Write instructions or directions on the board.** Colored chalk will highlight the important topic or specific assignment. Insist that students copy the assignment word for word. Then check what the student has written.

[Be That Teacher That Breaks Through]

- **Digital audio recorders can help children store several minutes of information** that can be played back immediately – useful for dictating homework assignments and other reminders throughout the school day.
- **Provide instructions in writing.** One teacher’s student, who had ADHD, assured him she’d written the assignments, but then wasn’t sure what to do when she got home. The teacher found that the child had written “Reading Assignment” but had failed to write down which chapters to read and what questions to answer. After that, the teacher always provided a typed list of instructions.
- **When giving verbal directions, reinforce them.** It’s helpful and fun to ask three students, from different parts of the room, to repeat the assignment. This method gives the student more than one opportunity to “tune in” to the directions.
- **Raise or lower your voice in a dramatic fashion** to catch the attention of a student who may have tuned out temporarily.

[Supporting the Disruptive Child]

Solutions at Home

At home, as well as in school, multi-step directions are almost impossible for children with ADHD to master. There is just too much information to take in and retain.

- **Parents need to break down large jobs with multiple tasks into smaller, single steps.** Give your child one instruction, ask him to complete it, then report back to you. Provide the second step only when the first step is done.
- **Older students do best with a checklist or daily routine,** allowing them to assume more responsibility by referring to a list of things to accomplish. They can check off completed assignments as they go along.
- **For younger students, some parents and teachers take pictures of each step of a routine.** For example, getting ready for school involves multiple steps and instructions. Take a picture of your child at each activity — getting dressed, eating breakfast, brushing teeth, preparing her backpack — and then place these pictures in order so your child has a visual reminder of the daily morning routine.
- **If your child needs more reinforcement, adopt a reward or token system** to provide external motivation. Either way, making instructions simpler and clearer will help children with ADHD feel more responsible and become more successful at home and in school.
- **If the child agrees to do something, but gets sidetracked by something else, try to “redirect”** rather than punish. If you’ve asked him to feed the dog, then found him outside playing basketball, redirect: “Remember, you’re supposed to feed the dog. I’ll hold on to the basketball, so you’ll know where to find it when you’re done.”

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