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Helping Your Child Listen, Follow Directions, And Manage Behavior At Home

For Parents of Young Children (Ages 4–7)
Simple, practical strategies you can start using today

Why Consistent Strategies Matter

Young children—especially those with attention and self-regulation challenges—do best when expectations are clear, predictable, and positive. Using the same strategies consistently helps your child feel safe, reduces power struggles, and improves cooperation over time.

Below are three core behavior management strategies that work best when used together.

1. Give Clear & Effective Instructions

Children are more likely to listen when directions are simple and concrete.

How to Do It:

- Get eye level with your child before giving directions
- Say the child's name first
- Give one instruction at a time
- Use a calm, neutral tone
- Tell them what TO do, not just what not to do

Examples:

- ✗ “Stop running and calm down!”
- ✓ “Emma, walk to the couch and sit down.”
- ✗ “Why aren’t you listening?”
- ✓ “Emma, put the blocks in the bin.”

Helpful Tip:

After giving a direction, pause for 5–10 seconds before repeating it. Many children need extra processing time.

2. Use Visual Cues & Routines

Visual supports reduce frustration and help children remember expectations without constant reminders.

Visual Tools You Can Use:

- Picture charts (morning routine, bedtime routine)
- Simple checklists with pictures or symbols
- Visual timers (sand timer, phone timer, kitchen timer)
- “First–Then” cards

Examples:

- First clean up toys → Then watch one show
- First brush teeth → Then story time

Helpful Tip:

Keep visuals simple and visible (refrigerator, bathroom mirror, bedroom wall).

3. Use Positive Reinforcement (Catch Them Being Good)

Children repeat behaviors that get attention. Praise and rewards are powerful tools.

What to Praise:

- Listening the first time
- Trying—even if it's not perfect
- Calming their body
- Following directions

How to Praise Effectively:

- Be specific
- Praise immediately
- Keep it short and positive

Examples:

- “Great job putting your shoes on when I asked!”
- “I love how you used your calm voice.”
- “You followed directions the first time—nice listening!”

Optional Rewards:

- Sticker chart
- Extra bedtime story
- Choice of game or activity

Rewards work best when they are earned quickly and tied to clear expectations.

Putting It All Together (Daily Example)

1. Parent gets eye level and gives a clear direction
2. Parent points to the visual chart
3. Child follows direction
4. Parent gives specific praise

Over time, this builds listening skills, confidence, and emotional regulation.

What to Expect

- Improvement takes practice and patience
- Consistency matters more than perfection
- Some days will be harder—and that's okay

Keep in mind: You are building skills, not just managing behavior.