

Skills for Good Parenting: Middle School - Commands and Directions

Being a parent means that you are giving a lot of instructions, commands and directions. Once your child is a middle schooler, every interaction can be a battle. You can't wave a magic wand and get your pre-teen to comply, but there are techniques you can use to get her to cooperate. You want to make sure that your commands are effective.

Effective commands are specific and direct. They are given face to face, and after giving them, the parent remains in charge. Ineffective commands are broad, vague, yelled from another room, and cede control to the child.

What do we mean by specific and direct commands? Rather than asking your child to tidy up the kitchen, tell them to put their dishes in the dishwasher. Rather than telling them to clean their room, tell them to make the bed and put the dirty clothes in the hamper. It is important to make sure that you have your child's attention when you give the command. Kids this age may feel that if it isn't important enough for you to come into the room to give the command, it's not important enough for them to pay you any heed. Ineffective commands are phrased as a question: "Do you want to take out the garbage?" What do you do when your child says no? You are kind of stuck, having ceded power to your child. Do not ask if they want to do something, instruct him to do something specific.

Effective commands begin with when and not if. "If you clean up your room, we can go to the mall." You are putting your middle schooler in charge when you start a command with if. Instead say "When you've cleaned up your room, I'm ready to take you to the mall."

They are phrased positively in terms of what to do, not what to stop. "You need to leave your cellphone on the kitchen counter until you've finished your homework," Rather than "Stop checking your messages when you are supposed to be doing your homework."

Just as with setting limits and not backing down, once you have told a child to do something, you can't do it for them or let them off the hook. If they don't do what has been asked, you need to be ready to enforce a consequence. Pre-teens push limits and not following instructions is an easy way to assert independence.

As your child matures, she will use emotions to escalate conflict. You need to exercise self-control. This is where you can practice your "super-hero" parenting skills. Getting your child to comply isn't about your entire relationship, it is about getting a job done, and if you keep things cool and "professional" you are less likely to be dragged into an emotional battle. Pay attention to your facial expression and body language; maybe you need to take a few deep breaths before launching into command mode. Be polite – remember modelling, if you include "please" in the command and thank your child when they have accomplished what you have asked, you are more likely to hear them using those words. Finally, effective commands are used only when really necessary. If you constantly nag your pre-teen, he is much more likely to ignore you.

Finally, when a child does comply with a command, it remains important to reinforce the positive behavior. Just as a command needs to be specific and direct, so to should your praise and gratitude. "Thank you for unloading the dishwasher before dinner." Not only will the job get done but you have navigated away from conflict.

SDJ 8/13/18