

12+ Ways to Help ADHD Students Follow Directions

Children with ADHD have a hard time following instructions because they can't stay focused long enough to clearly comprehend them. Find out how to help attention deficit children listen to, and understand instructions completely.

by ADDitude Editors

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

The reason: ADHD students have difficulty focusing and sustaining attention. Also, they may not be "tuned in" at that precise moment when instructions are given. Often a student will 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 with ADHD 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 it can hurt a child's self-esteem by making her think she's stupid or falling behind.

Solutions in the Classroom

- **Know your students.** Be mindful of how ADHD student's minds tend to wander. Know also that they can easily lose their places in a lesson because of slow language processing skills.
- **Make eye contact.** When giving specific directions to an ADHD student, establish eye contact. You may need to pause in your sentence until the student's eyes meet yours.
- **Make it brief.** When giving instructions, be specific and brief. If possible, provide instructions personally to the child, not to the entire room.
- **Use visuals.** Write instructions or directions on the board in colored chalk to highlight the important topic or specific assignment. Insist that students copy the assignment word for word. Then check what the ADHD student has written.
- **Provide instructions in writing.** One teacher's ADHD student 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.
- **Quiz them on assignments.** 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 ADHD student more than one opportunity to "tune in" to the directions.
- **Use your voice.** Raise or lower your voice in a dramatic fashion to catch the attention of a student who may have tuned out temporarily.
- **Try technology.** 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.

Solutions at Home

At home, as well as in school, multi-step directions are almost impossible for ADHD students 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.

-- **Try checklists.** 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.

-- **Make a photo timeline.** For younger students, some parents and teachers take pictures of each step of a routine. For example, getting ready for school in the morning 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.

-- **Use rewards.** 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 ADHD children feel more responsible and become more successful at home and in school.

-- **Redirect bad behavior.** 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, but found him outside playing basketball, redirect him by saying: "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."

More on ADHD Children's Behavior

Hyperactivity Help

When ADHD Kids Don't Seem to Care

End Interruptions

ADHD at School eBook – Fixing Problem School Behaviors and More

More ADHD in the Classroom...

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