

Understanding trouble following directions

By Amanda Morin

Expert reviewed by Bob Cunningham, EdM

Many people have trouble following directions. They don't seem to "listen" when they're asked to do a task. Even if there's a negative consequence, they don't do what they're supposed to do.

Why does that happen?

It might seem like laziness or a lack of respect. But when people frequently don't follow directions, there's often something else going on.

A common reason is trouble with executive function, a group of skills needed to get through tasks. Some people also have a hard time processing information or tuning in to what others are saying.

When people have trouble following directions, the results are clear — things don't get done. Or they get done poorly. But people may also struggle in ways that seem confusing or not directly related.

For example, kids and adults might:

- Get easily frustrated when trying to do something
- Agree to do something and then not do it
- Look away or zone out when being given directions
- Get halfway through a task and then stop
- Say they did something when they didn't

People struggle with directions for different reasons. It's not a matter of intelligence. It's caused by challenges with specific skills.

Dive deeper

The role of executive function

Executive function involves many skills, including memory, attention, and planning. Weaknesses in these areas make it hard to follow directions.

People might not remember what someone just said. They might struggle to keep track of the steps in a task. Or they may not “hear” the directions because they’re distracted and not focusing on them.

For some people, trouble following directions is really trouble following directions quickly. They take longer than others to process information and need more time to get the job done. This is often referred to as slow processing speed.

For parents and caregivers: What to do next

The more information you have, the better able you’ll be to help. Try to look for patterns in your child’s behavior. Share what you’re seeing with your child’s teacher and health care provider. Getting into trouble and struggling with tasks can make kids feel bad about themselves. Learn how to respond to negative self-talk. Discover strategies to help your child follow directions. And find out how one mom got her child to listen (without yelling).

Specific tips:

- Get your child’s full attention before giving directions.
- Give short and simple instructions.
- Create written or picture lists of the steps in a task.

For educators: What to do next

Students who have trouble following directions can easily get frustrated and act out — in addition to not getting work done. Understanding what their behavior is telling you lets you respond to their specific needs.

It’s important to connect with parents and caregivers to work on these challenges. You can share the behavior you see in class and find out what’s happening at home.

Specific tips:

- Give praise for working hard.
- Let students know it’s OK to fail sometimes.
- Give written, step-by-step directions.

If you have trouble following directions: What to do next

There are strategies you can try for remembering the steps in a task and doing them in the right order. Written checklists can help. So can having directions repeated.

<https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/learning-at-home/following-directions/why-some-kids-have-trouble-following-directions>

You may be able to get accommodations at school or in the workplace. These supports can help keep challenges from getting in the way of doing your best work.

People with ADHD often struggle with following directions. That's because ADHD is a problem with executive function. For people with ADHD, medication may help. Reach out to your health care provider if you're concerned about ADHD