

# Behavioral Interventions and Strategies Series:

## *Delivering Effective Commands/Instructions*



**When to use:** To obtain timely student compliance with teacher directives

**Why use:** Along with a set of consistent rules, timely student compliance is necessary in establishing and maintaining teacher control in the classroom. Common ineffective methods for obtaining compliance include asking questions (“Will you look at me?”),

giving multiple commands at once (“Go back to your seat, take out your book, read chapter 12, and answer the questions.”), and not allowing enough time for compliance with the initial request. Repeated commands, waiting for compliance, student arguments about commands, and increased disciplinary procedures result in decreased instruction time and teacher-student rapport.<sup>2</sup>

**Brief Description:** This strategy was originally developed as part of a parent training program for noncompliant children. The delivery of effective commands includes a structured sequence of instructions, use of specific words, positive social reinforcement, and consequences for noncompliance. Effective commands are particularly useful with students who chronically engage in more noncompliant behaviors and who tend to argue with teachers.<sup>2</sup>

### **Procedure:**

1. Move within 3 feet of the student and make a request beginning with the word, “please.” Make the request (command) a statement rather than a question and use a tone of voice that is firm, calm, and unemotional.  
Do: “Jennifer, please turn around in your seat to face the front of the room.”  
Avoid: “Jennifer, will you turn around in your seat to face the front of the room?” (*question allows for the student to choose to comply or not*)
2. Make the request as specific as possible to ensure the student understands exactly what you are asking them to do.  
Do: “Bobby, please place your book under your desk.”  
Avoid: “Bobby, clear your desk.” (*too vague and allows for student interpretation of how to clear the desk*)
3. After making the request, wait approximately 5 seconds for the student to initiate compliance (10 for younger students) but do not interact with the student while waiting. If the student is compliant, provide immediate, specific, labeled praise for fulfilling the request.  
Do: “Thank you for turning around, Jennifer. I like it when you follow directions.”  
Avoid: “Thank you.” (*not specific, labeled praise*)
4. If the student does not *initiate* compliance within the appropriate time period, repeat the request using the word, “need.” Wait an additional 5 (10) seconds without interacting with the student. Provide praise for compliance.  
Do: “Bobby, you need to place your book under your desk.” Student complies. “Thank you for following directions.”  
Avoid: Raising your voice
5. If the student continues to not comply within 5 to 10 seconds after the second request, provide the usual consequence for not following rules based on the classroom management plan. Repeat the second request (using, “need”). Praise student for compliance or provide next consequence based on classroom management plan.



### **Keep in Mind:**

- Only make commands when they are necessary—No one likes to be told what to do several times a day—and you are prepared to follow through with consequences when students are noncompliant.
- Issue commands as statements instead of questions—avoid words like, “will you,” “can you,” “why don’t you,” “don’t you want to,” etc.
- Have a backup plan for students who continue to be noncompliant with commands after the second request. Always follow through with consequences for noncompliance.

### **References**

1. De Martini-Scully, D., Bray, M. A., & Kehle, T. J. (2000). A packaged intervention to reduce disruptive behaviors in general education students. *Psychology in the Schools, 37*, 149-156.
2. Rathvon, N. (2008). *Effective school interventions, Second Edition: Evidence-based strategies for improving student outcomes* (pp. 83-84). New York: The Guilford Press.
3. Rhode, G., Jenson, W. R., & Reavis, H. K. (2010). *The Tough Kid Book* (2nd ed.). Eugene, OR: Pacific Northwest Publishing.