



Give clear directions

Summary

In busy classrooms, many students, including those on the autism spectrum, benefit from clear and explicit directions in order to respond readily and appropriately. Challenges with social communication, interaction, expressive and/or receptive language can impact students' ability to focus on instructions and understand what is required of them. Some students, including those on the autism spectrum, need concrete language to understand exactly what the teacher wants them to do. Clear directions support students in feeling confident that they are doing the right thing.

Australian Professional Standards for Teachers related to this practice

- 3.5 - Use effective classroom communication
- 4.2 - Manage classroom activities

For further information, see [Australian Professional Standards for Teachers AITSL page](#)

Preparing to Teach

Directions are given all the time in teaching and often it seems like a stream of constant directions - for both the teacher and the student.

Good directions need to be clear and the students need thinking time which means we need to pause and wait. Phrasing directions as statements and not requests indicates your expectation that these directions will be followed. For example, you can request a student join in on a group assignment by stating, "Time to do group work with your team, Jane" rather than "Would you like to join your team for group work?"

Clear directions:

- are short, specific statements
- start with a verb
- tell students what they are expected to do
- tell students how they are expected to do it
- are followed by a 5-10 second pause by you, the teacher.

By pausing you provide:

- students with the time needed to process the direction
- yourself with an opportunity to check for attention and understanding.

To prepare appropriate adjustments to the directions you give, it is important that you understand the communication strengths and needs of your students. Particularly relevant is knowing which students are visual learners or have learning needs that include:



- auditory processing & planning
- organising
- task initiation.

When giving directions, you should refer to whole-class, or individualised visual supports. These will support students' processing and task initiation.

Longer instructions

Choose a verbal and/or non-verbal cue to gain attention e.g., "1, 2, 3... listen to me" or . Choose one that matches your style – it can become one of your teaching 'signatures'.

Directions provide students with the information needed to complete the required task: who? — what? — when? — where? — why? — how?

When giving instructions, do not give all of the information at once. Chunk your instructions into smaller segments that are:

- short
- specific
- start with a verb.

Prepare the following supports ahead of lessons, and have them in place and within easy reach for reference:

- rules
- schedules
- routines
- written lesson plans
- task sequences
- organisational checklists.

Communication style

Be aware of your own communication style; directions should be short, specific, and start with a verb. You may need to write out and/or rehearse optimal ways to deliver clear short instructions. Reflect and monitor if these instructions are working.

When giving instructions, use non-verbal cues in a consistent way. Give directions:

- from the same place
- using the same focused facial expression
- using the same posture e.g., at the whiteboard with arms not folded.

It works better if:

- you refer to visual materials
- you always give directions from the same space within the classroom (non-verbal cue) or use the same verbal cue
- you separate instructions from curriculum/content talk.

It doesn't work if:

- instructions are too long - chunk down for easier processing
- you give directions without first gaining student attention



- you continue talking while waiting and scanning for student attention
- you do not reference visual materials.

In the classroom

Step 1. Check

- Make sure other distractions are reduced wherever possible, e.g., auditory or visual distractions, such as video or music playing
- Minimise competing demands on students' attention, e.g., if students are engaged in group work, approach the groups individually and ask them to stop what they are doing to await next instructions.

Step 2. Gain attention

- Use the attention-gaining strategy you have chosen e.g. "1, 2, 3... listen to me", or a nonverbal strategy (such as one hand in the air which indicates students should be quiet and put their hand in the air as well)
- Wait
- Scan for attention.

Step 3. Give direction

- Give the intended direction
- Use a firm, clear, and calm voice (not speaking too fast)
- Refer to whole-class and/or individualised visual materials, if relevant
- Wait
- Scan for understanding.

Step 4. Scaffold further

- Prompt student to begin following the direction
- If you can see a student is not following the direction, use short, concrete language to explain the next step
- Refer again to whole-class and/or individualised visual support.

Step 5. Acknowledge

- Provide feedback to students who followed, or tried hard to follow, the direction. This can be verbal ("Good job!") or nonverbal (thumbs up, smile, high-five).

Step 6. Review

- Review if the desired outcome to the instruction is achieved or if the directions given need altering
- Check if further supplementary visual supports (e.g., "first-then" cards or checklists) will support students to focus on and follow directions as independently as possible.



How will I know if it's working?

- You spend less time on giving directions, and more time on curriculum/content talk
- Students follow directions without prompting
- Students independently follow directions.

Materials informing practice

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning [CSEFEL]. (2013). Inventory of practice for supporting social-emotional competence. <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/modules/module1/handout4.pdf>

Working with Autism: Giving Directions to Children. <http://workingwithautism.com/giving-directions-to-children/>

