

Increasing Cooperation in Kids With Autism

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Strategies for getting kids to work with you

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Cooperation can be a challenge for children with *autism spectrum disorder*

(ASD) under the best of circumstances. And in stressful situations — when cooperation is often most important — following instructions can get even harder.

Here are some tips to help parents of kids with autism increase cooperation while still respecting kids' autonomy and keeping fights to a minimum.

Communicating effectively

Following a few simple guidelines can make it much easier to [communicate with a child on the autism spectrum](#) — and getting your message across makes cooperation much more likely.

- **Be simple and direct.** “If you want to give effective instruction, you have to be super specific,” says [Bethany Vibert](#), PsyD, a clinical *psychologist* at the Child Mind Institute. For example, instead of saying, “Can you finish setting the table?” you might say, “Please put the plates on the table.” The idea is to let your child know exactly what your expectations are in the moment, rather than giving them a list of tasks or a general instruction.
- **Avoid sarcasm, figures of speech and jokes.** Kids with autism tend to take things literally, so non-literal speech like sarcasm and jokes can confuse them. And if they're not sure what you're asking, it's hard for them to cooperate. “Saying something vague like, ‘It's about time you get to that’ might just end up frustrating your child,” Dr. Vibert says.
- **Use visual aids.** Often, children with ASD benefit from having a visual representation of their goal. So if you want them to set the table, for example, having a picture on hand of exactly how the plates should go can be a big help. A list where kids can check off tasks as they go can also make it easier.

- **Make cooperation rewarding.** All kids appreciate acknowledgement for a job well done, so offer small rewards when your child does cooperate. “This could be as simple as a high five or maybe a tickle routine they really enjoy,” says Dr. Vibert. “You really want to make following instructions a positive thing.”

Getting your child to wear a mask

Wearing a masks in public may be part of our reality for quite some time, and it can be especially challenging for autistic kids.

If your child is just getting old enough to wear a mask or has been struggling to deal with masks so far, there are ways you can help them adapt.

- **Take it slow.** Vibert recommends adding masks to your child’s routine gradually. “Introduce the mask in a way that’s going to increase positive association with that mask,” she says. “Try not to do it right before you go somewhere or right before you want them to wear it.” You might start by having your child hold or play with the mask while they do something they enjoy, like watching a favorite show. Then, once they’re comfortable with it, they can hold it up to their face for a few seconds at a time and eventually wear it around the house. By practicing in low-stakes situations, your child will likely find the mask less stressful and have an easier time working up to wearing it in public.
- **Adapt to your child’s needs.** Try to find out exactly what it is about the mask that bothers your child. Is it the elastic? The fabric? By experimenting with different masks, you can find one that’s easier for your child to tolerate. Getting one in their favorite color or a fun pattern can also help.
- **Have an exit plan.** When your child is ready to go out with their mask on, it helps to be clear about what’s expected and what you’ll do if they have a hard time with it. For instance, you and your child might agree that they’ll leave the mask on for ten minutes and then, if they don’t want to keep it on after that, they’ll be allowed to leave the store and take it off.

Managing responsibilities

Whether it’s handling homework or keeping up with chores at home, it can be hard for autistic kids to reliably complete tasks. Set them up for success with clear expectations and predictable routines.

- **Set reasonable expectations.** It’s important to be aware of your child’s attention span. Kids with autism may struggle to stay on task for a long period of time, which can make it harder for them to do what you’re asking. Help them plan tasks accordingly, like doing homework in short bursts or breaking chores up into steps that don’t take too long.

- **Take plenty of breaks.** Once your child completes a task, encourage them to take a break with some physical activity, whether that's going for a walk, playing in the yard or dancing to a favorite song. "An active break will make them a little less antsy and restless," says Dr. Vibert.
- **Use a visual schedule.** Having a clear visual schedule can help your child see what's coming and motivate them to stick with tasks they might not like. Dr. Vibert recommends a simple "First/Then" format, where you pair a picture of something your child needs to do with a picture of the reward they'll get afterward. For example, "If" might be picking up their toys while "Then" is a favorite snack.
- **Be creative.** If your child tends to struggle with the same kinds of tasks over and over again, try alternate ways of completing the same work. For example, Dr. Vibert notes that some kids do better writing by hand than typing. So if your child is supposed to type a homework assignment, you can check with the teacher to see if they can write it by hand instead. Even small adjustments to tasks can make it much easier for your child to cooperate.

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