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Not responding to instructions

"William doesn't respond to group instructions because he doesn't realise that he is part of the group."

Why does this happen?

- Most children with autism have poor receptive language skills; they interpret language literally and have difficulty with long verbal instructions.
- Some children have difficulty with group instructions. Possibly they do not think of themselves as part of the group, so they don't realise the instruction also applies to them.
- However some children will respond *better* to group instructions. Those that recognise group instructions tend to be the type to adhere strictly to rules. They will rigidly follow these rules in preference to being singled out.
- Auditory processing may take longer in children with autism. They may need more time to respond to an instruction.
- The child may have an overriding desire to do what he wants to do, not what he is told to do. This compulsive behaviour can make it hard for him to stop what he is doing. The child may feel the need to control his environment as a means of making the world more predictable, thus lessening anxiety brought on by uncertainty.
- The child may be easily distracted and irritated by even a minor level of background noise. This makes it very difficult for them to interpret instructions and distinguish your speech from other sounds. Children with autism may only be able to attend to only one stimulus at a time, ie. visual, auditory or tactile.
- The child may follow an instruction one day, then won't respond the next. This can be really frustrating for teachers; it can be caused by certain environmental cues. For example, you are holding up a student's project and you ask the class to start working on the project. The child with autism responds to the *visual cue*. If you are not holding a visual cue next time you give the instruction, the child with autism may not respond.

What you can do

- Gain the child's attention. Address the child by name even when addressing the group as a whole. This should gain his attention and help him understand that the instruction is intended for him as well as others in the group. If you have a classroom aide, have him/her repeat the instruction to the child individually.
- Assess whether the child responds to group instructions. If he is non-compliant when you make an *individual request*, it might be better to address the child with autism as if you were giving a whole-class instruction.
- Give the child sufficient time to respond to an instruction (perhaps ten seconds) before repeating it.

- Slow down your speech and emphasise the important words.
- Use clear, precise instructions. Give only one instruction at a time. Auditory processing difficulties may result in the child missing parts of the instruction. Instead of hearing, "Don't slam the door!" he may hear "Slam the door!" Try saying, "Child's name, shut the door quietly please."
- Approach the child and try to gain his attention and eye contact before giving an instruction. If the child doesn't mind being touched, you could gain his attention by touching his arm or hand.
- Keep classroom noise to a tolerable level. This will reduce stress levels and maximise the child's ability to concentrate and listen to instructions. The child's ability to process language will diminish or fluctuate when he is stressed.
- Use visual cues to maximise the child's ability to fully understand instructions.
- Sign language can be helpful to reinforce verbal instructions. You might sign 'sit down' while you are reading a story, as a subtle reminder to the child with autism to remain seated in a group.
- Make sure the instruction is a directive, not a question. Instead of saying, "Can you pass the textas?" say "Pass the textas." This does not mean that you have to use an overly firm voice or that you cannot give the child choices.