Establishing cooperation.

A simple framework for building calm, connected cooperation.

A gentler, caregiver-centered approach loosely adapted from The Seven Steps to Instructional Control (Schramm & Miller, 2014).

Many families reach a point where things feel overwhelming or unclear. That doesn't mean you're doing anything wrong. When things feel challenging, it's often not about "not listening," but about skills, expectations, and how support is provided in the moment. These steps are designed to help create more clarity, consistency, and connection in everyday interactions.

STEP 01

Start with connection

When things have felt hard, connection can feel like the last thing there's time or energy for, but it's often the place where change begins. Before expecting cooperation, it helps to slow things down and create moments where your child feels safe, seen, and not being asked to do anything but be present with you. Connection doesn't have to be big or perfect. It might look like sitting nearby, commenting on what your child is doing, or joining in briefly without directing the interaction.

WHAT THIS CAN LOOK LIKE

- Spend time each day giving attention without placing demands
- Follow your child's lead during play or conversation
- Use positive language and a calm, neutral tone

A gentle reminder

If you're feeling overwhelmed or frustrated, it's okay to take a moment for yourself first. Connection tends to come more naturally when you feel regulated too.

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Source adaptation: Schramm, R., & Miller, M. (2014). The 7 steps to earning instructional control. Pro-ABA.

Make the next step manageable.

STEP 02

Follow through consistently

It can be exhausting to repeat yourself or feel unsure whether a direction has been understood. A child may need more processing time, help with the task, or a change in expectations. Clear, predictable communication can reduce confusion. Consistency means being dependable while staying responsive to your child's needs.

WHAT THIS CAN LOOK LIKE

- Give simple, clear directions your child can understand
- Allow time for your child to process and respond
- Offer help or adjust the task if your child is struggling

A gentle reminder

Being consistent does not mean pushing through distress. Pause, offer help, or change the expectation when needed. If you are overwhelmed, take a moment when it is safe to do so. You can return to the task together when you are both ready.

STEP 03

Keep expectations manageable

When things aren't going smoothly, expectations may be too big for the moment. Breaking a task into smaller, more manageable steps can help. A small step completed with support can be more useful than pushing through a long process. Success can build confidence for both you and your child.

WHAT THIS CAN LOOK LIKE

- Break tasks into small, clear steps
- Adjust expectations based on energy, time of day, and environment
- Focus on what is realistic for both you and your child

A gentle reminder

Starting small creates an accessible path forward. Expectations can change as your child's needs and capacity change.

Build clarity. Notice the effort.

STEP 04

Notice and reinforce what's going well

During stressful moments, it is natural to focus on what is difficult. Try to notice effort, communication, and moments of connection too. Specific, sincere acknowledgment can help your child understand what went well. Choose forms of encouragement your child finds comfortable.

WHAT THIS CAN LOOK LIKE

- Notice effort with specific feedback, such as “You tried a new way!”
- Acknowledge moments that go smoothly in ways your child enjoys
- Keep praise simple and genuine

A gentle reminder

You do not have to ignore challenges. Try to balance problem-solving with noticing what is going well.

STEP 05

Reduce mixed signals

When expectations change without explanation, children may feel unsure about what comes next. Clear communication and familiar routines can help. Predictability does not mean rigidity: plans can change, and expectations should remain responsive to your child’s needs.

WHAT THIS CAN LOOK LIKE

- Make sure your child has noticed you before giving a direction, without requiring eye contact
- Explain when a plan changes, and adjust expectations when needed
- Keep routines predictable while allowing flexibility

A gentle reminder

You do not have to get this right every time. Small changes in how you communicate can help. If a plan needs to change, explain it simply and offer support.

Support the shift. Build gradually.

STEP 06

Support through transitions

Moving from one activity to another can involve shifting attention, stopping something enjoyable, and facing uncertainty. Some children need extra time and support to make that shift. A predictable cue, time to process, and help with the next step can make transitions more manageable.

WHAT THIS CAN LOOK LIKE

- Give a heads-up before transitions
- Offer simple reminders, visuals, or countdowns when helpful
- Stay nearby and offer support without rushing independence

A gentle reminder

A hard transition is a cue to consider what support is missing. Allow time, acknowledge disappointment, and offer calm assistance. Adjust the plan when needed.

STEP 07

Build up gradually

Change takes time. As smaller steps become comfortable, consider whether your child is ready for the next step. Progress may vary from day to day. The goal is meaningful participation with support, at a pace that works for your child.

WHAT THIS CAN LOOK LIKE

- Expand expectations when smaller steps feel manageable
- Continue to notice effort and offer support
- Adjust the pace based on how things are going

A gentle reminder

It’s okay to move slowly. Progress that feels manageable is more likely to last.

These steps aren’t meant to be followed perfectly or all at once. Even small changes in how support, expectations, and connection show up day to day can create meaningful shifts over time. If things have felt overwhelming, starting with just one small change is enough.