

COMMANDS THAT CONNECT

How to Talk to Your ADHD Child So They Actually Hear You

A Six-Step Programme for Effective Communication, Instruction, and Follow-Through

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Why Your Instructions Aren't Landing

"I've told him a hundred times!"

If that's your daily refrain, you're not alone. It's the single most common frustration I hear from parents in my consulting room. And here's the relief: the problem isn't that you're a bad communicator. The problem is that your child's brain processes instructions differently.

ADHD brains need instructions delivered differently. Not louder. Not angrier. Not with more threats attached. Differently. This guide gives you the exact formula for commands that actually get followed—and scripts you can use tonight.

Why Traditional Instructions Fail

Understanding this prevents a mountain of frustration. When you call your child's name from the kitchen while they're watching a screen, their brain genuinely doesn't register your voice. This isn't defiance. Their attention was elsewhere, and the ADHD brain struggles to shift gears without help.

Working memory is small. Think of working memory like a school bag. Some bags hold a laptop, books, lunch, and a PE kit with room to spare. Your child's "bag" is much smaller—it fills up fast. By step two of a three-step instruction, step one has fallen out. This isn't a sign of laziness or stupidity. It explains why tasks are dropped and steps are forgotten.

Questions invite refusal. "Would you like to get dressed?" is a question. "No" is a perfectly valid answer. You've accidentally given them an option you didn't mean to offer.

Vague instructions fail. "Clean your room" involves dozens of sub-tasks. For a brain that struggles with planning and sequencing, that's not one instruction—it's an impossible mountain. "Put your clothes in the laundry basket" is one clear task.

Your frustration makes it worse. When you raise your voice, stress hormones flood your child's brain, and the very brain functions they need—the pause button, holding information in mind, staying calm—shut down further. A calm instruction works better than an angry one, every time.

From My Consulting Room: Thandi's Morning Battles

Thandi came to me exhausted. Every morning was the same war with her eight-year-old son, Siphos. "I tell him to get ready for school and he just sits there staring at the wall. I end up screaming by 6:45."

I asked Thandi to walk me through exactly what she said. "Get ready for school" was her instruction. I asked her to count how many separate tasks were hidden inside that command: get out of bed, go to the bathroom, brush teeth, wash face, go back to bedroom, choose clothes, get dressed, find socks, find shoes, pack school bag, get lunch box, get to the car.

That’s thirteen tasks. Sipho’s working memory could hold one or two. She wasn’t giving him one instruction. She was giving him thirteen—and then wondering why he froze.

When Thandi switched to one instruction at a time—“Sipho, brush your teeth” then waited, then “Sipho, put your shirt on”—mornings transformed within a week. Not perfectly. But the screaming stopped.

Instead of this...	Try this tonight...
<i>“Why don’t you go get your shoes?”</i>	“Sophie, put your shoes on now.”
<i>“Get ready for school!”</i>	“Put your lunchbox in your bag.”
<i>“Behave yourself!”</i>	“Sit with your bottom on the chair.”
<i>“How many times do I have to tell you?”</i>	Move close. Say name. Wait. Give one instruction.
<i>“Clean your room!”</i>	“Put your dirty clothes in the basket.”
<i>“Stop being naughty!”</i>	“Hands by your side, please.”
<i>“Can you come set the table?”</i>	“Jake, put four plates on the table.”
<i>“Why can’t you just listen?”</i>	“Let me try that again. Aisha, look at me.”
<i>“Be nice to your sister!”</i>	“Use gentle hands with your sister.”
<i>“You never do what I ask!”</i>	“Let’s try one thing. Put your cup in the sink.”

Step 1: Get Their Attention First

Before a single word of instruction leaves your mouth, you need your child's brain tuned in. This sounds obvious, but most parents skip this step entirely. They shout instructions from the kitchen, call out from another room, or speak while the television is blaring. Then they wonder why nothing happens.

The ADHD brain has weaker attention filters. It's harder for your child to pick out your voice from background noise, shift their focus from what they're doing, and register that you're speaking to them. This isn't rudeness. It's neurology.

The Five-Point Attention Check

1

Move Close

Walk to within arm's reach. Don't shout from across the house or another room. Your physical proximity tells their brain: something is happening that needs my attention.

2

Reduce Distractions

Turn off the TV, pause the game, or move to a quieter spot. You cannot compete with a screen for an ADHD brain's attention—and you shouldn't have to try.

3

Say Their Name and Wait

Say their name once. Then stop. Wait for acknowledgement—a look, a grunt, a "what?" Don't continue until you have it. This pause feels awkward, but it's essential.

4

Make Eye Contact

Get down to their level if needed. If your child is comfortable with it, a gentle hand on the shoulder helps. Eye contact tells the brain: this is directed at me.

5

Check They're Ready

Look for signs they've actually shifted their attention to you. If they're still glancing at the screen, they're not ready. Wait. Another few seconds now saves ten minutes of repeating yourself later.

Scripts for Getting Attention

"Sophie. [pause, wait for eyes] Good. I need you to listen."

"Jake, eyes on me please. [wait] Thank you. Here's what I need."

"I need to tell you something important. Can you pause that for a moment?"

"I'm going to wait until you're looking at me. [calm, patient, no frustration]"

"Lerato, I need your ears. [touch shoulder gently, wait for response]"

"I can see you're busy. I'll wait until you can look at me. [stand nearby, patient]"

Real-World Scenarios

Scenario: Your child is gaming and dinner is ready

[Walk to the room. Stand where they can see you. Don't shout from the kitchen.]

Parent: "Jake."

[Wait. He's still looking at screen. Give him five seconds.]

Parent: "Jake, I need your eyes."

[He glances up briefly.]

Parent: "Thank you. Dinner is on the table. Pause your game and come now."

[Wait ten seconds. If he doesn't move:]

Parent: "Jake, the controller needs to go down now. Dinner."

[Calm. Firm. Not angry. He knows you mean it because you're standing right there.]

Scenario: Your child is playing with siblings and you need them to come inside

[Walk outside. Don't shout through the window.]

Parent: "Aisha." *[Wait for her to look.]* "It's time to come inside now."

[If she doesn't respond, move closer. Touch her arm gently.]

Parent: "Aisha, I need you to stop the game and come inside. We're starting bath time."

[If she says "Just five more minutes!":]

Parent: "Two more minutes. I'm setting my timer. When it beeps, we go in."

[Set timer visibly. When it beeps, follow through immediately.]

Scenario: Homework time — your child is on the couch staring at the ceiling

[Don't call from another room. Walk over. Sit next to them.]

Parent: "Sipho." [Touch his knee gently. Wait for eye contact.]

Parent: "It's homework time. Let's go sit at the table together."

[Walk with him. Don't send him alone—your presence is the scaffold.]

Parent: "What subject is first?" [Let him choose—even small choices help.]

Parent: "Open your maths book to the right page. I'll sit right here."

From My Consulting Room: David's Invisible Instructions

David (42) told me he'd started recording himself at home to understand why his son, Connor (7), "never listened." What he discovered shocked him.

"I counted seventeen instructions in one hour—and I gave fifteen of them from another room. I was shouting instructions through walls, around corners, while the TV was on. Connor wasn't ignoring me. He literally couldn't hear me over everything else."

David started walking to Connor before speaking. Within three days, Connor's "compliance"—his word, not mine—doubled. Nothing about Connor had changed. David had changed how he delivered the message.

Why This Matters

Research shows that children with ADHD take two to three times longer to shift their attention than neurotypical children. Those extra seconds you wait aren't wasted—they're the difference between your instruction landing and disappearing into thin air.

This single step—getting attention before speaking—will reduce how often you repeat yourself by at least half. That's not an exaggeration. It's what twenty-five years of clinical experience has shown me.

Step 2: Give One Clear, Specific Instruction

Now that you have their attention, give exactly one instruction. Not three. Not a paragraph of expectations. One specific, observable action.

Your child’s working memory bag is small. Every additional instruction you add is another item crammed in. By the time you finish a three-step command, the first step has already fallen out. This isn’t them being difficult. It’s how their brain is wired.

The Specificity Rule

If you can’t observe it, it’s too vague. “Be good” is invisible—what does “good” look like? “Sit with your bottom on the chair” is specific, visible, and achievable. If you couldn’t take a photograph of the behaviour, your instruction isn’t specific enough.

Instead of this...	Try this tonight...
<i>“Get ready for school”</i>	“Put your shoes on”
<i>“Be good at Granny’s”</i>	“Use your quiet voice inside”
<i>“Tidy up”</i>	“Put the Lego in the blue box”
<i>“Do your homework”</i>	“Open your maths book to page 12”
<i>“Get ready for bed”</i>	“Go brush your teeth”
<i>“Behave at dinner”</i>	“Stay in your seat until everyone’s finished”
<i>“Be respectful”</i>	“Use a calm voice when you’re talking to me”
<i>“Stop messing around”</i>	“Sit down and put your pencil on the paper”
<i>“Sort out your bag”</i>	“Take your lunchbox out of your bag”
<i>“Pack for swimming”</i>	“Put your costume in the blue bag”

Use a Directive Tone—Not a Question

Firm but calm. Not angry, not pleading, not questioning. A statement, not a request. Your tone tells your child’s brain how serious this is.

“Would you like to put your shoes on?” invites “No.” “Put your shoes on now” is clear. You’re not being harsh. You’re being clear. And clarity is kindness for an ADHD brain.

Questions vs Directives — Hear the Difference

[Question — invites refusal]

“Would you like to come to the table?”

“Can you go brush your teeth?”

“Don’t you think you should start your homework?”

“Why don’t you go put your pyjamas on?”

[Directive — clear and kind]

“Come to the table now, please.”

“Go brush your teeth.”

“Open your homework book.”

“Put your pyjamas on.”

Give Time to Process

After giving your instruction, count to ten silently. This is the hardest part for most parents. Your instinct is to repeat immediately. But repeating before they’ve had time to process feels like nagging and triggers resistance.

ADHD brains need longer to shift gears. That ten-second pause isn’t them ignoring you. It’s their brain loading your instruction. Wait.

Check Understanding

For important instructions, ask them to repeat back what you said. “What did I just ask you to do?” This isn’t treating them like a baby. It’s accommodating how their brain works. Having them repeat the instruction also increases the chances they’ll follow through.

Scenario: Getting dressed for school — the full sequence

Parent: “Lerato.” [Walks into bedroom. Waits for eye contact.]

Parent: “Put your school shirt on.” [Places shirt on the bed where she can see it.]

[Counts to ten silently. Lerato picks up the shirt and starts.]

Parent: “Well done, you’re getting dressed.” [Stays nearby.]

[Shirt is on.]

Parent: “Now put your skirt on.” [Points to it.]

[Waits. Doesn’t add “and then find your socks and don’t forget your shoes.”]

Parent: “That’s two things done already. Socks next.”

[One instruction. Wait. Praise. Next instruction. Repeat.]

Scenario: Leaving the house when you’re running late

[You're stressed. You want to say "Get your shoes, grab your bag, find your water bottle, and get in the car NOW!" Don't.]

Parent: "Sipho." [Eye contact.] "Shoes on."

[Wait. Shoes go on.]

Parent: "Thank you. Now pick up your bag."

[Bag goes on shoulder.]

Parent: "Great. Get in the car."

[Three instructions given separately = three instructions followed. Four instructions given at once = zero instructions followed and everyone screaming. Slow is fast.]

Scenario: Tidying up toys before dinner

Parent: "Connor." [Walks over, kneels to his level.]

Parent: "Put the cars in the red box."

[Not "tidy up." Not "clean this mess." One specific task with a specific destination.]

[If the room is very messy, pick one category at a time:]

Parent: "First, all the cars in the red box." [Wait. Help if needed.]

Parent: "Now all the books on the shelf."

Parent: "Lastly, put the crayons in the tin."

[Three rounds of one instruction each. Room is tidy. No tears.]

From My Consulting Room: Priya's Homework Revolution

Priya's daughter Anaya (9) would stare at her homework for forty-five minutes without writing a word. Priya would say, "Do your homework" and then leave the room, checking back every ten minutes to find nothing done.

I asked Priya to break "do your homework" into its smallest parts. She started sitting with Anaya and giving one instruction at a time: "Open your maths book." Wait. "Read question one." Wait. "Write the first number." Wait.

"It felt ridiculously slow at first," Priya told me. "But she actually finished in thirty minutes instead of the usual two-hour battle. I couldn't believe it."

Over the following weeks, Priya gradually reduced her involvement. Anaya didn't need someone doing it for her. She needed someone breaking the mountain into steps her brain could manage. That's scaffolding—not doing it for them, but providing exactly the support they need until they can do it themselves.

This feels slower. It is slower. But instructions that actually land save hours of repetition, nagging, and conflict. Slow is fast when you're working with an ADHD brain.

Chore Cards: A Visual Lifeline

For children old enough to read, make a chore card for each regular task. Use a simple index card listing each step. When you need them to do the task, hand them the card instead of reciting instructions verbally.

Example — “Making Your Bed” card: 1. Pull duvet up to pillow. 2. Straighten duvet. 3. Put teddy on top. Done!

Example — “Packing School Bag” card: 1. Homework folder. 2. Pencil case. 3. Lunch box. 4. Water bottle. Check: is everything in?

The card reduces the load on their working memory. It also takes you out of the nagging role—they're following the card, not arguing with you.

Step 3: Use When-Then Language

When-Then is the single most powerful language pattern you'll learn in this entire programme. It replaces nagging, threatening, and arguing with calm clarity.

The structure is simple: "When you do X, then Y happens."

Why When-Then Works

It's clear. There's no ambiguity about what's required or what happens next. The ADHD brain thrives on clarity.

It puts your child in control. They decide when they do the task, which means they decide when they get the reward. This sense of agency matters enormously.

It removes you from the role of enforcer. You're not threatening or bribing. You're simply stating how things work. The rule is the rule—not you being mean.

It teaches cause and effect. ADHD brains struggle with connecting actions to outcomes. When-Then makes that connection visible and immediate.

When-Then Scripts for Every Part of the Day

[Morning]

"When your teeth are brushed, then we'll read the cereal box game."

"When your shoes are on, then we can get in the car."

"When your bag is by the door, then you can have five minutes on your tablet."

[After school]

"When your lunchbox is in the kitchen, then you can have your snack."

"When you've changed out of your uniform, then you can go play."

[Homework]

"When your maths is finished, then you can have screen time."

"When you've done five sums, then we'll take a movement break."

"When your reading is done, then you choose what we do together."

[Evening]

"When your teeth are brushed, then we'll read your story."

"When your pyjamas are on, then you can choose tomorrow's outfit."

"When your toys are in the box, then we'll have pudding."

[Weekends and outings]

"When your room is tidy, then we'll go to the park."

"When you've helped clear the table, then you can watch your show."

“When everyone’s ready, then we leave for swimming.”

Scenario: Morning routine — When-Then in action

Parent: “Connor, when your teeth are brushed, then you can have your Weetbix.”

[Connor doesn’t move immediately. Parent waits. Doesn’t repeat. Doesn’t nag.]

[After about thirty seconds, Connor heads to the bathroom.]

Parent: “Thank you for doing that. Breakfast is ready.”

[After breakfast:]

Parent: “When your shoes are on, then we can get in the car.”

[Parent puts their own shoes on, picks up keys. Doesn’t hover or repeat.]

[Connor sees parent is ready and moving. Puts shoes on.]

Parent: “Shoes on, great. Let’s go.”

Scenario: Screen time negotiation — holding the line

Parent: “When your homework is finished, then you can have your screen time.”

Child: “But I want to play NOW! I’ll do homework later!”

Parent: [Calm, not arguing] “I hear you. The deal is: when homework is done, then screens. You decide when you start.”

Child: “That’s not fair!”

Parent: [Still calm] “I know it feels hard. Homework first, then screens. I’ll be in the kitchen when you’re ready to start.”

[Parent walks away. Doesn’t engage further. Doesn’t argue. The When-Then statement has been made. The child decides when.]

Scenario: Bath time refusal — staying calm under pressure

Parent: “Aisha, when you’re in the bath, then you can play with the new bath crayons.”

Aisha: "I don't want a bath!"

Parent: "I understand. When you're in the bath, then bath crayons. You choose when you get in."

[Parent starts running the bath. Doesn't force. Doesn't argue.]

Aisha: [After a minute] "Can I bring my doll?"

Parent: "Of course. Hop in and your doll can come too."

[The battle didn't happen. Parent stated the When-Then, waited, and Aisha came around on her own timeline.]

From My Consulting Room: Nomsa's Transformation with When-Then

Nomsa had three children under ten, the oldest diagnosed with ADHD. Evenings were chaos. She'd find herself repeating "Get ready for bed" sometimes twenty times before anyone moved.

I asked Nomsa to try one When-Then statement each evening for a week. She chose the bedtime story, because it was the thing her children loved most.

"When your pyjamas are on and your teeth are brushed, then we'll read our chapter." She said it once. Calmly. Then she sat on the couch with the book visible.

"The first night, Thabo took fifteen minutes to get moving. But he did it without me shouting. By Wednesday, all three were in pyjamas within five minutes of me saying it. They were motivated because they were in control of when the story happened. I'd been fighting a battle I didn't need to fight."

Critical Warning: Follow-Through Is Everything

When-Then only works if you follow through consistently. Every single time.

If you say "When your room is tidy, then we'll watch the movie" and the room isn't tidy but you watch the movie anyway, you've just taught your child that your words don't mean anything. One broken When-Then undoes a week of consistency.

This is hard. Some nights you're exhausted and it's easier to give in. But every time you follow through, you're building trust. Your child is learning: "When Mum says something, she means it." That trust is the foundation of everything else.

When-Then also works in reverse for consequences: “If you choose to throw the toy, then the toy goes away.” Natural and logical. Calm, not punishing.

Step 4: Catch Them Being Good

This step feels counterintuitive when you're drowning in daily battles. But it may be the most important strategy in this entire programme.

Children with ADHD receive an extraordinary amount of negative feedback. They're corrected constantly—at home, at school, by peers, by coaches, by family members. By some estimates, an ADHD child hears 20,000 more negative comments by age twelve than a neurotypical child. That's not a typo. That accumulates into negative self-image, defensiveness, and resistance.

The 5:1 Ratio

Research is clear: you need five positive interactions for every one correction. For ADHD children, you may need even more. Most parents are shocked when they count their interactions for a day. The ratio is often 1:5—one positive for every five negatives. We need to flip that completely.

Here's the transformation: Constant correction creates a defensive child, which deteriorates the relationship, which worsens behaviour. Predominantly positive interactions create a cooperative child, which improves the relationship, which improves behaviour. The maths is simple. The practice takes effort.

What “Catching Good” Looks Like — 20 Ready-Made Scripts

Specific Praise for Cooperation

“You came when I called you. Thank you—that really helps me.”

“I noticed you started your homework without me asking. That took real effort.”

“You used a calm voice just now even though you were frustrated. I'm proud of that.”

“You shared that with your sister without being asked. That was kind.”

“You put your plate in the sink. Brilliant—you remembered.”

“Look at how quickly you got dressed this morning. That's impressive.”

“You waited your turn just now. That's really grown-up.”

Specific Praise for Effort (Not Just Achievement)

“You stuck with that maths even though it was really hard. That's determination.”

“I can see you tried your best on that drawing. The effort shows.”

“You didn't give up when it got difficult. That takes courage.”

“You kept trying even after the first one went wrong. That's how you learn.”

“I know that was hard for you, and you did it anyway. Well done.”

“You sat through that whole dinner even though you wanted to get up. That took real self-control.”

Specific Praise for Self-Management

“You stopped yourself before you shouted. I saw that. Amazing.”

“You took a deep breath when you were angry. That’s exactly what we practised.”

“You asked for help instead of getting frustrated. That’s smart.”

“You remembered your lunchbox without being reminded. Your brain is getting stronger at that.”

“You told me you were feeling angry instead of hitting. I’m so proud of that.”

“You walked away when your brother was annoying you. That’s real maturity.”

Compliance Training — Building the Cooperation Habit

Here’s a technique that sounds almost too simple to work, but it does. Several times a day, ask your child to do very brief, easy favours.

Scenario: Compliance training in the living room — 5 minutes

Parent: “Lerato, can you hand me that cushion?”

Lerato: [Hands cushion]

Parent: “Thank you! I love it when you help me.”

Parent: “Can you pass me the remote?”

Lerato: [Passes remote]

Parent: “Thanks for doing what I asked. You’re being really helpful.”

Parent: “Could you put this cup on the table for me?”

Lerato: [Does it]

Parent: “You did that so quickly! Three for three.”

Parent: “One more — can you bring me that book from the shelf?”

Lerato: [Fetches book]

Parent: “Wow, four out of four. You’re on a roll today.”

[Total time: 3 minutes. Total effect: Lerato has practised cooperating four times and been praised four times. She’s now far more likely to cooperate with the next instruction—even a harder one.]

From My Consulting Room: Mike and the Praise Experiment

Mike was sceptical. “My son doesn’t do anything worth praising,” he told me flatly. Ethan (8) had ADHD with significant behavioural challenges, and Mike felt like every interaction was a battle.

I challenged Mike to find five things to praise each day for one week. “They can be tiny,” I said. “He sat down. He picked up a fork. He looked at you when you spoke. Anything.”

Mike came back the following week looking different. “Day one was torture. I could barely find three things. By day four, I was finding them everywhere. He ate his breakfast without throwing cereal. He put one shoe on by himself. He said please once. I’d just never been looking for those things.”

Then he said something that stuck with me: “Ethan noticed. By day three, he looked at me after doing something and waited. Like he was expecting me to notice. He wanted to be caught being good. He was just waiting for someone to see it.”

From My Consulting Room: Zanele’s 5:1 Challenge

Zanele kept a tally on her phone for one day—every positive and every negative interaction with her daughter Thandi (6). The result: 4 positives and 23 negatives.

“I was horrified,” she told me. “I thought I was a good mum. But I was criticising her all day without realising it. ‘Don’t do that. Stop that. How many times. Why can’t you just.’ It was relentless.”

We set a target: flip the ratio over four weeks. Week one, aim for 10 positives a day. Week two, reduce unnecessary corrections by picking only three battles. Week three, add the compliance training exercises. Week four, count again.

Her final count: 18 positives, 7 negatives. Not perfect. But Thandi had started coming to Zanele for help instead of hiding from her. “She’s not scared of me anymore,” Zanele said. “I didn’t know she had been.”

The Backhanded Compliment Trap

Never follow praise with a dig. “It’s about time you cleaned your room. Why couldn’t you do that before?” destroys everything the praise just built.

“See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” feels like a slap after a compliment.

“Well done for sitting still — why can’t you do that every day?” turns praise into criticism.

Praise the behaviour. Full stop. No “but.” No “finally.” No “see, I told you so.” Just the praise. Let it land.

Step 5: Build a Reward System That Works

ADHD brains have a different relationship with motivation. The dopamine system—the brain’s reward and motivation chemical—works differently. Internal motivation (“I should do this because it’s the right thing”) is genuinely weaker. This isn’t laziness. It’s brain chemistry.

Until internal motivation develops, your child needs external motivation—visible, immediate, tangible rewards for specific behaviours. Think of it as scaffolding: you provide the external structure until the internal structure grows strong enough to stand on its own.

Parents sometimes worry this is “bribery.” It’s not. Bribery is when you pay someone to do something wrong. This is earning rewards for doing something right. You earn a salary for going to work. Your child earns tokens for building good habits. Same principle.

Setting Up a Token System — Step by Step

1

Choose Your Tokens

Ages 4–7: Physical tokens work best—plastic poker chips, marbles in a jar, or stickers on a chart. They can touch and count their earnings. Ages 8+: Points in a notebook, set up like a chequebook with deposits and withdrawals.

2

Pick 2–3 Target Behaviours

Start small. Be specific. “Got dressed before breakfast without reminders” or “Started homework within five minutes of being asked” or “Used calm words when frustrated.” Never vague targets like “was good.”

3

Assign Token Values

Harder behaviours earn more. Getting dressed without reminders: 3 tokens. Putting dirty clothes in laundry: 1 token. Starting homework without argument: 2 tokens. Using calm voice during disagreement: 3 tokens.

4

Create a Reward Menu Together

Mix small daily rewards with larger weekly rewards. Let your child help choose. Small: Extra 10 min screen time (2 tokens). Medium: Choose dinner (4 tokens). Large: Special outing (20 tokens). This gives them ownership.

5

Award Immediately and Specifically

The moment they earn a token, hand it over with praise. “You started homework without being asked. That’s two tokens!” Immediate. Specific. Enthusiastic. Delayed tokens lose their power.

6

Make It Visible

Chart on the fridge. Jar on the counter. Your child should see their progress at a glance. Visible progress is motivation you don't have to provide—they provide it themselves.

Scenario: Setting up the poker chip system — Saturday afternoon

Parent: "Connor, I've got something fun to show you. Come sit with me."

[Show the poker chips and the jar.]

Parent: "These are your earning chips. Every time you do certain things, you earn chips. Then you can swap them for rewards."

Parent: "Let's decide together. What are some things you'd love to earn?"

[Write his ideas down. Let him feel ownership.]

Parent: "Okay, here's how you earn chips. Getting dressed by yourself in the morning? That's worth three chips. Starting homework without a fuss? Two chips. Putting your plate in the sink? One chip."

Parent: "And here's your reward menu. Five chips gets you an extra fifteen minutes before bed. Ten chips and you choose dinner. Twenty chips and we go to the park on Saturday."

[Stick the chart on the fridge. Put the jar where he can see it. Start immediately.]

Awarding Tokens — Make It a Moment

"You got dressed all by yourself this morning! That's three chips. Let's put them in your jar."

"You started homework without me asking. That's two chips. You're getting close to choosing dinner!"

"Excellent calm voice just then. Here's a chip for that. I noticed."

"Bonus chip! You didn't just put your plate in the sink—you rinsed it too. Above and beyond."

"Let's count your jar. Twelve chips! That's amazing progress this week."

From My Consulting Room: The Lunchbox Miracle — Ayanda's Story

Ayanda's son Lethabo (6) would not put his lunchbox in the kitchen after school. Every single day it stayed in his bag until it grew mould. Ayanda had tried shouting, begging, consequences. Nothing worked.

We added “lunchbox in the kitchen within ten minutes of getting home” to Lethabo’s token chart. Worth two chips. The reward menu included ten minutes of trampoline time (his favourite) for five chips.

Day one: Ayanda said, “Remember, lunchbox in the kitchen earns two chips.” Lethabo did it within three minutes. She handed over two chips with big praise. He bounced on the trampoline that afternoon.

By day five, Lethabo was doing it without the reminder. By week three, it was automatic. The chips were still technically available, but Lethabo had stopped asking for them. The behaviour had become a habit. That’s the goal—external motivation builds the habit, and then the habit sustains itself.

The Golden Rule: Never Remove Earned Tokens

This is non-negotiable. Once your child earns a token, it stays earned. Never take away tokens as punishment.

Removing earned tokens destroys trust. Your child thinks: “What’s the point of earning if you can just take them away?” Motivation collapses.

If they misbehave, use other consequences—time out, loss of a privilege, natural consequences. But earned tokens are sacred. They represent work your child has done. Don’t steal their earnings.

When the System Stops Working

Rewards aren’t motivating anymore? Your child has habituated. Rotate in new rewards. Ask what they’d like. ADHD brains crave novelty.

Targets too easy? They’ve mastered those behaviours—that’s success! Graduate to harder targets.

Targets too hard? They’re not earning enough to stay motivated. Lower the bar temporarily. Success builds motivation; failure kills it.

Everyone forgot about it? Put the chart where you can’t miss it. Set a phone reminder to award tokens at key moments. Consistency matters more than perfection.

Step 6: Consequences That Teach

Everything builds to this step. Consequences only work properly when connection is strong, communication is clear, and your child is developmentally ready to learn from them. That’s why this is Step Six, not Step One.

Too many parents start here—jumping straight to punishment without the foundation underneath. It’s like building a roof without walls. It doesn’t hold.

Five Principles of Effective Consequences

- 1 Immediate**
 ADHD brains live in the now. A consequence tomorrow has no impact today. “Because of what you did this morning, no screen time tonight” doesn’t work—by tonight, this morning is ancient history.
- 2 Brief**
 Hours, not days. Long punishments lose their teaching value and breed resentment. “You’re grounded for a month” teaches nothing except that you’re harsh. Keep it short.
- 3 Predictable**
 The same behaviour produces the same consequence every time. Predictability creates learning. Inconsistency creates confusion and anxiety.
- 4 Proportionate**
 The consequence matches the behaviour. Taking away a birthday party for leaving toys out is not proportionate. Match the scale.
- 5 Connected**
 Where possible, the consequence relates logically to the behaviour. Left the bike out? Bike stays in the garage tomorrow. Used screens instead of homework? Screens come out only after homework tomorrow.

Natural and Logical Consequences — Examples

Instead of this...	Try this tonight...
<i>Threw the toy</i>	Toy goes away for the rest of the day
<i>Refused dinner</i>	No snacks later — next meal is breakfast

<i>Left bike out overnight</i>	Bike stays in the garage tomorrow
<i>Didn't pack homework</i>	Deals with teacher's response at school
<i>Broke a sibling's toy</i>	Uses pocket money to replace it
<i>Used screens instead of homework</i>	Screens only after homework tomorrow
<i>Wouldn't put coat on</i>	Gets cold — learns the lesson naturally
<i>Was rough with the dog</i>	Dog time is over for today

Planned Ignoring: When Silence Is Your Superpower

Whining, silly noises, eye-rolling, dramatic sighing, minor rudeness—these behaviours often exist because they get a reaction. Remove the reaction, and the behaviour loses its purpose.

Important: Only use planned ignoring for attention-seeking behaviours that aren't dangerous. Never ignore behaviour that could hurt your child or someone else.

Scenario: Planned ignoring — whining about dinner

Child: [Whining voice] "I don't WANT chicken. I NEVER want chicken. This is DISGUSTING."

Parent: [Calm, brief] "I'm not going to respond to that voice. When you use a calm voice, I'm ready to listen."

[Parent turns away. Continues serving. No eye contact. No further engagement.]

Child: [Still whining] "MUM! I said I don't WANT it!"

[Parent stays calm. Doesn't react. Continues with dinner preparation.]

Child: [Normal voice] "Mum, can I maybe have some bread with it?"

Parent: [Immediately warm] "Of course you can. Thank you for using that calm voice. I'll get you some bread."

[The moment they switch to a better approach, you switch on like a light. This teaches: calm voice = attention. Whining = nothing.]

Scenario: Planned ignoring — silly noises at homework time

Child: [Making fart noises with armpit, giggling]

Parent: [Doesn't react. Doesn't smile. Doesn't say "stop that." Continues looking at their own book/phone calmly.]

Child: [Tries louder noises. Looks at parent for reaction.]

[Parent stays neutral. No reaction whatsoever.]

Child: [Stops. Picks up pencil. Writes one word.]

Parent: [Immediately] "You've started writing. Good effort."

[The attention goes to the behaviour you want, not the behaviour you don't want.]

Time Out: Last Resort, Done Right

Time out is for behaviour that cannot be ignored or redirected—hitting, biting, destroying things. It's not for minor misbehaviour, and it's not your first response.

Scenario: Time out in action — hitting a sibling

[Connor hits his sister during an argument over a toy.]

Parent: [Firm, not shouting] "Connor. We don't hit. If you hit again, you go to the chair."

[This is the one warning. Count to five silently.]

[Connor hits again.]

Parent: "You hit your sister. Time out now."

[Takes Connor firmly but gently by the hand. Leads to the chair. No lecture. No negotiation.]

Parent: "You stay here until I say you can get up."

[Sets timer for 7 minutes (Connor is 7). Walks away.]

[Connor protests, cries, says "I'm sorry!" Parent doesn't engage. Doesn't make eye contact. Goes about business calmly.]

[Timer goes. Connor has been quiet for 30 seconds.]

Parent: "Time out is finished. Are you ready to play nicely?"

Connor: "Yes."

Parent: "Good. Off you go."

[No guilt trip. No "now what do you say?" No lecture about why hitting is wrong. He knows. Fresh start. Move on.]

From My Consulting Room: Michelle's Consequence Revolution

Michelle had been grounding her daughter Kayla (10) for a week at a time for various misbehaviours. "By Wednesday she's climbing the walls, I'm climbing the walls, and I end up lifting the grounding early anyway because we can't stand it anymore. Then she learns that the punishment doesn't stick."

I explained the ADHD brain's relationship with time. For Kayla, a week-long grounding was meaningless—she couldn't connect today's consequence to last Saturday's behaviour. And lifting it early taught her that consequences weren't real.

We restructured everything. Consequences became same-day, brief, and connected. Left her bag at school? She walks it to the car herself tomorrow morning. Used a rude voice? Loses fifteen minutes of screen time that evening. Hit her brother? Five minutes in the chair, then back to play.

"It felt too light at first," Michelle told me. "But she actually started learning from them. The short consequences happened every time, so they were predictable. She could see the connection between what she did and what happened next. In three weeks, the rude voice was almost gone."

From My Consulting Room: When Time Out Needs a Rethink — James's Story

James (5) had ADHD with significant emotional challenges. Every time his parents used time out, he'd escalate—screaming, kicking the wall, trying to leave the chair. Time out was lasting an hour because he couldn't calm down alone.

This told me something important. James wasn't being defiant. His brain couldn't manage the emotions of isolation. He needed co-regulation—an adult's calm presence to help him find his own calm.

We switched to time-in. Same principle—removed from the situation, brief, consequence for the behaviour—but with his mum sitting quietly nearby. No talking. No lecturing. Just presence.

“The first time I sat with him instead of leaving him alone, he calmed down in three minutes instead of forty-five,” his mum said. “I think he needed to know I was still there. That I was upset about the hitting, not upset about him.”

If time out consistently escalates things, your child may need time-in instead. Discuss this with your child’s paediatrician or therapist.

The Punishment Trap – What NOT to Do

Long lectures after the consequence. They can’t process your words when they’re emotionally flooded. Save the teaching for later, when everyone is calm.

Escalating threats. “If you don’t stop, you’re grounded for a week. A month. No birthday party. No Christmas.” This spiral makes you look out of control and teaches nothing.

Delayed punishment. “Wait till your father gets home” doesn’t work. By then, the moment has passed. The ADHD brain has moved on.

Physical punishment. Research is unequivocal—physical punishment worsens behaviour in ADHD children. It increases aggression, damages the relationship, and teaches that bigger people use force. It doesn’t teach self-control.

Shaming. “Why can’t you be more like your sister?” “What’s wrong with you?” “You always do this.” Shame shuts down the learning brain entirely.

Quick Win Tonight

You don't have to master everything before you see improvement. Start tonight with these three things.

1. Get Attention First — Tonight

Before your next instruction, walk over, say their name, and wait for eye contact before you speak. Just this one change. Notice the difference.

Try it at dinner time: walk to them, say their name, wait for eyes, then say "Dinner is ready. Come to the table."

2. One When-Then — Tomorrow Morning

Replace one nagging reminder with When-Then language. Say it once. Calmly. Wait. Follow through.

Try: "When your shoes are on, then we can get in the car." Then stand by the door with your keys. Don't repeat. Don't nag. Wait.

3. Catch Them Being Good — Before Bed Tonight

Before bed tonight, notice and comment on three things your child did right today. Be specific.

Try: "You came when I called you for dinner. Thank you." "You shared the remote with your sister. That was kind." "You brushed your teeth without me asking. I noticed."

These three practices take less than fifteen minutes combined. They cost nothing. And they begin shifting the dynamic immediately. Do them every day this week. By Sunday, you'll feel the difference—and so will your child.

Remember This

Your child's brain isn't broken. It's wired differently.

When you change how you communicate, you're not giving in. You're not lowering your standards. You're working with your child's brain instead of fighting against it. That's not weakness. That's wisdom.

Connection before correction. Immediate feedback. External structure. Specific praise. Calm consistency. These aren't fancy parenting theories. They're how ADHD brains learn best.

You won't get this right every time. Some days you'll shout from the kitchen, give three instructions at once, and forget to praise anything. That's okay. Tomorrow you try again. Progress, not perfection.

The fact that you're reading this tells me everything I need to know about you. You're not failing. You're learning. And so is your child.

The Six Steps at a Glance

1**Get Their Attention**

Move close. Reduce distractions. Say their name. Wait for eye contact. Check they're ready.

2**One Clear Instruction**

Specific. Observable. Directive tone. One task at a time. Wait ten seconds.

3**When-Then Language**

When you do X, then Y happens. Say it once. Follow through every time.

4**Catch Them Being Good**

5:1 positive to negative. Specific praise. Immediate. Notice effort, not just results.

5**Reward System**

Tokens for target behaviours. Visible progress. Never remove earned tokens.

6**Consequences That Teach**

Immediate, brief, predictable, proportionate, connected. Planned ignoring for minor issues. Time out as last resort.

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