



Precision Commands



Definition

A precision command, sometimes referred to as a precision request, is a precise verbal statement made by staff to enhance student compliance. Student compliance is typically defined as following directions within 10 seconds.

Things to Do

- ✓ Give a polite, effective command.
- ✓ Give a second command using signal words.
- ✓ Use a preplanned, unpleasant consequence.
- ✓ Restate the second command.



Give a polite, effective command.

The correct form of a precision command is a polite command.

“(Student’s name), please complete your handwriting assignment.”



Do not use an invitation format.

A common but inappropriate form of a precision command is an implied invitation.

“Let’s begin our work.”

An invitation implies that help will be given when no offer is actually intended.



Do not use a question format.

The question format suggests that a student has a choice when one is really not offered.

“Wouldn’t you like to finish your work?” “Isn’t it time to get your work done?”



Do not use a threat.

Do not use threats as part of a precision command.

“Sara, I’ll take your recess privilege away if you don’t pick up the mess.”

This example is less effective than,

“Sara, I need you to pick up the papers now.”

Describe the Behavior

Descriptive commands are more effective than ambiguous or general commands. For example, the command “Do the even math problems on page 22” is better than “Do your work.”

Give a Precision Command from a Short Distance

Many commands are issued from a distance of 15 to 20 feet. Another common problem is to give a command from behind a desk. To give an effective precision command, the instructor should stand **within 3 feet** of the student. It also helps to touch younger students on the shoulder to gain their attention.

Look the Student Directly in the Eyes

The instructor should make direct eye contact with the student when giving a precision command. This eye contact should be maintained throughout the precision command regardless of whether the student looks at the instructor.

Give Precision Commands in a Soft, Firm Voice. Do Not Yell.

Yelling, cajoling, or pleading reduces the effectiveness of a precision command. A soft, firm command given within 3 feet of the student is usually more effective.

Give Precision Commands in a Nonemotional Manner

Disparaging remarks reduce the effectiveness of precision commands. Such statements as “Bill, if you’d listened in the first place, you wouldn’t have to . . .” or “It’s about time you did something I asked!” are highly critical and reduce effectiveness.

After Giving a Precision Command, Allow the Student 3 to 5 Seconds to Comply

Once a precision command is given, allow the student 3 to 5 seconds to respond. Frequently, instructors unnecessarily repeat the command or give a new command before the student has had an opportunity to comply to the original command.

If the Student Complies, Praise the Student

An instructor should always praise the student for following directions. However, if the student fails to comply, give a second command.



Give a second command using signal words.

If the student fails to respond, give a second command. The second precision command is more effective if warning words such as “need” and “now” are consistently used. The words signal or warn the student that unless the command is followed an unpleasant consequence will follow.

For example:

1st command “Danny, please give me the toy in your desk.”

The student continues to play. The teacher allows 3 to 5 second pause, then says:

2nd command “Danny, you need to give me the toy in your desk now.”

After Giving a Precision Command, Allow the Student 3 to 5 Seconds to Comply

When asking a student to follow a direction, ask only twice. If the student has not started to respond after the second command, follow through with a preplanned consequence.



Use a preplanned, unpleasant consequence.

If a student does not follow the command, **use an appropriate, unpleasant consequence.** Unpleasant consequences might include response cost or loss of a privilege such as free time, recess, or eating lunch in the lunchroom. A hierarchy of unpleasant consequences may be needed if a student fails to comply.



Restate the second command.

Following the unpleasant consequence, restate the command. For example, “John, now I need you to . . .” followed again by an appropriate consequence.

Evaluate the Effectiveness of Precision Commands with Difficult Students

Monitor student compliance. The average student is compliant to teacher’s commands about 70-80% of the time. A problematic student is compliant less than 50% of the time.


Example


A student named Jeffrey does not follow Mrs. Smith’s basic requests. She describes the precision command technique to the class and reviews the warning words “need” and “now” that will be used. Students who do not follow a request after the warning words will have their names written in the discipline book and miss 10 minutes of recess. If they continue to not follow directions, their parents will be called on the telephone.

Jeffrey is talking out during math lesson and disrupting other students. Mrs. Smith moves

from her desk to within 3 feet of Jeffrey. She puts her hands on his shoulder, looks him in the eye, and says, “Jeffrey, please stop talking and get back to work.” He talks out again and the teacher says, “I need you to stop talking now.” He continues to talk. Mrs. Smith writes his name in the book, and he loses 10 minutes of recess. After recess, Jeffrey is quiet and working on his assignments. The teacher again gets within 3 feet, touches his shoulder, looks him in the eye, and says, “Jeffrey, I really appreciate it when you’re working quietly on your assignments. Thanks.”

Variations of the Technique

 Combine the precision command strategy with other techniques such as a group reward for compliance. If no more than three names are in the instructor’s discipline book for “not following directions,” then the class gets a “mystery motivator.”

 Combine the precision command strategy with another program that teaches a “directions following” behavior. For example, when an instructor uses a precision command and a student responds, “Sure I will,” before the instructor makes a second request, the student is rewarded.

Potential Problems and Solutions

Overuse of Precision Commands

There is a tendency to overuse an effective technique. Instructors should make sure that they only use precision commands for the most difficult situations. In addition, the ratio of positive remarks to precision commands should be about 4 to 1.

Failure to Reinforce Compliance

It is easy to forget to praise students for following directions. Positive attention should always be given when students comply with directions.

Students May Become Confrontational When Touched

If a student does not want to be touched, then don't. Stand within 3 feet, make eye contact, wait 3 to 5 seconds, and then repeat the command if necessary. Let the program work for you.

Some Cultures Do Not Allow or Encourage Eye Contact

Some Native American cultures do not allow or encourage eye contact. In this situation, do not make eye contact. However, follow the other outlined procedures for precision commands.

Getting Ready

- ☞ Check the level of positive responses to students. The ratio of positive comments to reprimands/negative comments should be about 4 to 1 (*see High Rates of Positive Responses LRBI Checklist*).
- ☞ Design a set of classroom rules. The first rule in the list should be, "Follow your instructor's directions immediately."
- ☞ Preplan a set of positive and negative consequences.
- ☞ Explain the precision command process to students before starting.

Materials and Supplies

- ☞ Preplanned consequences.
- ☞ Rules Chart with the first rule "Follow the teacher's directions immediately."
- ☞ A "What If . . ." chart (consequences) to help implement a hierarchy of both positive and unpleasant consequences.



References

- Reavis, K., Jenson, W. R., Kukic, S. J., & Morgan, D. (1992). *Reprimands and precision requests*. Salt Lake City: Utah State Office of Education.
- Rhode, G., Jenson, W. R., & Reavis, H. K. (1992). *The tough kid book*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.
- Van Houten, R., & Doley, D. M. (1983). Are social reprimands effective? In S. Axelrod & J. Apshe (Eds.), *The effects of punishment on human behavior* (pp. 45-70). New York: Academic Press.