

Compliance It's No Mystery!

By Kristin E. Robinson, Ph.D.

Jacob is an eight-year-old boy who wakes up in plenty of time to get ready -- but is perpetually late to school. In fact, he has been late so many times this semester that an official note made its way to Jacob's mother, requesting her help in gaining Jacob's compliance with the tardy bell. A minimum of 15 minutes is spent looking for the books. Sometimes he can't find his shoes. On other days, the morning cartoons are just too enthralling to tear away from in time to catch the bus. Jacob's mother -- who is often late to work herself as a result -- has told him a million times, has reminded, scolded, bargained and pleaded with him to GET READY! Jacob increasingly responds by whining, crying, ignoring, procrastinating and sometimes even YELLING.

So What IS Compliance?

Compliance may be defined as completion of a specific request and/or following previously taught rules. A child's compliance depends on two things: ability and motivation. Compliance to a direction cannot occur if the direction is beyond the child's ability. Attention is critical to compliance. It is important to check children's understanding of the requests we make of them. Once ability has been established, motivation plays a part in how often a child is compliant. Even adults seek external rewards to motivate them to complete some tasks! Compliance is a normal part of child development and generally improves with age. By around age eight, most children comply with 60 to 80 percent of requests given by adults. A compliance rate of less than 60 percent indicates a problem with either ability (including attention/understanding) or motivation. See the Compliance Check box to obtain a rating for your child.

Often compliance may be improved simply by changing the way directions are given. For example, which direction would you be more apt to follow: "What did I tell you about dinner, young man?" or "Please come to dinner now so we can have dessert sooner!" See the Ways to Improve Compliance box for more tips on improving directions. For tasks that require daily completion -- such as homework, getting ready for school, household chores, and bedtime -- a "Mystery Motivator" (MM) will come in handy. An MM is a type of behavior chart that delivers random rewards for completion of a goal. The concept is similar to the force operating within Las Vegas slot machines: you never know when the reward will appear! This random delivery is the most effective way to reinforce a behavior.

Creating a Mystery Motivator

The mystery lies in hiding the rewards, until earned, using "color change" markers (Crayola™ and generic brands). Color change markers come with a variety of colored markers and one pen with ink that is invisible until "developed" with the other pens.

When the other pens are colored over the invisible ink, the original color will change to another color. Use the invisible ink to write in the rewards that appear when colored over with the other pens. Color change markers are widely available in grocery stores. It's a good idea to reserve the color change pens for use only with the Mystery Motivator chart (lest a mysterious new reward develop overnight!).

First, discuss a goal with your child. Completion of this goal will lead to her chance to color in a square on the MM. The goal should be specific, observable and positively stated. For example, "Clean your room" is not as clear as, "Make bed by 8:30. Hang clothes up and put toys away by 6 PM. Vacuum on Mondays before 6 PM." All the steps of the goal should be described to ensure the child can actually perform the goal on her own. Explain to the child that the MM is a fun way to help her remember to meet her goal every day.

HINT: Post the chart in a place the child will see it often to remind him of his goal.

Second, develop a "reward menu" with your child by asking what she would like to earn. This is a list of small items, treats and social activities. The list should include one or two bigger items that will only be awarded once for the entire month. The more a child likes the reward, the more powerful it will be in motivating her to complete the behavior.

HINT: Rewards listed on the reward menu will be more powerful if they can only be attained by earning them from the Mystery Motivator.

Third, use a blank calendar page as the chart itself. Write numbers identifying rewards (from the menu), using the invisible marker, in the calendar dates in a random order. A 50 percent "hit" rate is a good place to start, so there will be approximately 15 days -- including one big item -- with rewards written in the date. Now fill the remaining boxes with encouraging words and symbols, such as "keep up the good work," "great job" and "Way to go!" The chart can be a helpful tool to teach many important life skills, including dealing with disappointment, keeping an optimistic attitude, expressing feelings and developing persistence. It will be important to help your child deal with the inevitable disappointment when she doesn't have a "hit" that day. This can be a teaching opportunity to use feeling words and develop coping skills. Be sure to offer extra verbal praise for completing the task, and encourage persistence.

HINT: Only allow the child to color in EARNED squares-uneared squares remain a mystery forever!

Finally, a note on fading. We wouldn't expect the MM to go with Johnny to college, so we'll need to fade (gradually decrease) the reward hit rate. For example, you may begin with a 50 percent hit rate during the first month, and move to a 40 percent hit rate the next month. This is a way to raise the expectations, teach persistence and reinforce delayed gratification. It's not necessarily the reward that is the incentive -- the motivation springs from a natural desire to see "what's behind curtain number two."

The Mystery Motivator in Action

When we last left Jacob and his mother, they were locked in a classic battle over compliance. Neither seemed particularly close to winning. So, Jacob's mother introduced the Mystery Motivator. If he could get to school on time, he could color the date to see what superfantastic something may appear. Other stipulations: Jacob would get dressed and eat breakfast before the television goes on; by 7:15, the TV is off and Jacob is out the door with his books. Jacob's MM was placed prominently on the refrigerator, reminding him to keep up the good work. His mother also added a shelf in Jacob's room for schoolbooks, supplies and even his shoes, so he can be more organized in the morning. She even threw in a random "double square" that was worth twice the reward that day -- but only she knew where that day was. It took less than two months for Jacob to acquire a solid habit of getting ready in the morning, and the MM chart was faded out after the third month with a reward hit rate of only 10 percent.

Compliance Check

Obtain a rate of your child's compliance by asking her to do 10 things during the day. Record whether she completes the task in three to five seconds:

	Direction	Yes	No
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			
7.			
8.			
9.			
10.			

Compliance Rate: YES/10 = _____%

Ways to Increase Compliance

Tell, don't ask. Do not use a question format ("Isn't it time to do your homework?"). Instead, use a specific request, such as "Please start your homework now."
Talk to the eyes. Making eye contact with the child will improve compliance.
Get close. Directions are more effective when given within three feet of the child.
Be specific. Give only one request at a time. Describe the exact outcome you want, with a time frame for completion.

Give time to comply. Wait quietly three to five seconds after you make a request. REINFORCE compliance immediately -- use verbal praise often.

Reward Menu

1. Bite-sized candy bar
2. Soda pop with dinner
3. Bedtime 15 minutes later than usual
4. Card game with Dad
5. Granola bar
6. Favorite cereal for breakfast the next day
7. Card game with Mom
8. 20 minutes video game
- *9. Pizza party with friends (big ticket item)
- *10. Sleepover with three friends (big ticket item)

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