

Why Does My Child Know What to Do but Still Not Do It?

Practical guidance for understanding what may be happening underneath behavior and helping families move forward.

One of the most frustrating parenting experiences is watching a child explain exactly what they are supposed to do - and then not do it. They know homework comes before video games. They know the backpack belongs by the door. They know they need to brush their teeth.

So why are they not doing it? Because knowing and doing are different processes.

Knowledge Is Not the Same as Execution

Completing a task may require a child to remember the expectation, stop the current activity, shift attention, estimate time, initiate the task, resist distractions, hold steps in working memory, monitor progress, and finish. Knowing the rule is only one piece.

Build Bridges Between Intention and Action

Instead of repeating the rule more loudly, provide external supports such as visual checklists, alarms, timers, routines, designated locations, written steps, calendars, or “when-then” plans.

For example: “WHEN I put my dinner plate away, THEN I check my homework list.” The goal is gradually helping the child develop systems that eventually replace parental prompting.

ETHOS SHORELINE REFLECTION

When your child does not follow through, ask where the process broke down: remembering, starting, planning, transitioning, staying focused, or finishing. Finding the breakdown tells you more than simply labeling the behavior.

Related Ethos Shoreline pathway: Chaos to Consistency™

A Note for Parents

Behavior makes more sense when we understand what is happening underneath it. Ethos Shoreline resources are designed to help families build practical structure while protecting connection, responsibility, and belonging.

Educational Disclaimer: This resource is for general educational purposes and is not a substitute for individualized mental-health, medical, educational, or emergency services. Consider consulting an appropriately qualified professional when concerns are persistent, worsening, affecting daily functioning, or creating safety concerns.

