Understanding Key Words

In order to successfully understand instructions children need to be able to remember all the **key words**. A **key word** is a word which you **MUST** understand in order to carry out an instruction.

For a word to be a key word:

- There must be a contrast – an alternative which could be chosen instead eg doll or teddy, cup or plate
- It’s meaning must not be obvious from other means such as:

  - The context – It’s just the obvious thing to do!
  - Looking at the object
  - Gesture such as pointing...
  - Looking at the object
  - Just copying what others are doing..

Children can use lots of ways to compensate for not understanding language and can sometimes seem to understand more than they actually can. They can:

- Learn routines. For example, if you always say “put your shoes on” before you go out they will do this without necessarily understanding any of the words.
- Copy other children. For example, in nursery they will tidy up because other children are not because they understand “tidy up time”.
- Follow non-verbal clues. People will often point and/or look at the object they are talking about. For example, if there is a car and a ball in front of the child and the adult looks at and asks for the ball. The child will almost certainly pick up the ball whether he understands the word or not just because that was the one the adult seemed interested in!
- Just do the obvious. For example if you put a spoon and a cup in front of the child they will almost certainly put the spoon in the cup to pretend to make a cup of tea, just because this is the obvious thing to do.

Identifying key words helps us to focus on the number of words in an instruction that a child really understands and help them increase this.