A key word, or information-carrying word, is a word which carries meaning. Many words in a sentence are not essential for getting the message across.

N.B. When working with children, make sure that they know each object you are going to use. Check their understanding of the objects / language before starting activities.

Sometimes a child does not need to understand any of the words because they can see what is needed from the context. For example:

* When the child has something, and an adult uses gestures to signal ‘come here’ or points to the item and says ‘Give me that’
* Only dolly available on the table and adult says ‘Give me dolly’ or ‘Show me dolly’
* A teacher holds up a coat and says “put your coat on”
* A parent hands a child an empty crisp packet and says “put it in the bin” – this is where they always go.

**One key word**

Even though there are a lot more words in the sentence, a child only needs to understand **one** (underlined) word to follow the instruction.

* “Pass me the scissors” when there is a choice of scissors, pencils and paper
* “Where’s the book?” when there is a choice of book, key and monkey
* “Wash dolly?” when there is a choice of washing dolly or teddy
* “Where’s your nose?” when there is a choice of other body parts

If there is only a dolly and a brush, then saying ‘Brush dolly’s hair’ contains no key words at all because there are no alternative choices and ‘brush’ is the natural thing to do.

**Two key words**

This is where there are two words in a sentence that must be understood for the child to follow the instruction accurately.

* ‘Put teddy on the chair’ when there is a choice of teddy *or* dolly and chair *or* table.
* ‘Wash teddy’s ears’ when there is a choice of teddy *or* dolly and a range of body parts (ear, feet, face, nose etc)

Three key words and above would add in more detail, such as describing words and prepositions.

Understanding builds up **step by step**, so if the child can comfortably understand one key word at a time, we would try to develop their understanding to two key words, and so on. It is also important to reinforce understanding by adding more words at the level that the child can already understand.