

# Receptive Language

## Introduction

**Receptive language refers to a child's ability to understand what has been said to them.**

There are many factors that can influence a child's ability to understand and follow directions. This can include; their attention and listening (see separate handout), the amount of information they are being asked to process, the order in which information is given and the child's ability to understand the individual words that are being used.

## Information carrying words:

**Information Carrying Words (ICWs) or key words refer to those words in a sentence that carry meaning, which the child would have to understand in order to know what is being said to them/ asked of them.**

For something to be a key word it must have an alternative choice, for example 'Find the apple' when there is a choice of an apple or banana would be a 1 key word instruction. If there was no other choice, this would not require the key word understanding of 'apple' as the child can choose what is in front of them.

Context and other gestures also impact upon the meaning and key words that the child must understand, as they often aid understanding and remove the need to understand the words. For example, if an adult holds up a child's coat and says 'put your coat on', the child does not need to understand the words used, because they can see what is needed from context and/or the gestures from adults.

One key word:

- 'Find the apple' if there is an apple *or* a banana.

Two key word:

- 'Find the big apple' if there is a choice from big/little banana, and big/little apple
- 'Put teddy on the chair' if there is a choice from teddy/dolly, and chair/table.
- 'Give baby a drink' if there is a choice from baby/teddy, and drink/food.

Three key word:

- 'Put big carrot in the cup' if there is a choice from big/little carrot, big/little banana, cup/bowl.

Four key word:

- 'Give teddy the big blue brick' if there is a choice from teddy/dolly, red/blue/yellow bricks and big and small bricks/cars.

## Use everyday activities to develop understanding skills:

- Playing games such as Simon says can help focus on not only a child's ability to follow instructions but also attention and listening skills.
- Use games to introduce new concepts and complete instructions relating to these. E.g. can you put the doll under the table?
- When playing outside on equipment such as the climbing frame, trikes and in the sand pit there are lots of opportunities to increase a child's vocabulary. Concepts such as: in, on, under, in front and behind can modelled, as well as learning new words (hurdles, bench, balancing).
- Barrier Games can work on social interaction, expressive and receptive language skills. Barrier games involve situations between a pair/group of people – the idea being that there is a 'barrier' in between the members so they cannot see what the other is doing, instructions are then passed between the members of the group with the others complete these instructions, at the end of the game the 'barriers' are removed to see if everyone has achieved the same outcome – please ask your speech and language therapist for more information on barrier games if required.

## How to support receptive language

- Gain the child's attention before speaking, such as physical prompts (touching arm) or saying their name.
- Minimise distractions within the environment.
- Be aware of the vocabulary used – does the child know the words?
- Break instructions down into smaller 'chunks' of information and give information in the order in which it should be completed. Rather than saying 'Before you go outside, put your books away,' say 'Put your books away, then go outside.'
- Slow your rate of speech. Give the child time to process what you have said and respond. Give the instruction, and then count to 10 before repeating – avoid changing the language you use.
- Support verbal instructions with visual aids (e.g. objects, pictures, gesture) to reinforce understanding of what they have been asked to do. See handout on 'Visuals'.
- Use visual prompts (gestures/pictures/written words) to support your language, concepts, and ideas. Spoken language goes away as soon as the information is given, whereas visuals remain for children to refer back to.
- Teach new concepts one at a time. For example, if you were teaching hot and cold, start by teaching hot before moving on to cold.
- When introducing new vocabulary, or teaching an abstract concept, help make this more explicit by relating to the child's own experiences or give them the experience. Always proceed from concrete (what the child knows) to abstract (what you are asking them to imagine).
- Encourage the child to ask for repetitions if they have not understood, or cannot remember what has been said. Praise them for asking and let them know it is good to do so.
- Be aware of the number of key words given in an instruction. Try reducing the number of key words if the child has difficulty understanding the instruction.

## Questions

For information about understanding and responding to questions, please see our handout on '**Blank's Levels of Questioning**'.