Solving Word Problems Without the "Keyword" Strategy

Danny has 9 toy cars. He has 5 fewer toy cars than Sara. How many toy cars does Sara have?

After reading this word problem, many children and adults believe they have to subtract to find the answer. Students will tell me, "I see the word fewer so I must subtract." But, go ahead, give this word problem another read focusing **on the people and the quantities** in the story problem and not just the keyword meanings. Upon reading this a second time, you may ask yourself, "Who has more toy cars? How many more?" And then you may realize that you needed to **add** to determine that Sara has 14 toy cars.

One common approach we have observed is using "keywords" to solve word problems. While this method may seem straightforward, it can sometimes lead to misunderstandings and errors, like in the example above. We believe fostering a deeper understanding of word problems is key to building a strong foundation in mathematics. Below are some suggestions for helping your child when the homework involves solving word problems. These practices not only enhance mathematical skills but also contribute to the development of critical thinking and analytical abilities.

The Power of Multiple Readings
Encourage your child to read the word problem multiple times. This practice helps them grasp the context, identify key details, and understand the relationships between different elements in the problem. Each reading provides an opportunity for deeper comprehension, leading to more accurate problem-solving.

Envisioning with Closed Eyes
Another effective strategy is encouraging your child to close their eyes and envision what is happening in the story problem. Students do this all the time when they read and create a movie in their minds. By creating mental images, children can better understand the context and relationships between quantities and the action of the word problem. This imaginative approach not only enhances their comprehension but also helps a person retain information for longer periods.

Visualizing with Pictures and Models
Drawing pictures and mathematical models can be a powerful tool for understanding and solving word problems. Encourage your child to illustrate the situation described in the problem. This representation helps them visualize the scenario and aids in making connections between the information given and the solution required. This practice will provide the foundation needed for solving multi-step problems.

Checking for Reasonableness

Children must check their answers for reasonableness. After solving the problem, they should review it in the context of the story. Does the answer make sense given the scenario described? This step ensures that the mathematical solution aligns with the real-world situation presented in the word problem.