

EARLY READING & PHONICS POLICY

Claystone School



We're teaching every
child to read with
Little Wandle Letters
and Sounds Revised

A complete SSP validated by
the Department for Education



EARLY READING & PHONICS POLICY

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

At Claystone School, we believe that every pupil is on a unique journey towards engaging with reading. Reading is central to communication, independence, and learning across the curriculum. Our approach ensures that every pupil, regardless of their starting point or learning profile, has access to meaningful and motivating opportunities to develop their literacy skills.

2.0 AIMS OF POLICY

The aims of this policy are to:

- Enable all pupils to develop the skills required to become confident and independent readers.
- Provide a consistent, structured and inclusive approach to teaching reading.
- Promote a lifelong love of reading through exposure to high-quality, engaging texts.
- Ensure reading development is supported through collaboration between teachers, speech and language therapists, and other professionals.
- Embed reading across the curriculum as a means of supporting communication and understanding of the world.

3.0 TEACHING AND LEARNING APPROACH

Our teaching approach is developmental, systematic, and responsive to individual needs. Reading is taught through three key stages:

3.1 PRE-READING STAGE

Many of our pupils begin their reading journey at a pre-reading stage. At this point, the focus is on developing foundational pre-reading and communication skills, including:

- Attention and listening
- Auditory discrimination
- Oral language comprehension
- Memory and sequencing
- Symbolic understanding

Teachers work closely with Speech and Language Therapists (SaLT) to plan and deliver activities that develop these skills across the curriculum. Language-rich interactions, targeted vocabulary, and structured listening tasks are embedded into daily routines. This joint approach fosters consistency and generalisation, ensuring that pupils develop strong foundations for future literacy learning.

3.2 EARLY READING AND PHONICS

Once pupils are ready to engage with formal phonics, we implement Little Wandle Foundations for Phonics followed by Little Wandle Letters and Sounds Revised (systematic synthetic phonics). Through this programme, pupils learn to:

- Recognise and recall phonemes and graphemes
- Blend and segment words for reading and spelling
- Apply phonics knowledge in supported reading contexts

Decodable reading books are carefully matched to each pupil's current phonics phase. Reading sessions focus on building accuracy, fluency, and confidence. Pupils are encouraged to engage with a range of stories, poems, and rhymes to enrich language exposure and enjoyment.

3.3 DEVELOPING FLUENCY AND COMPREHENSION

For pupils who have mastered foundational reading skills, the focus shifts to developing fluency, automatic word recognition, and comprehension. Pupils explore a variety of texts, including fiction, non-fiction, and poetry, to enhance vocabulary and understanding. Teachers model reading strategies and encourage pupils to apply their reading in real-life contexts, promoting generalisation and independence.

4.0 SUPPORTING A LOVE OF READING

We actively promote reading for pleasure by:

- Providing a diverse and inclusive range of high-quality books
- Reading aloud daily in all classes
- Creating inviting reading areas
- Using sensory and interactive story sessions to engage learners
- Involving pupils in choosing books and sharing stories with peers and adults

5.0 ASSESSMENT AND MONITORING

Reading progress is monitored through:

- Regular phonics assessments using Little Wandle assessment tools
- Observations and evidence collected through Evidence for Learning
- Ongoing collaboration with SaLT to review progress in communication and comprehension
- Termly review meetings to evaluate progress and plan next steps

Pupil progress is tracked against individual targets and SCERTS goals where applicable. Teachers use assessment outcomes to adapt teaching and resources.

6.0 INCLUSION

All pupils are given access to reading at a level appropriate to their developmental stage. Adaptations include:

- Use of visual supports, symbols, and Makaton
- Sensory and multisensory approaches
- Alternative methods of response and engagement
- Collaboration with therapists to tailor strategies

Reading is viewed as part of each pupil's communication pathway. Every pupil's achievements are celebrated, regardless of the stage they are working at.

7.0 PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS

Families are encouraged to support reading development at home. We share strategies and book recommendations to help families engage with their child's reading journey. Home-school communication ensures consistency and celebrates progress.

8.0 REVIEW AND EVALUATION

This policy will be reviewed annually to ensure it reflects current practice, professional guidance, and the needs of our pupils. Feedback from staff, therapists, and families will inform updates.

9.0 APPENDIX A – Little Wandle: Guiding principles of teaching reading to children identified with SEND



A COMPLETE PHONICS RESOURCE
TO SUPPORT CHILDREN

Guiding principles of teaching reading to children identified with SEND

What does the research tell us?

In alphabetic writing systems, such as English, phonemes (the smallest units of sound within a word) are represented by graphemes (letters or groups of letters). By teaching children the relationships between graphemes and phonemes (often referred to as grapheme phoneme correspondences or GPCs), they will then have the ability to *'translate printed words into spoken language'* (Castles, Rastle & Nation, 2018, p. 9). A secure understanding of phonics underpins all successful reading.

Extensive international research has demonstrated the positive impact that phonics instruction can have on children's decoding, spelling and comprehension (Ehri et al., 2001) and their reading accuracy (Brooks, Torgerson & Hall, 2006).

As the DfE's Reading framework reminds us, pupils with SEND have to *'navigate the same written language, unlock the same alphabetic code, learn the same skills, and learn and remember the same body of knowledge as their peers'* (2023, p.77).

Meta-analyses, where the results of multiple quantitative studies are combined to calculate the effectiveness of an approach, have demonstrated the efficacy of using phonics instruction to support struggling readers.

For example, Galuschka et al. (2014) combined the results of 22 research projects involving over 1,900 children with reading disabilities, including dyslexia. All the studies included looked at the effectiveness of a range of strategies to support struggling readers, including phonics instruction, auditory training and the use of coloured overlays or filters. The researchers concluded that, within the studies included, phonics instruction was the *'only approach whose effectiveness on reading and spelling performance in children and adolescents with reading disabilities is statistically confirmed'* (Galuschka et al., 2014, p.9).

Drawing upon this research and other studies, Ofsted (2023) state clearly that *'children who have been diagnosed with developmental conditions learn to decode words by relying on the same processes as other readers'*.

The following two pages include useful guidance from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) report *'Special Education Needs in Mainstream Schools'*: a Summary of recommendations and Four common SEND misconceptions.

EEF: SEND in mainstream schools – Summary of recommendations



Education
Endowment
Foundation

**SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS
IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS**

Summary of recommendations

eeef/send

<p>1</p>	<p>Create a positive and supportive environment for all pupils, without exception</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An inclusive school removes barriers to learning and participation, provides an education that is appropriate to pupils' needs, and promotes high standards and the fulfilment of potential for all pupils. Schools should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> promote positive relationships, active engagement, and wellbeing for all pupils; ensure all pupils experience the best possible teaching; and adopt a positive and proactive approach to behaviour as described in the EEF's Improving Behaviour in Schools guidance report.
<p>2</p>	<p>Build an ongoing, holistic understanding of your pupils and their needs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools should aim to understand individual pupils' learning needs using the graduated approach of the "assess, plan, do, review" approach. Assessment should be regular and purposeful rather than a one-off event, and should seek input from parents and carers as well as the pupil themselves and specialist professionals. Teachers need to feel empowered and trusted to use the information they collect to make a decision about the next steps for teaching that child.
<p>3</p>	<p>Ensure all pupils have access to high quality teaching</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To a great extent, good teaching for pupils with SEND is good teaching for all. Searching for a "magic bullet" can distract teachers from the powerful strategies they often already possess. The research suggests a group of teaching strategies that teachers should consider implementing for pupils with SEND. Teachers should develop a repertoire of these strategies they can use flexibly in response to the needs of all pupils. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> flexible grouping cognitive and metacognitive strategies; explicit instruction; using technology to support pupils with SEND; and scaffolding.
<p>4</p>	<p>Complement high quality teaching with carefully selected small-group and one-to-one interventions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small-group and one-to-one interventions can be a powerful tool but must be used carefully. Ineffective use of interventions can create a barrier to the inclusion of pupils with SEND. High quality teaching should reduce the need for extra support, but it is likely that some pupils will require high quality, structured, targeted interventions to make progress. The intensity of intervention from universal to targeted to specialist should increase with need. Interventions should be carefully targeted through identification and assessment of need. Interventions should be applied using the principles of effective implementation described in the EEF's guidance report Further Evidence in SEND: A School's Guide to Interventions.
<p>5</p>	<p>Work effectively with teaching assistants</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effective deployment of teaching assistants (TAs) is critical. School leaders should pay careful attention to the roles of TAs and ensure they have a positive impact on pupils with SEND. TAs should supplement, not replace, teaching from the classroom teacher. The EEF's guidance report Addressing the Use of Teaching Assistants provides detailed recommendations.

Report published 20th March 2020

eeef/send

Education Endowment Foundation (2021). *Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools: Summary of recommendations*

EEF: SEND in mainstream schools – Four common SEND misconceptions

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS

Four common SEND misconceptions

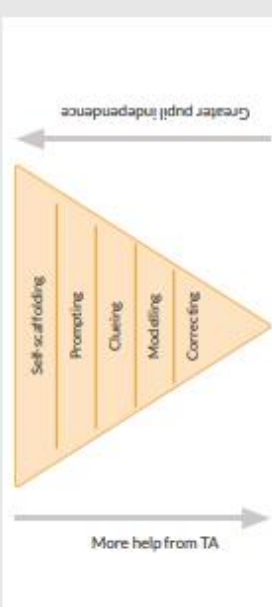
1

'SEND is the sole responsibility of the SENCo'

All teachers must have a clear understanding of the needs of all pupils, including those with SEND. For every teacher, it is an integral part of planning and teaching effectively. Teachers should be supported to work effectively with teaching assistants and to ensure all pupils, including those with SEND, have access to high-quality teaching.

For example, if a new teacher is preparing for a new class in September, they may do some, or all, of the following:

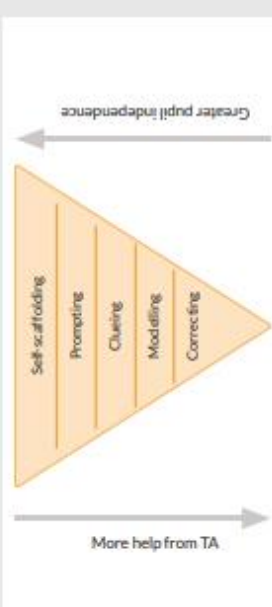
- Develop a seating plan that considers peer dynamics and support, alongside specific needs.
- Ensure access to high-quality learning materials; for example, manipulatives in maths.
- Co-planning with the TA to ensure that high-quality teaching is established for all.
- Personalised communication with the parents of pupils with SEND at the start of the school year.



2

'A Teaching Assistant (TA) is responsible for a child with SEND.'

Children with SEND should have access to high-quality teaching. Additional, targeted interventions can be delivered by teachers and trained TAs and integrated into whole class learning. TAs can support a range of children in the class using the EEF's scaffolding framework (see below). Crucially though, teaching assistants should supplement support from classroom teachers, not act as substitutes for it.




3

'If a child has SEND, they automatically need an EHC plan.'

The majority of children with SEND make progress with high-quality teaching, reasonable adjustments and targeted interventions carefully planned to meet their needs.

An Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan is a legal document which could last until the child is 25 years old. EHC plans are for children and young people who have a special educational need or disability that cannot be met by the support that is usually available at their school or college.



This resource supports the [Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/681111/special-educational-needs-and-disability-code-of-practice-0-to-25-years.pdf) guidance report.

4

'All children with SEND display disruptive behaviour.'

Some pupils with SEND may display misbehaviours, but not all. These challenging behaviours may or may not be related to their needs. SEND can affect how a child behaves, how they socialise and communicate, and their concentration levels.

Challenging behaviours can feel personal to a member of staff and reduce empathy for the learner. Acknowledgement that behaviour could be a form of communication is helpful. Picking overlapping needs for children with SEND is important to identify appropriate provision.

Some questions to consider may include:

- Are literacy needs creating a barrier for learning and reduced engagement?
- Has learning been supported and scaffolded so the child can succeed?
- Are reasonable adjustments to the learning environment or the routines of the day in place; for example, consistent routines, reduction in visual stimuli, seating arrangement?
- Is there a targeted intervention that can be put in place?
- Have positive communications about the pupils' learning been communicated with the parents or carers?
- Does the pupil have a supportive relationship with a member of staff?

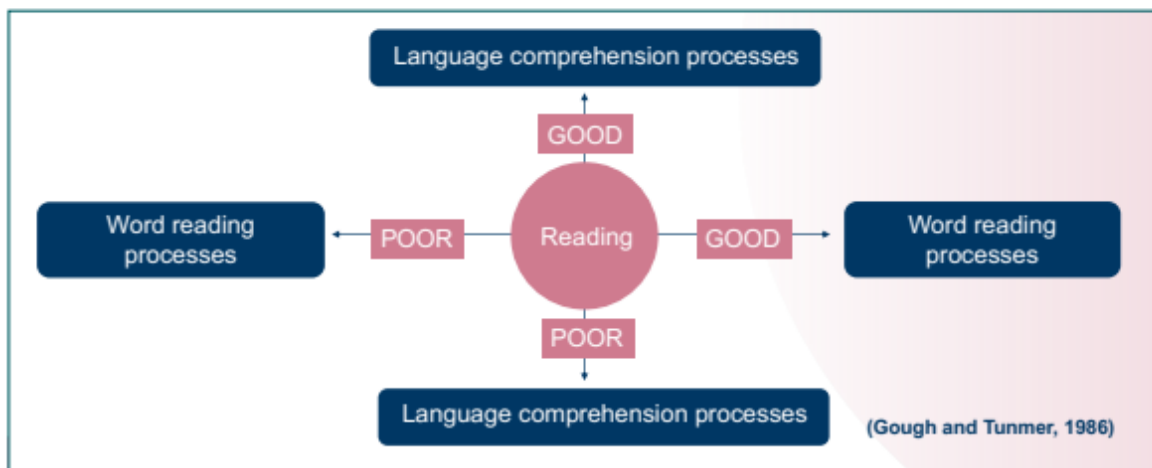
This resource supports the [Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/681111/special-educational-needs-and-disability-code-of-practice-0-to-25-years.pdf) guidance report.

Education Endowment Foundation (2021). *Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools: Four common SEND misconceptions*.

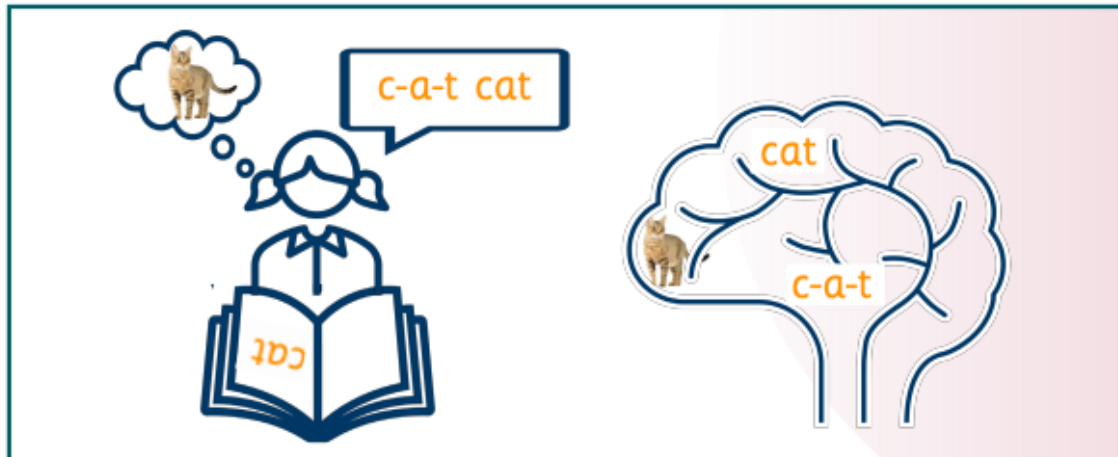
The Simple View of Reading

Becoming a fluent reader is a complex process that requires an integration of both word reading and language comprehension, as shown in the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986).

At a very simple level, comprehension of any written text is affected by the reader's background knowledge and their ability to connect to and understand the vocabulary and language of the text. Connecting to a text is foundational to understanding it. A reader's reservoir of knowledge, along with flexible thinking, helps bring the text to life. A successful reader creates the text in their mind, moment by moment, creating an accurate mental model of what they read.



Understanding the orthographic store



When we read words 'at a glance' with little effort, we are still using our phonic knowledge. The words are in our 'letter box' or 'orthographic store', and we reach what the researcher and reading development expert Linnea Ehri calls the 'full automatic stage'. Because we have sufficient code knowledge and have read these words often, they have become cemented in our memory and we can read them with ease.

For us as skilled readers, the visual cortex, the auditory cortex and the Wernicke's area, a region of the brain important in language comprehension, are connected. We can read, understand and make a visual representation of the word 'cat' in our brains.

This brain-changing activity happens when we teach phonics - we facilitate the movement of more and more language into pupils' orthographic store. At the same time, you will be teaching pupils how to read new words using the alphabetic code, so they don't guess.

As we have discussed, learning to read in English is complex. Our writing system uses an alphabetic code in which phonemes (the smallest units of sound in a word) are represented by graphemes (letters or groups of letters representing a sound).

To master this alphabetic code, children need explicit teaching and lots of exposure to print. Have a look at the diagram:



Adapted from: Rastle (2019, p. 47).

By teaching phonics, we are teaching children to link letters to sounds. Once this link is made, children are able to read any unknown word. Children need multiple repetitions of a word to see it as a unit rather than its individual sounds (or 'unitise' it) – and put this word in their orthographic store, or the brain's letter box, where words are stored and retrieved automatically without recall to overt decoding. This move to automaticity is what we want for our pupils to become fluent readers – phonics is the gateway to this!

Because we are expert readers, it is easy for us to forget what our brains have learned to get us to the point of automatic reading!

What about sight words?

A secure understanding of phonics underpins successful reading. Like other alphabetic languages, children need to learn how the sounds of our language map onto the letters of our alphabet. This differs from, for example, Mandarin Chinese, in which children are required to learn characters that represent whole words. On average, it takes Chinese children six years, with nine hours of instruction weekly, to learn 2,500 characters (Hsieh, Marelli & Rastle, 2023). This is useful to bear in mind when we consider the argument that some children should learn to read by memorising whole words. In effect, learning characters requires the same memorisation of shapes as is required by sight word learning. One of the major differences for English learners is the sheer volume of our vocabulary.

It is estimated that from the middle of childhood onward, children learn approximately 3,000 new words per year (Nagy & Herman, 1984). Clearly, teaching each of those new words as sight words would be an insurmountable task for both teacher and student. (Castles, Rastle & Nation, 2018, p.24)

Even when we take into account the opaque nature of our alphabetic code, learning how 26 letters map onto approximately 44 sounds is better use of instructional time than learning whole words, as it enables children to read and write an endless number of words rather than a limited selection. While teaching children to read words by sight might appear to provide what Ofsted (2023) describe as 'short-term success', this approach will not provide children with a 'long-term strategy for decoding unfamiliar words'.

The term 'sight word' is often used to describe words that are not phonically decodable in the early stages of learning to read before particular GPCs have been learned, for example, the word 'is' before the 's' as /z/ has been taught. These words have historically been taught by encouraging pupils to memorise them as whole words, so they know them 'by sight'. The National Curriculum refers to these words as 'Common Exception Words'. Your SSP programme may refer to these as 'tricky' or 'red' words and should give you a clear structure for their teaching. This is based on the most recent research on orthographic mapping, which suggests drawing pupils' attention to the GPCs they know, as well as the part that is an exception.

Once children have learned the GPCs, both those that they know and those that are an exception, they need repeated practice for that word to move into the orthographic store, where it is held as a whole unit, rather than its composite sounds. At this point, it can be said that a child is able to read 'by sight'. Orthographic mapping only occurs when the connection has been made between graphemes and phonemes (Ehri, 2013) and doesn't mean we should teach words by sight.

Ofsted blog: Pupils with SEND who have fallen behind with reading

We have been writing about how important it is for all children to be able to read for some time now. This blog post focuses on pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) who are not reading fluently.

Learning to read is essential for all pupils because it helps them to:

- read for pleasure
- study all subjects in the curriculum
- be prepared for life.

That is why our education inspection framework (EIF) places a strong emphasis on how well all pupils, including disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND, are taught to read.

All pupils need the same knowledge of the alphabetic code to become independent readers and spellers

Extensive research shows how important teaching systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) is until children can decode automatically.

SSP represents a body of knowledge needed for word reading (and spelling). Without the knowledge they build through being taught SSP, pupils will struggle to read unfamiliar words.

This is true for all pupils who are learning to read, including those with SEND. Broadly speaking, it will only be those pupils with severe cognitive difficulties that cannot be taught the alphabetic code.

The curriculum remains the same but the pedagogy might be different

We know that sometimes, schools assume – mistakenly – that if pupils are struggling with reading, then phonics has not worked and pupils must need something different. But understanding the alphabetic code, that the letters on the page represent the sounds in spoken words, is the basis of successful word-reading. Study upon study show that children who have been diagnosed with developmental conditions learn to decode words by relying on the same processes as other readers.

A different curriculum, such as teaching pupils to read whole words by sight, may appear to offer short-term success, but it will not provide a long-term strategy for decoding unfamiliar words.

Teaching sight words (where pupils need to memorise words without phonics) relies on an adult to tell the pupil every word. So it does not work when there is no adult present. Nor are pupils able to learn enough words by sight to access the curriculum effectively.

Teaching sight words alongside phonics is confusing to pupils because they are then unclear about which strategy to apply, often resorting to guessing.

Some pupils with SEND will probably need a lot more practice to secure important phonic knowledge. This does not mean phonics is not working. It just means we need to think really carefully about how best to help pupils secure this knowledge – what pedagogy we are using.

For example, it may be more helpful for pupils to be in a small group that is free from distractions. They may also benefit if teachers break down the learning into smaller steps and repeat the steps more to increase overlearning. Older pupils may need more age-appropriate resources.

Schools also need to make sure that pupils with SEND get high-quality teaching from the staff who are early reading experts.

Making reasonable adjustments to help pupils access the same phonics curriculum as their peers

Pupils with SEND may have a range of difficulties that affect how easily they are able to access the curriculum. Under the Equality Act 2010, schools must make reasonable adjustments to enable pupils with SEND to have full access to the curriculum and to be able to participate in it. This includes making appropriate phonics instruction available for children with complex needs.

When leaders are thinking about how to help pupils with SEND access the same phonics curriculum as their peers, it's important that they assess the individual pupils' needs. Knowing each individual's learning needs then plays an important part in helping staff to choose the most effective pedagogy to secure the knowledge being taught. Assessment should identify the precise knowledge which pupils need in order to progress through the curriculum. Teaching can then target this knowledge precisely.

What effective schools do

Inspection evidence shows us that the most effective schools teach all pupils to read, despite disadvantage or special educational need. These schools know that pupils' understanding of the alphabetic code underpins successful reading and spelling. They make sure adults read to children, they teach SSP well and they give children time to practise and consolidate their growing knowledge.

Ofsted (2023). *Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities who have fallen behind with reading.*

10.0 APPENDIX B – Little Wandle: Teaching the Little Wandle SEND Programme



TEACH READING: CHANGE LIVES!

Teaching the Little Wandle SEND programme

Little Wandle SEND is a complete programme that mirrors the core *Little Wandle Letters and Sounds Revised* phonics programme but with adaptations and support in place that make it possible for schools, special schools and providers to meet the needs of all their learners.

It has been created to help children learn to read using the right level of challenge for each child and using the graduated approach if needed.

We have provided a range of resources to support teachers with the planning and delivery of phonics lessons and reading practice sessions. Use the resources flexibly in your teaching to match the needs of each child. Always teach to the point of challenge – we can have high expectations for every child if we put the correct adaptations, support and repeated practice in place.

We follow the concept of the 'Least dangerous assumption' set out by Anne Donnellan, (1984)*:

'The criterion of least dangerous assumption holds that in the absence of conclusive data, educational decisions ought to be based on assumptions which, if incorrect, will have the least dangerous effect on the likelihood that students will be able to function independently as adults.'

This means we encourage all schools to teach every child to read so that every child has access to reading and communication which, in turn, gives them a voice and choice about their lives.

*Donnellan, A. (February, 1984), *The Criterion of the Least Dangerous Assumption* (Sage Publications)

Using the graduated approach with Little Wandle

The graduated approach to teaching children to the point of challenge is outlined in the SEND Code of Practice (2014). This table outlines how you can use the graduated approach within the Little Wandle pedagogy.

The graduated approach	
Assess	Initial assessment: Use the SEND placement assessment or ongoing assessments to identify the appropriate starting point for each child, except for those starting at the beginning of Phase 2. Children unable to access Phase 2 should follow SEND Foundations for Phonics. Ongoing assessment: Use the appropriate SEND ongoing assessment at least once every half term.
Plan	Plan the steps and adjustments needed to successfully teach GPCs and blending. Choose the appropriate grapheme-by-grapheme plans and blending grids. Give a clear timescale for teaching and decide when to review the children's progress towards these steps.
Do	Teach and keep notes for additional adjustments, successes and extra steps as needed.
Review	Use Assessment for Learning (AfL) in every lesson to repeat, review or adapt pace. Ensure that regular review of the children's progress occurs. Consider reteaching where more input and practice is needed.

General principles of teaching

Reduce cognitive load

It is important to factor in the impact of cognitive load on children. In phonics lessons, be mindful of the impact on cognitive load of the following:

The teaching environment

- Keep the teaching environment clear and uncluttered – remove visual distractions.
- Keep teaching surfaces clear and easy to use.
- Put away any grapheme cards or word cards that are not needed.

Language and presentation

- Keep language simple, clear and to the point; use the mantras and keep to the lesson templates. Language comprehension requires working memory, and many children with SEND will have both limited working memory capacity and delayed or disordered receptive language. Minimising unnecessary language will offer children with SEND the maximum opportunity to process and understand what is being taught and, therefore, learn. Do not include unnecessary details such as anecdotes or animations.

-
- Use the plans so that you present the children with essential information only. This ensures that non-essential information does not take up some of their working memory's capacity.
 - Teach essential information one step at a time.
 - Use teacher modelling and the **copy me method** to ensure that the children have worked examples to learn new content or skills.

Establish positive learning behaviours and relationships

- **Prioritise relationships:** Relationships are key. Once children feel they can trust the adults around them, they will take the risks they feel are associated with learning to read.
- **Get to know the children:** There is no substitute for really getting to know the children in your class. Knowing their strengths and potential barriers to learning to read will help you support them.
- **Pay attention to social and emotional learning behaviours:** When teaching reading, practise and model the behaviours you want the children to be able to name and understand.
- **Use positive praise:** Provide lots of positive feedback and praise specific to the children's reading behaviours.

Adapt teaching resources and books to meet children's needs

Children who need sensory input

- Use mirrors to help the children see how they make the sound.
- Use balloons and other objects that give feedback to help the children feel the sound.
- Use objects that give a sensory input. Provide visual aids where possible, for example, when blending c-a-t, have a toy cat to aid learning and recall.

Children with vision impairments

- Use the larger, sensory grapheme cards.
- Verbalise pictures and allow longer processing time.
- Visit the RNIB Bookshare (www.rnibbookshare.org) to access all the Little Wandle resources and reading books available in a range of accessible, ready-to-use formats. These can be read electronically or adapted to suit the personal reading needs of learners.
- Order adapted, large print reading books from CustomEyes Books.

Provide a literacy-rich environment

The children in your setting who are not formally learning to read should be offered the chance to see words and interact with books. A literacy-rich environment is more than simply displaying key words or ensuring that there are books in every area of learning (although they do both have a part to play).

Instead, ensure the children are truly surrounded by language in all areas of your environment:

- **Physical space:** Make clear zones, including quieter, more enclosed places that encourage talk. Keep background noise/music to a minimum, where possible.
- **Resources:** Curate interesting objects and activities to provoke talk. Ensure there are plenty of opportunities to role-play with costumes, puppets and props.
- **Books and rhymes:** Give the children access to a wide range of books. Plan for practitioners to regularly read to children individually and in small groups.
- **Print awareness:** Display print around the setting in a meaningful and purposeful way (for example, resource labels). Incorporate authentic texts into role-play areas (for example, menus).
- **Adult interactions:** Ensure practitioners meet the children at their level physically, and give them their full attention.

Use the document 'SEND Foundations for Phonics: Language-rich environment checklist' to support this crucial element of reading and language provision in all classes.

Timetabling phonics lessons and reading practice sessions

Timetabling will depend on the specific needs of the children and on staff resourcing. Phonics lessons should be timetabled daily. To ensure that the children's attention and concentration needs are met, you may need to break up lessons across the day. The teaching and practice of GPCs and reading words should continue until these are secure.

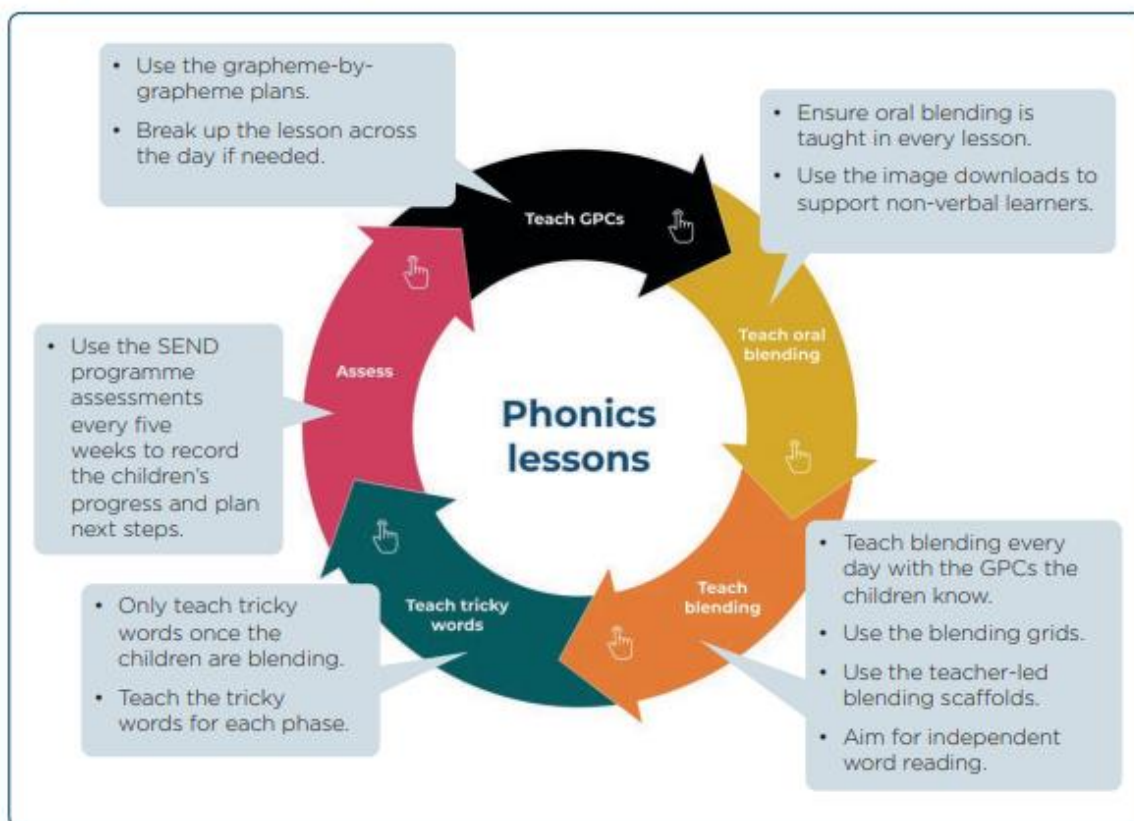
You will also need to timetable reading practice sessions – ideally three times a week. These sessions are essential so that the children receive quality teaching of reading and have time to apply their secure phonic knowledge using age-appropriate decodable books. The children need to read each decodable book three times, and books should only be taken home for further reading practice after the final read. (For more information about these sessions and the books, see the SEND documents 'Using the resources' and 'Guidance for reading practice sessions').

Typically, you will be teaching individuals or small groups. The phonics lessons and reading practice sessions can be used for small groups if the children have been assessed to have largely the same needs. You could also consider mixed year groups. All the resources and activities in this guide can be used with individuals or groups of children.

Teaching phonics lessons using the graduated approach

Teaching the SEND programme from Phase 2

The first step is to teach children the most common GPCs, using the grapheme-by-grapheme plans to teach lessons that focus on GPCs and oral blending. Once the first set of GPCs is secure, teach and practise blending with these GPCs using the blending grids. You will also need to teach tricky words once children are able to blend. Assess children after five weeks of teaching, secure gaps, then move on to the next set of GPCs if appropriate. This cycle, as shown in the diagram below, continues in phonics lessons until the end of Phase 5. Oral and teacher-led blending practice continue throughout.



You will need to direct the pace of teaching to match the needs of each child/group. The grapheme-by-grapheme plans and blending grids should be used flexibly: the lessons can be chunked up and taught over longer periods of time to match the adaptations of pace that children need. Children may make progress in very small steps, but every GPC they learn and word that they read or spell is a step towards being able to read and write. Use adapted resources such as sensory grapheme cards, additional sensory resources or word cards with larger print in your lessons if needed.

Teaching the SEND programme from Foundations for Phonics

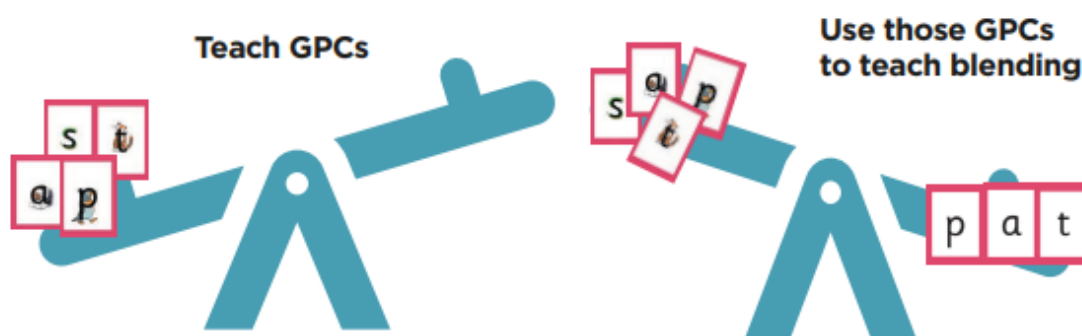
Some children may need to start with phonemic awareness activities before moving on to Phase 2 phonics using the graduated approach. Equally, we suggest that children learning Phase 2 GPCs and words would benefit from the Foundations for SEND activities to deepen their phonemic awareness and oral blending.

Our advice is always to give children in Reception and above the opportunity to learn GPCs and blending. Again, we would encourage you to follow the concept of the 'least dangerous assumption' (Anne Donnellan, 1984) and offer both the Foundations for SEND curriculum and the chance to learn GPCs and practise blending. Plan your teaching for Foundations for Phonics using the guidance and resources in the SEND Foundations for Phonics area of the website.

Teaching phonics is teaching reading

It is crucial that children apply their GPC knowledge by learning to read words. Some children find learning to blend much more difficult than learning to read GPCs. But if we teach children lots of GPCs and don't help them learn to blend, then they are missing out on the most important part of phonics: reading!

Teaching reading is a to-and-fro process, which is why we use the see-saw image (below). We want you to help the children to learn enough GPCs to be able to make words. But we need the see-saw to tip from learning GPCs to practising blending every day. In doing that, the children will get plenty of practice and support to blend GPCs into words. And, of course, as soon as children can blend, they can read a book!



Children need to be able to blend independently before being taught Phase 4. We explicitly teach children to blend using teacher-led blending throughout the Little Wandle SEND programme. This scaffold should be used to support children as they learn to blend and removed as they gain confidence. Use teacher-led blending flexibly, and return to it whenever a child requires support.

You will find detailed guidance on the different methods used to teach blending in the SEND blending lesson templates, 'How to' videos and prompt cards.

SEND programme prompt cards

The SEND programme prompt cards provide step-by-step support and advice for teaching children using the graduated approach. Use them if you need to:

- break up your GPC or blending lessons into smaller steps
- teach children who need a smaller-step approach for all or most of their teaching
- teach a specific skill, for example, reading a word containing a split vowel digraph.

Teaching spelling

You will find words to spell in the blending grids. Teaching spelling will deepen the children's knowledge of the alphabetic code. Spelling is especially important for children who need to communicate using Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices as this will unlock their ability to say what they think and what they need.

Reading phrases and sentences

Optional phrases and sentences to read have been included for each phase. These do not need to be taught within the lesson but they are an important part of contextualising words. They can also be used to increase challenge.

Supporting non-verbal children with phonics

About one-third of autistic children and adults cannot communicate effectively using speech (DiStefano et al., 2016¹; Kasari et al., 2013²). But recent research has shown that cognitive ability and language learning potential may have been underestimated (Courchesne et al., 2015³; Jaswal et al., 2024⁴).

You will find images for every word that is used in the grapheme-by-grapheme plans and blending grids in the SEND planning area of the website. You can also find downloadable images for the words in each phase and image-based resources to support the reading of phrases and sentences.

¹ DiStefano, C., Shih, W., Kaiser, A., Landa, R. and Kasari, C., 2016. Communication growth in minimally verbal children with ASD: The importance of interaction. *Autism Research*, 9(10), pp.1093-1102. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.1594>.

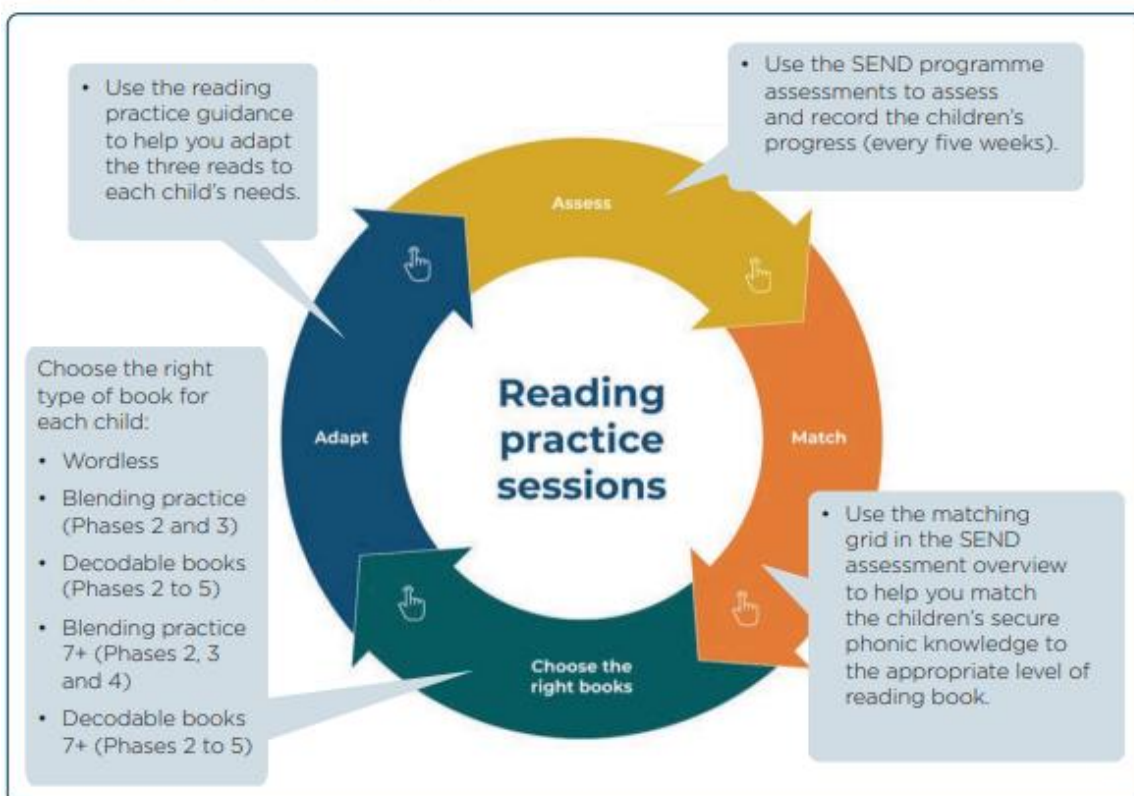
² Kasari, C., Brady, N., Lord, C. and Tager-Flusberg, H. (2013), Assessing minimally verbal ASD. *Autism Res*, 6: 479-493. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.1334>

³ Courchesne, V., Meilleur, A.A., Poulin-Lord, M.P., Dawson, M. and Soulières, I., 2015. Autistic children at risk of being underestimated: School-based pilot study of a strength-informed assessment. *Molecular Autism*, 6(1), p.12. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13229-015-0006-3>

⁴ Jaswal, V.K., Lampi, A.J. and Stockwell, K.M., 2024. Literacy in nonspeaking autistic people. *Autism*, 28(10), pp.2503-2514. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613241230709>.

Teaching reading practice sessions using the graduated approach

The ultimate aim of teaching phonics and blending is for children to be able to read and enjoy reading books. Using a graduated approach to teaching in your reading practice sessions will ensure that the children are successful and enjoy the books that they are reading. Do not leave out this essential part of the programme. Timetable reading three times a week and make sure it happens.



Big Cat for Little Wandle books

All the Big Cat for Little Wandle books follow the *Little Wandle Letters and Sounds Revised* progression. You can choose the wordless books, blending practice books, decodable books or 7+ books that best suit your learners' needs and interests.

Children who are not blending will benefit hugely from reading wordless books with you. Watch the wonderful SEND programme 'How to' videos of children engaging with reading and talk using the wordless books to see how purposeful and enriching this can be.

Use the blending practice books as soon as the children are blending so that they can build their confidence in themselves as readers. Be flexible about using the early books in Phase 2. Consider using both the longer decodable books from the core programme as well as the blending practice books. Use your knowledge of the children you teach to select the right type of book to meet their needs.

Older SEND children may prefer the content and look of the 7+ blending practice and decodable books.

There is more information about the different types of reading books in the SEND programme document 'How to use the resources'.

Matching books to children's secure phonic knowledge

Use the assessments to work out which books match the children's secure phonic knowledge. The SEND assessment spreadsheet will give you the best match for each child, but you should use your professional judgement as well. If a book level seems too difficult or easy, try the level below or above to see if it is a better fit.

If a child is making quicker progress in between assessments, you can also use your judgement to move them on to the next level of book. Check the child can read:

- the GPCs in the book effortlessly
- the practice words at the front of the book fluently (with little or no overt blending)
- the tricky words.

Then ask them to read the first double-page spread. Can they read it without hesitation? If so, then this is the correct level.

Adapting the three reads

Children need to be given regular opportunities to apply the phonics they have learned to reading fully decodable books. The phonic progression in these books must match the Little Wandle progression. Reading practice sessions should take place at least three times a week. Each reading practice session needs to have a clear focus so that the demands of the session do not overload the children's working memory.

The reading practice sessions have been designed to focus on three key reading skills:

- decoding – using phonic knowledge to read words
- prosody – reading with meaning, stress and intonation
- comprehension – understanding the text.

For some SEND children, the three reads may take longer. Reading practice sessions can be adapted and taught to meet the needs of individuals or groups. A book can be taught over two weeks rather than one. Sensory elements, pictures and other adaptations can be added to ensure the children make strong connections between the book and their knowledge of the world. This will enable them to read the book with the greatest possible level of success.

Decoding: The decoding session might be repeated to aid fluency, or the book might be broken up across two sessions, depending on the needs of the children.

Prosody: Teaching prosody is an important skill for all children. Some children with an autistic spectrum condition (ASC), auditory processing disorder or hearing impairment may not be able to produce prosody when speaking. However, talking through how and why specific emphasis carries meaning beyond the words themselves is helpful in teaching how spoken prosody affects comprehension.

Comprehension: Dialogic talk is the best way to grow vocabulary and language. Teach comprehension through talk and by making connections between the book and the children's lives. When children make connections between books and their interests, they are growing their foundational knowledge of reading and finding out how it will benefit them and give them pleasure.

Supporting non-verbal children with reading

Some children may make sounds as they read; others may be unable to do so. This does not mean they are not reading. We want all children, including non-verbal learners, to see themselves as readers.

Decoding: Let the child read silently. Check their reading by asking them to point to specific words.

Prosody: Model prosody so that the child can hear the intonation. Use emphasis. Try the following to check the child's understanding of prosody:

- Ask the child to point to the word or punctuation used to show a specific emotion.
- Use the emoticons provided in the 'Support for comprehension' guidance in the SEND Reading area of the website to talk about emotions in a text.
- Read a sentence in more than one way and ask them to choose the most suitable version.

Comprehension: Use the communication method the child uses, for example, PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System), to ask questions. Use the pictures in the book to check understanding. You can also use the Support for comprehension materials in the Reading area of the SEND programme content. These offer four levels of questions for non-verbal learners.

Using AACs: Children who communicate using AAC devices can do so when reading. However, the cognitive load is very high for the user as they are in effect spelling every word. Consider using a mixture of communication methods with non-verbal learners so that they are successful.

Reading for pleasure

Reading to children, providing them with a wide range of books and other reading materials and creating enticing reading environments is a vital part of growing a reader for life. Ensure that the children have time set aside to enjoy books every day. Make sure that these books are truly diverse and representative of your school community and the wider world.

We encourage you and your staff to join our Everybody read! community through our online webinars and website area. There are resources for parents, a host of book recommendations and downloads to help you and your school develop an authentic reading culture. We hope to see you there!

Remember, always follow the 'Least dangerous assumption' and give every child the opportunity to learn to read.

A word about the schwa

The schwa is the name for the most common sound in English. It is the unstressed sound that we find in many words; it makes an 'uh' sound, which varies according to accent. For example, the 'o' in 'lesson' makes the schwa sound. The phonemic symbol for the schwa is ə. Schwa can be represented in writing by all five vowels, and by a number of digraphs and trigraphs such as 'er', 'ou', 'or' and 'our'.

Introducing the schwa in Phase 3

Children first meet the schwa in Phase 3 when they read words ending in 'er'. In many accents, the 'er' makes an unstressed vowel sound at the end of words such as 'bigger' and 'better', but in other accents these words are pronounced with pure sounds.

The schwa in two-syllable words in Phases 3 and 4

Later in Phase 3 and in Phase 4, children will encounter some two-syllable words with the schwa sound that do not have the 'er' ending. Words such as 'dragon' and 'frighten' can be read using the GPCs the children know and with the chunking technique.

1. Say the word with pure sounds, a syllable at a time, for example: d-r-a-g/o-n.
2. Modify the pronunciation of the word. **Say:** *But we say dragon* [with the schwa].
3. Teach vocabulary. **Say:** *A dragon is a monster that breathes fire. It is not a real animal. It only appears in stories.*

The schwa in Phase 5

Many combinations of vowels can make the schwa sound, especially in longer words. In Phase 5, the 'er' in 'spider', the first 'o' in 'potato', the 'e' in 'oven' and the 'a' in 'giant' make the schwa! Once again, it all depends on accent. We teach children to read these words with the chunking method and pure sounds, and then we explain how the word is said (in their accent) with the schwa. This is important as so many words have the schwa!

The table below gives example words containing the schwa sound from the Little Wandle SEND programme.

Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5
better bigger ever finger	printer swimmer trainers children dragon frighten monster	avenue human sofa spider potato giant oven potion magician



Outcomes
First Group