



WILLOW DENE

SCHOOL

EARLY READING AND PHONICS POLICY

Reviewed policy agreed by GB on:	Autumn 2026
Reviewed policy shared with staff on:	Autumn 2026
Policy to be reviewed again on:	Autumn 2027
Committee responsible for review:	Policy Committee

At Willow Dene, we actively promote the development of reading skills through a positive reading culture embedded throughout the school. We are ambitious about teaching children to enjoy books and become successful readers, ensuring a carefully sequenced approach taking into account children's individual strengths, weaknesses, profile of need and current knowledge and skills. Early reading has a high profile in the curriculum, ensuring sufficient time and emphasis is given to children developing pre-reading skills and learning to read effectively.

We recognise that learning to read is complex and involves a wide range of skills: visual, auditory, language and cognition, so teaching needs to be multi-faceted but coherent. Our approach to Early Reading is informed by Scarborough's Reading Rope Model, which recognises the importance of language comprehension alongside word decoding and recognition skills. This fits with the school's ethos of developing communication, vocabulary and conceptual understanding in parallel to ensure that children can make sense of the things they encounter in books and to support their development as confident and fluent readers, who have a love of reading.

Language Comprehension

- Background Knowledge
- Vocabulary Knowledge
- Language Structures
- Verbal Reasoning
- Literacy Knowledge

Increasingly
Strategic

Skilled Reading

Fluent execution and coordination of word recognition and text comprehension.

Word Recognition

- Phonological Awareness
- Decoding (and Spelling)
- Sight Recognition

Increasingly
Automatic

Scarborough, H. 2001. Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, theory, and practice. Pp. 97-110 in S. B. Neuman & D. K. Dickinson (Eds.) *Handbook of Early Literacy*. NY: Guilford Press.

At **Early Development** level, all children are read to daily. Some children at the later stages of Early Development levels will engage in daily Sense of Sounds sessions, which use song, structure and routines build the skills below. We teach key processes which lead to the development of early visual and auditory skills and then to learning symbolic representation and pre-reading skills. These include:

- response to stimuli and an understanding of and response to sensory input
- early focus and attention skills

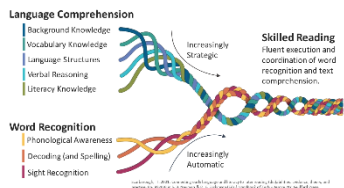
- early visual skills such as locating, focusing, and tracking leading to visual discrimination skills with objects
- the understanding that objects and symbols can carry meaning leading to the development of symbolic representation
- an interest in the messages carried by the human voice through words, expression, volume, onomatopoeia, and context leading to auditory discrimination
- gross and fine motor skills which support the development of spatial awareness
- the use of anticipation, cuing, structures, functional routines, and familiar sequences to support the development of temporal sequencing
- the use of song, rhythm and rhyme to create meaning (such as cuing and developing anticipation) and for enjoyment
- the development of short-term memory skills, including object permanence, early cause and effect skills
- communication skills which build children's understanding of words and meaning, including names, verbal cues

Children working at **Emergent Concept** level continue to work on these skills in more sophisticated and complex ways. Children will be read to daily, or engage in reading wordless books. Some children at Emergent Concept level will engage in daily Sense of Sounds sessions, which use song, structure and routines build the skills below. Others will progress onto daily Little Wandle Foundations for Phonics sessions to support the development of attention, focus and the beginnings of an awareness of sounds in words. In order to begin to access reading as a distinct stage of literacy, children work on the following pre-requisite skills, before formal word recognition:

- symbolic discrimination – so that children process the visual information in a symbol through rapid shape discrimination
- short term memory - the ability to retain information essential for fluent reading to both make sense of what has been read and decode
- awareness of words as units of sound, and being able to produce and imitate some sounds, such as animal noises
- auditory discrimination – of environmental, instrumental and body sounds, with attention to supporting children to listen attentively
- appreciation and enjoyment of rhythm and rhyme
- left-to-right sequencing – in a range of functional contexts (e.g., now and next boards) and in play (e.g., placement)
- sequencing - the ability to retain and process a short series of concepts, linked to convey a wider concept. This will initially be in the context of functional routines and highly familiar sequences.

- language comprehension of single words and two information carrying words. Reading skills will overtake a child's general level of language development, access to high quality early reading provision will enhance them
- vocabulary development – the acquisition of words and associated concepts, through a focus on understanding, expressive use of the word and through to generalisation, application, and association

Once these skills are secure, children working at **Basic Concept** level will start the process of formally decoding text and making meaning from it. This is taught through a carefully sequenced focus on both word recognition and language comprehension skills. Willow Dene uses Little Wandle Foundations for Phonics to support the development of phonological awareness, followed by the Little Wandle SEN programme, alongside a continued focus on language comprehension to ensure children can understand and make sense of what they are reading. Our approach follows Scarborough's Reading Rope Model which is detailed below.



Language

Background knowledge

Children rely on background knowledge to make sense of what they are reading. When a reader has background knowledge to draw on, they are more likely to find it more interesting and easier to remain focused on a text. It reduces the likelihood of cognitive overload, especially important for readers who are also focusing on word decoding (or symbol recognition). The more knowledge they have about a variety of subjects, topics and ideas, the more likely they will be able to make sense of what they are reading, and the more likely they will add to their body of knowledge.

Vocabulary knowledge

A broad and rich vocabulary supports readers to make sense of what they are reading. Being able to match a word to a thought, idea or concept crucial in reading. The richer a reader's listening and spoken vocabulary, the easier they will find it to encounter texts that contain words they do not know, particularly if these are linked to existing knowledge, allowing them to spend less overall effort on reading a text. An individual needs to have the vocabulary to understand what a significant percentage of the words in the text means.

Language structures

Language structures refer to syntax, or the arrangement of words in a phrase or sentence. Children learn a variety of syntax structures through meaningful exposure to language being spoken, read to them and presented to them in text. Semantics is concerned with meaning, carried in a word, phrase, sentence or text. It refers to how the punctuation and chosen words relate to each other. Understanding a language's structures allows the reader to make sure they are understanding the text the way the author intends it to be read.

Verbal reasoning

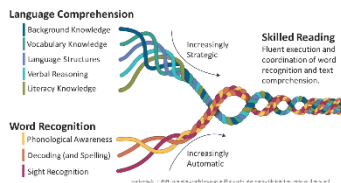
Verbal reasoning relates to the ability to infer meaning from linguistic devices such as metaphors, similes, and idioms. It allows the reader to interpret what the words on the page are intending to say. A reader must be able to grasp when words are being used literally or figuratively. By talking about the meaning of words, phrases, tones of voice and even body language, and about what they are observing during the day will help children develop and practice their verbal reasoning skills.

Literacy Knowledge

Literacy knowledge provides the reader with the information they need to know to enjoy reading. For example, they need to know how to hold a book, the way to read the words on a page from left to right and which way to turn the pages. They also need to understand different genres of text so they know what they can expect from what they read and how to interpret it. Exposure to a variety of literary styles gives children greater understanding they can draw as they encounter different types of books.

Summary

Supporting children to develop their vocabulary and understanding of language is key to developing good reading skills. Well-matched language comprehension when listening to, or decoding, text, reduces cognitive load. This should be supported throughout the day and opportunities identified in lots of contexts, but particularly when cognitive demands are lower, such as playtimes, during personal care or snack or meal times. Because many children are not at a stage of formal decoding and word recognition, this is an essential element of early reading.



Word recognition

Phonological awareness (including early sound discrimination skills)

For all children, this is promoted through integrated and frequent opportunities to develop skills in identifying and manipulating units of oral language – parts such as words, syllables, onsets, and rimes. This work should draw heavily on Phase One, developing an awareness of the seven aspects outlined below. There is considerable overlap between these aspects and the overarching aim is for children to experience regular, planned opportunities to listen carefully and communicate about what they hear, see and do. Each aspect is divided into three strands, also shown below. The boundaries between each strand are flexible and not fixed: teachers should plan to integrate the activities according to the abilities and interests of the children, capitalising on routines and familiar parts of the day. Activities within the seven aspects are designed to help children to listen attentively; enlarge their vocabulary; communicate confidently to others; discriminate phonemes; reproduce audibly the phonemes they hear, in order, in a range of familiar words; use sound-talk to segment words into phonemes. The ways in which staff interact and talk with children are critical to developing children's speaking and listening. This needs to be considered throughout all phase one activities.

Aspect 1	Aspect 2	Aspect 3	Aspect 4	Aspect 5	Aspect 6	Aspect 7
General sound discrimination – environmental sounds	General sound discrimination – instrumental sounds	General sound discrimination – body percussion	Rhythm and rhyme	Alliteration	Voice sounds	Oral blending and segmenting
Strand 1: Tuning into sounds (auditory discrimination)			Strand 2: Listening and remembering sounds (auditory memory and sequencing)		Strand 3: Talking about sounds (developing vocabulary and language comprehension)	

Decoding (and spelling)

Decoding is the ability to apply knowledge of sound-letter relationships (phonics) to correctly read and write words as text. Decoding is taught in a carefully sequenced and structured way through the Little Wandle Letters and Sounds synthetic systematic phonics programme. Children start learning grapheme-phoneme correspondences and associated skills of blending and segmenting to read and write words when they demonstrate appropriate sound discrimination skills, visual discrimination skills and early phonological awareness.

Phonics is taught through a systematic graduated approach which adheres to the Little Wandle SSP.

Sight recognition

When a child begins to recognize words by sight, it means they no longer have to work to decode the word whenever they come across it and they begin to store the word visually in long-term memory. This means they can recall it automatically. Most children develop a sight word memory as their decoding skills develop, committing high frequency and important words (such as names) to memory, so they can be read accurately and effortlessly.

However, most children will be developing this skill before they are at the stage of recognising some words in print, for example in sight recognition of symbols, environmental print (such as shop names etc.) and other words that are important to them.

Children working at **Basic Concept** level will be working on phonological awareness skills and language comprehension skills that include:

- developing more sophisticated sound discrimination skills, with environmental, instrumental, body and voice sounds
- developing awareness of syllables in words
- developing awareness of onset and rime
- recognising rhyming words, playing with rhyme, and continuing a rhyming string
- developing awareness of initial sounds in words through alliteration and an ability to identify familiar words that belong to an alliterative string
- practicing voice sounds and pronunciation skills
- developing oral blending skills
- auditory processing skills – being able to retain and process three things that have been heard is essential for blending and decoding CVC words. This can be scaffolded for children who are only able to hold two things in working memory by 'chunking' CVC phonemes into CV-C (e.g., 'ca-t' 'do-g')
- developing knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondence
- developing blending and segmenting skills
- developing the ability to blend words through teacher-led blending
- learning the grapheme and phoneme for common digraphs
- practicing decoding skills by reading fully decodable books well-matched to their secure phonic knowledge
- accessing symbol-supported text – this may be at a single word level, matching to symbols to objects, pictures, or actions; labelling with single symbol-supported words or phrases; or at a simple, repetitive sentence level
- learning commonly used tricky words (i.e., ones needed beyond the phoneme sequence they currently know)
- word to picture matching using simple picture noun vocabulary that is meaningful and motivating to the child
- engaging in structured reading practice sessions following the Little Wandle Programme, with a focus on decoding, prosody and comprehension at least three times a week
- reading a range of carefully selected high quality texts with an adult, in groups or individually, with rich opportunities to develop language comprehension skills through following carefully sequenced units of work and high-quality interactions with adults with good subject knowledge

- identifying features of the book, such as pictures and words and answering simple retrieval, prediction, and inference questions
- having opportunities to select and handle books, identify favourites, revisit and re-read familiar stories, interact with the book and adults
- reading simple, repetitive, personal books – these may contain photos or motivating pictures with either symbol supported text, individual words, or simple repetitive sentences
- accessing a text-rich environment with symbol support where appropriate
- developing one-to-one correspondence with finger pointing

Once these skills are secure, children working at **Applying Knowledge** level move beyond Early Reading. They will have a secure knowledge of all Phase 2 and 3 phonemes and be able to use and apply their 'Grow the Code' knowledge to decode and encode more complex spelling patterns at Phase 4 and 5. They will continue to work on developing their prosody, fluency, and comprehension skills.

Early reading approaches for all children

A respect for, and love of books, is encouraged for all children. They are offered experience of a wide a range of texts through the school and classroom environments, the curriculum, and special events. Every classroom has a designated reading area.

A balance of child-led and adult-led Early Reading experiences are provided for all children. These include:

- provision of a range and breadth of high-quality literature which allows children to see themselves reflected in the language, characters and events allowing for deeper engagement and empowerment as readers
- encounter texts which provide both 'mirrors' and 'windows'. Mirror stories reflect their own culture and helps to build their identity (e.g., contains a main character who looks like them, or a theme or language that is familiar to their life). Window stories offer a view into someone else's experience (e.g., a main character who is different from them or a setting that is far away in time or space)
- sharing high-quality stories, poems, and non-fiction texts
- learning a range of rhymes, action rhymes and songs
- activities that develop focused listening and attention, including oral blending
- attention to high-quality language and vocabulary
- careful assessment of individuals and groups to support carefully considered and well-matched progression of skills

To support Willow Dene's approach to Early Reading and Phonics, class-based staff:

- know the importance of reading aloud to children every day
- are given training and support to know how to teach a child to read, from their current starting point, so they are confident in, and deeply aware of, the key knowledge, skills and attitudes early readers need to succeed.
- choose and use stories, poems, rhymes, and non-fiction for reading that allow pupils to develop a rich vocabulary
- carefully assess the progress of every child, identifying the needs of any child not meeting expectations and putting appropriate support in place to enable them to make progress
- acquire specialist knowledge to be able to address potential barriers to learning, such as sensory impairments
- model and convey enthusiasm, opinion, and appreciation of texts
- foster children's engagement, motivations and reader identity to develop their persistence and resilience
- discuss and talk about books in way that supports comprehension at a deeper level and encourages a lifelong love of reading
- know how to support Early Readers across the curriculum, ensuring that their needs are met in an age-appropriate way
- are trained in the school's SSP (Synthetic Systematic Phonics), Little Wandle, and work to deliver the programme of phonics, ensuring that GPCs (grapheme phoneme correspondences) are taught sequentially alongside the key skills of decoding for reading and encoding for spelling
- when appropriate, use carefully selected and well-matched texts that enable pupils to use and apply their developing phonic knowledge
- are guided by carefully sequenced units of work for reading, which promote all aspects of early reading
- work with parents to support them to understand how to support their child's early reading
- build on children's prior knowledge and seek to incorporate family literacy into children's learning, including experiences of their own language, songs, and print
- link reading to other areas of the curriculum and look for incidental opportunities across the school day to promote reading

The Early Reading and English leader support and promotes the school's approach to Early Reading and phonics by:

- co-ordinating induction and ongoing Continual Professional Development (CPD) in Early Reading, phonics, and English

- supporting and identifying future CPD needs of staff
- develop own subject knowledge through working with other professionals and experts, such as participating in MAT and local authority level network meetings; working with our SSP provider and other SEND settings to develop and share good practice; and engaging with the CLPE
- strategically planning school-level interventions to improve the quality of practice
- engaging in and disseminating research, policy, and good practice in Early Reading
- implementing and overseeing the school's SSP: Little Wandle Letters and Sounds
- ensuring children have access to a wide range of high-quality texts in their classrooms and in shared areas
- writing and updating units of work to support Early Reading skills
- promoting reading and literate acts at home and training parents to support their children's literacy at home
- celebrating reading through special events and specialist week, such as Book Week
- supporting other subject leaders in how to promote and use literacy through their subject areas
- oversee and monitor assessments in reading across the school and develop assessment practice in reading