

EDUCATION

HELP FOR PEOPLE WITH DOWN'S SYNDROME



**DOWN'S
SYNDROME
ASSOCIATION**

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Early Years Education – Information Sheet

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Introduction

Many children with Down's syndrome enjoy attending their local pre-school, nursery or playgroup and most of the basic building blocks to prepare children for inclusion into mainstream school can be learnt in these environments.

Social Inclusion

In the early years, the prime aim is social inclusion. Successful integration with typically-developing peers will benefit not only the child with Down's syndrome, but also the other children in that community. While the child with Down's syndrome will undoubtedly learn from typically-developing children (who provide role models for age-appropriate behaviour and achievement), they may need additional help and support. Many children with Down's syndrome will be at a lower developmental, social and emotional level than their peers due to their learning difficulties. Moreover, they are unlikely to pick up conventions intuitively. As a consequence, their understanding of the world will be less advanced and their behaviour may be more on a par with younger children. It is also much harder for any child to make progress in cognitive areas until s/he is able to behave and interact with others in a socially acceptable way, and to understand and respond appropriately to the immediate environment. The focus of additional help and support in the early years should therefore be on learning the rules for normal and appropriate social behaviour.

Social inclusion aims for the young child with Down's syndrome:

- Learning to participate and respond appropriately
- Responding to verbal requests and instructions
- Learning appropriate patterns of behaviour e.g. taking turns and sharing, lining up, sitting
- Learning to play co-operatively
- Developing independence: self-help and practical skills
- Developing friendships
- Caring for others

The Nursery/ Pre-School Environment

Many children with Down's syndrome have shorter concentration spans than their peers. They also have more difficulty processing input from more than one sense at a time (e.g. copying and listening), which inhibits their ability to focus. These difficulties are particularly apparent in the early years and many youngsters with Down's syndrome may be easily distracted, flitting from one activity to another. The less focused and more informal the situation, the more difficult it will be for the young child to channel attention into one activity for any length of time.

However, children with Down's syndrome do respond well to structure and routine and are able to learn these well.

Teaching them the routine and structure of their day with the aid of strong, clear visual cues (e.g. photographs and objects of reference) can help children learn. By these means, they can understand their environment better, learn appropriate behaviour for particular sessions and activities and predict the next activity. Difficulties with understanding verbal explanations and instructions are also overcome.

Motor Development

Activities that depend on gross and fine motor co-ordination skills (sitting, crawling, walking, running, manipulating toys, feeding/drinking independently, etc.) increase a child's opportunities to find out about their world. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that any delay in motor development in the early years is likely to restrict cognitive development. Children with Down's syndrome, who tend to have lax muscle tone (hypotonia), may need additional help in developing their motor skills and benefit from a wide variety of materials, e.g adapted scissors, extra thick chunky pencils, large knob inset puzzles etc. They also benefit from a wide range of multi-sensory activities. For more information, see the DSA information sheet on Fine Motor Skills.

Self Help and Independence

Developing self-help skills is important in order to prepare the children as much as possible for the demands of school, especially as other children may "mother" them. So they may need additional help in areas such as toilet training, dressing, feeding and drinking independently or unwrapping a packed lunch. Skills should be targeted through a small steps approach. Liaison between pre-school and home is particularly important in order to maximise consistency. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that some self-help skills, particularly toilet training, are affected by maturity and so cannot be taught until the child is physically and cognitively ready.

Speech and Language

Most children with Down's syndrome have some degree of speech and language impairment. Most will start to speak between the ages of two and three. However, the vast majority manage to communicate extremely well from an early age with very little or no use of spoken language, relying on sign, gesture and body language.

These language-learning difficulties result in a smaller vocabulary and less general knowledge, delaying other aspects of cognitive development. Children with Down's syndrome are not able to use language for thinking, reasoning and remembering to the same extent as most other children of the same age. To encourage and develop their speech, it is vital that every opportunity is given to aid communication and understanding. Teaching children with Down's syndrome to use signs and gestures (such as Makaton or Signalong) is an immense aid to both a child's understanding and ability to communicate. Signs and speech are used together: as the child becomes more able to say the words, the signs are dropped, often by the age of five.

Hearing and Vision

Many children with Down's syndrome have some degree of hearing loss, even if only a fluctuating one due to glue ear. This will also affect the development of their speech. It is important, therefore, to make sure the child's hearing is checked regularly, particularly during the winter months when respiratory infections are prevalent.

Visual problems are also common, with many children requiring glasses to correct long or short sight. Again, regular checks by a practitioner familiar with testing young children are recommended.

Preparation for Starting School – Parents:

- Start planning early and make sure your child's Statement of Special Educational Needs is in place before they are due to start school. Check that speech therapy is included in part 3 and that the amount of help is specified e.g. "a weekly session of 1 hour with a qualified therapist" or "a daily language programme delivered by a teaching assistant monitored on a termly basis by a speech and language therapist". If not, take it up with the LEA as it may be too late once your child starts school.
- In choosing a school, take account of where the child's friends/ siblings/ playgroup peers are going; these will be a source of support
- Talk to your child about school after they have visited. Draw a map of the school and discuss what happens in different rooms e.g. the hall and the cloakroom
- Role play sitting quietly on the carpet to listen to a story, lining up to move to another room, taking their own coat off and hanging it on a peg
- Teach them the names of their teacher, the head and their teaching assistant(s)
- Make a photo book with pictures of the key people and rooms in the school with simple sentences e.g. "This is my teacher Mrs.Spencer"
- Talk about what they will need to take with them to school e.g. reading book, packed lunch, PE kit
- Ensure your child has sensible school clothes or modify their uniform to increase their independence. Put velcro on shoes, elastic in trousers or skirts and make a tie that slips over their head. Practice getting changed for PE as quickly as possible using a kitchen timer.
- Check that the school have appointed the teaching assistant(s) who will work with your child before the summer holiday. Make sure that they have relevant skills e.g. Makaton. Invite them to visit you at home over the summer to meet the whole family.
- On the first day of school hand your child over to their teacher or assistant, say your farewells and leave promptly. They will soon settle once you are out of sight. The staff will be experienced in settling in new children and will almost certainly have strategies in place for any children who find it hard to separate from their Mum/ Dad/ carer.
- Once they have settled in, ask for a meeting with the class teacher to talk about your child's individual needs and discuss their first Individual Education Plan (IEP). Set up a home/school book or a system of e-mails to ensure good communication from the beginning.
- Ask how speech therapy and any other additional services, e.g. input from an advisory teacher, are to be implemented. Ask for them to be provided in the classroom as far as possible rather than on a withdrawal basis.
- Stress that you do not want a 'Velcro'd' teaching assistant who sits beside your child the whole time. Emphasise the importance of your child taking part in all the ordinary activities of the class, alongside typically developing peers, and of having regular input from a qualified teacher.
- Check that the school have a copy of the Down's Syndrome Association Education Support Pack and that both the class teacher and teaching assistant(s) have read it.

Preparation for Starting School: School Staff

- Involve parents, relevant professionals and pre-school staff in liaison meetings with the school before the child starts.
- Ensure that any learning support hours mentioned on the child's Statement of Special Educational Needs are ready to be put in place, and teaching assistants with relevant skills are appointed before the summer holiday.
- Consider having two teaching assistants, rather than one, to avoid over-dependency on one adult.
- Try to arrange a visit from school to home and/or pre-school setting : seeing the child in the security of their own home/ pre-school can be very valuable for a class teacher or LSA.
- Consider additional visits, to accustom the child to the feel of the school, develop a basic knowledge of the layout, and give them a member(s) of staff on whom they can focus.

- Ensure that school staff are as fully informed about Down's syndrome as possible—booklets, training opportunities etc.
- Make it clear that the ownership of the child's learning programme remains with the class teacher, not the teaching assistant(s) or the SENCo.
- Include targets on independence, self help, social skills and inclusion in the child's IEP, as well as communication, motor skills, literacy and numeracy.
- Build in time each week for the class teacher and teaching assistant(s) to liaise and plan.
- Do not give the child support where it is not needed or the class teacher can cope on their own. Where additional support is not required, possibly in subjects such as PE or music, or during literacy hour where there are small groups, encourage the teaching assistant(s) to use the time to prepare differentiated teaching materials, rather than sitting with the child.
- Give the child frequent opportunities to work alongside or cooperatively with more able peers. Try not to group them with other special needs pupils on a regular basis. The good role models and more advanced skills of able peers will aid their development.
- Carefully consider the first transfer within primary school. For some children, spending extra time in reception or nursery, especially if summer born, can provide valuable additional time to develop and consolidate skills. The children then travel up through the school system a year older than their peers. (Holding children back after they have settled and become established with a particular peer group however is not recommended.)

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