



STARTING SCHOOL

Promoting good practice



Starting school, for any child and their family, is an important milestone. Here at Down Syndrome UK, we feel it is essential to share good practice to help support schools to feel confident and positive about welcoming a child with Down syndrome into their settings.

Some schools will already have previous experience of doing this, some will not. Initially, for some settings and staff, it may feel a little overwhelming to think about teaching a child with Down syndrome. Not knowing what you don't know can create some anxiety and this is perfectly normal. We want to ensure that every setting feels enabled and excited to welcome children with Down syndrome. We support many children at the start of their school journey, and we are confident with the right attitude and understanding you will enjoy the ride!

DSUK is proud to have been heavily involved with the introduction of the Down Syndrome Act and are working with DHS&C and other stakeholders to generate guidance. Meanwhile, we hope you find our resources informative, inspiring and useful, and we welcome your feedback.



Getting to know your child

Every child with Down syndrome is a child first, who happens to have an extra chromosome. As with any child, each child with Down syndrome is an individual influenced by their families and experiences, with individual interests, personalities, home backgrounds, health and medical needs.

When at school this child becomes “your child” and if you can provide the very best support, care and learning opportunities that you would want for your own child, then this is a great starting position to be at.

Arranging home and nursery visits, before your child starts school will help you to see the child in familiar settings, where they are more likely to demonstrate a greater level of interaction. This gives you a valuable opportunity to begin to get to know your child. What things make them happy, excited, frightened and sad? What can they do well? What do they struggle with, need help with?

Encourage both home and nursery to complete our This is Me or something similar. It will provide information all about your future pupil and can act as an aid for further discussion between home and school. Beginning to know your child as a child, rather than just seeing a “syndrome” is very important.





Specific learning profile

As educators, you will find this information about the specific learning profile of a child with Down syndrome interesting. This profile highlights the learning strengths and challenges that many of our children experience.

The learning profile incorporates the following strengths and weaknesses:

Areas of strength:

- ▶ Strong visual awareness and visual learning skills.
- ▶ Ability to learn and use sign, gesture and visual support.
- ▶ Ability to learn and use the written word.
- ▶ Ability to learn from pictorial, concrete & practical materials.
- ▶ Keen to communicate and socialise with others.
- ▶ Ability to learn and copy behaviour from peers and adults.
- ▶ Structure & routine

Factors that inhibit learning:

- ▶ Auditory and visual impairment.
- ▶ Delayed motor skills – fine and gross.
- ▶ Speech and language impairment.
- ▶ Short term and working memory weaknesses.
- ▶ Shorter concentration span
- ▶ Difficulties with consolidation and retention
- ▶ Difficulties with generalisation, thinking and reasoning.
- ▶ Sequencing difficulties.
- ▶ Avoidance strategies.



A little something extra

It is important to acknowledge that our children come with a little something extra (an extra copy of the 21st chromosome). Schools can readily adjust their inclusive and creative thinking, resources and timetabling to help provide a little something extra to ensure a happy start for everyone on their school journey. A school and staff who can welcome and teach children with Down syndrome, is a good school who can welcome and teach any child.



What does this 'little extra' look like?

For many children with Down syndrome this may mean that they need:

Extra time to process information and instructions and to complete them.

Our children find learning from listening alone challenging. Keep instructions short and clear and where possible support with visual resources and gestures/signing. Allow children extra time when putting on coats, changing for PE, eating dinner etc to enable a calm environment.

Extra modelling of activities/tasks.

Our children learn best from seeing and experiencing activities first, before attempting them independently, therefore teacher and peer modelling is an effective way to support all areas of learning. Show me – don't just tell me.

Extra exposure to visual resources.

Most children with Down syndrome are visual learners. Using visual timetables, checklists, mind maps, photos, pictures and videos are all ways of supporting visual learning.

Extra support to assist with learning self-help skills, for example putting on a coat, getting dressed, going to the toilet, using a knife and fork.

Many of our children struggle with fine and gross motor skills which means they must work harder at controlling and moving their bodies and need lots of practice. Specific help and support are needed in all the above areas. Arranging a school visit by an Occupational Therapist (OT) to come and observe the child in their classroom environment is recommended. They can advise on a range of issues including, seating, handwriting, dressing skills, toileting, hand strengthening programmes and specific resources

Extra support to develop and use their communication skills.

Many of our children find it hard to communicate clearly and effectively. They generally understand more than what they can express through speaking, which can cause frustration for everyone. Arranging input from a Speech and Language Therapist (SALT) with experience of working with pupils with Down syndrome is recommended. They will be able to assess and offer a program of speech and language activities to be undertaken during the school day. All teachers, when speaking to the child should use the child's name first to gain attention. Speaking clearly and directly to the child, while maintaining eye contact and using gestures, signs or pictures to help support speech. Where children already have been exposed to and use the signing system Makaton before entering school, basic whole school training is needed, with specific training for keyworkers - Class Teachers/Teacher Assistants.

Extra support to ensure their safety both in and out of the classroom.

Many of our children have limited sense of danger, especially in the early years and new environments. Extra vigilance is always required by all staff to ensure the safety of their child both in and out of the classroom (including playtimes, PE lessons, dinner times, outdoor activities and toilet breaks).

Extra interventions to ensure that the foundations of literacy and numeracy skills are being embedded.

All our children need daily opportunities to consolidate previous learning of basic skills. These sessions need to be well planned with clear, focused learning objectives and success criteria. A range of resources should be readily available to support and encourage the learning. The pace of these sessions should be lively and purposeful. When learning to read, whole word recognition is encouraged. Start with word matching, then selecting words and finally reading of the whole word.



Phonetic reading.

This is an expectation for our children. Many of our children will have been exposed to phonics in relation to speech sound production. It is important for our children to be included in whole class phonics teaching and group activities. Remember that more processing time will be needed along with extra opportunities to revisit and practice phonics

Numicon.

This is a proven visual and practical resource, which helps develop understanding that numbers do not occur randomly, but are part of an organised system, which follows many different patterns. Children with Down syndrome respond well to this approach.

Extra support at break/play times to enjoy time with friends.

It is a fine line for teaching assistants between over supporting and becoming a barrier to social engagement and encouraging and facilitating opportunities to promote social interaction and enjoying playing with friends.

Extra communication to home.

Since we know children with Down syndrome require support to communicate, it is important that you provide a means for your child to be able to share with home what they have been up to at school. We recommend home school diaries full of photos and videos as well as written news, so the images can act as prompts to the child to share and celebrate with their family. Encourage families to do the same, by sharing special news such as family celebrations and special achievements. From a practical point of view, encourage families to share any issues about their child such as having a bad night sleep, or not eaten much for breakfast. Ultimately, this can impact on the child's day at school and give you as educators the "heads up" in terms of setting pace and duration of activities.



Checklist for preparing to welcome a pupil with Down syndrome.

Have you:

- 1. Read all supporting documentation that is coming with the child before starting school. In England this could be an Educational, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), in Wales an Individual Development Plan (IDP), a CoOrdinated Support Plan in Scotland or a Statement of Special Educational Needs (Statement) in Northern Ireland. Potentially a “Hello my name is ...” introductory form completed by the child and their family, and any specific reports from outside agencies such as Speech and Language, Occupational Therapy, Behaviour support and medical passport
- 2. Visited your child in their familiar settings, spoken to parents/carers and previous nursery staff?
- 3. Implemented an extended transition period, to allow for unexpected issues, such as chairs being too high and to see responses when entering a new environment e.g. classroom, PE hall, toilets, dining hall, library and playground?
- 4. Identified where your child will hang their coat, bag and wellies, perhaps at the start or the end of a line, where they might have more space?
- 5. Identified where you will position your child in the class? All children with Down syndrome have a visual defect and many experience hearing difficulties, so near the front, in clear view of teacher, is recommended.
- 6. Identified where you think your child will be best placed when lining up and where they will sit in the dining hall? Where appropriate consider sensory processing experiences around noise, hustle and bustle, and lighting.
- 7. Established if your child needs special cutlery and any specific help at mealtimes? For example, help with carrying tray, pouring water, wiping face, washing hands.
- 8. Established what support and encouragement your child might need around toileting? Does your child need help with pulling clothes up and down? Is your child in pull-ups/nappies? Will an accessible changing toilet be required? Does a toilet chart and/or care plan need to be completed to share between home and school? Remember it is vital to always ensure a child’s dignity and respect.
- 9. Established if there are any specific food/drink requirements during the day and at snack time?
- 10. Made sure that any resources used to support additional therapies and interventions are readily available and labelled? These can be stored in bags, boxes or plastic wallets (Numeracy/Literacy/Speech and Language/Fine Motor).
- 11. Identified how you will communicate with parent/carers to inform how your child has been at school during the day? (Face to face at end of day, home school diary, school app, iPad).
- 12. Considered your attitude around how inclusive you are, and that you will ensure this child is included in your classroom along with every other pupil?

Down Syndrome UK's Primary Education Programme is an accessible, online programme created by Dr Becky Baxter in collaboration with other specialist professionals.

Designed for teachers, SENCOs, teaching assistants and school leaders, the programme provides practical knowledge, strategies and information to help staff confidently support children with Down syndrome in the classroom.

Find out more



We hope you find this information useful and practical and that you are feeling excited to welcome your little one into their new school.

“Thank you for seeing me as I am and helping me be the best I can.”

Love from,
all your future children with Down syndrome.

Additional information and support can be accessed via our DSUK Primary Facebook groups:

For professionals



For parents



VISIT OUR WEBSITE

Lots of resources and details of training can be accessed via DSUK's website



Dear Future Teacher,

Hello, I'm Willow.

Please don't be afraid.

You're wondering how you'll meet my needs and help me to feel safe. You're wanting me to be happy in your class, and worried that I won't be. You're not sure how you're going to manage a class of 28 children and me. How will you cope with the workload? The extra resources? How will you manage any extra staff that may come with me? The inclusion? Getting it right for every child?

If you're thinking all this, then you're already doing an amazing job – so: thank you!

Please know, I come to you like any other child. I come to you with love in my heart and a joy for learning. I come to you hoping to be given the same opportunities as the rest of my class. Please don't limit my ability because you have a limited understanding of me. There's so much more to me than a diagnosis...

It may take me longer to understand some lessons, but in doing so, I'll help another child consolidate their learning when they want to help me. I will be the first to tell you that one of my friends is upset because one of my superpowers is being able to read people's emotions really well.



It may take me a little longer to get ready for break, but this may encourage compassion in my classmates as they help and teach me to zip up my jacket. I will be the first to greet you with a genuine smile in the morning and give you that heart-warming feeling that reminds you, through the tiredness and the long days, why you became a teacher.

It may take me longer to articulate my thoughts, and as I do, I am teaching our class patience, acceptance and respect. I will be the first to show you that pure determination and perseverance pay off. At times I will surprise you and the pride we will both feel when I achieve something will shine bright.

It may take me longer to write things down, and in doing so, I may teach you to be more creative in your delivery and remind you that each of your children learns in different ways and has different outcomes, not just me. I will be the first to teach our class that differences on the outside make no difference whatsoever; it's our insides that show true humanity, true love and true kindness. I'll be the one to teach people that we're more alike than different.

It may take me longer to run to the end of the finish line, and as I try my best, my classmates will show friendship and camaraderie as they cheer me on from the side lines and for some, maybe even by my side. I will be the one showing them that it's not always about being first, it's about being a good friend, a good person.

I will be the first to educate you, enlighten you and prove to you that Down Syndrome doesn't limit a person or their worth, because I will show you that I am so much more than a person who happens to have Down Syndrome. I am smart. I am funny. I am naughty. I am kind. I am thoughtful. I am valued so much by you.

Dear Future Teacher, my hope is that you see me first, and my diagnosis second. I hope you'll see all the good that comes with me. And the extra help you worried about organising – you'll soon find it is a great asset.

You will lead by example and show my classmates and your colleagues that I'm nothing to be feared. After all, who's afraid of a five-year-old?

I can't wait to be in your class!

Yours,

WILLOW

Written by Clare Fraser, mum to Willow

