

Frequently Asked Questions for Primary School



In March 2023 we collaborated with Twinkl to share some information around working with a child with Down syndrome in primary school settings. We thought this information worth sharing.



What support might a child with Down syndrome need in primary school?

Like all children, children with Down syndrome benefit hugely from attending school and the educational and social opportunities which it provides. It is especially beneficial for children with Down syndrome to have teachers and support staff who understand their specific learning profile and their areas of strengths and difficulties, so that activities and work can be planned and differentiated appropriately.

Things that can support success in the classroom include:

- ▶ All staff having good quality training regarding the learning profile of children with Down syndrome.
- ▶ Adapting activities to make use of a pupil's learning strengths (eg visual) and minimising those that are more difficult (eg only auditory).
- ▶ Using visual resources such as photographs, Numicon, visual timetables, storyboards.
- ▶ Using structure and routine.
- ▶ Repetition and daily practice of targeted skills.
- ▶ Using positive and proactive behaviour strategies.
- ▶ Scaffolding activities and allowing children to learn via imitation.
- ▶ Supporting friendships with peers.
- ▶ Staff having high (but reasonable) expectations.
- ▶ Ensuring good communication between home and school.





How can educators best support children with Down syndrome in the classroom?

Children with Down syndrome are very visual learners and so making lessons as visual as possible, using resources such as photographs, objects, video and role play is a key strategy to help learners get the most from lessons. Ensure that the resources are clear and unfussy to help students with Down syndrome to see them clearly, as most will have some difficulty with visual acuity, even if they are not wearing corrective glasses. This means that vision can lack fine detail and contrast so darker, larger fonts on pale backgrounds work best. Visual strength is one of the reasons that Makaton signs and symbols can work so well, and we would encourage staff working with children with Down syndrome to sign up to a Makaton course.

Students with Down syndrome find structure and routine helpful and this coupled with their visual strengths means that visual timetables can work especially well to help children know what is coming next, and what will be expected of them.

Classroom placement is important. Children with Down syndrome often have difficulty hearing because of problems with the inner ear, auditory nerve or due to glue ear. Learning from auditory sources is also especially difficult due to problems with short term memory and difficulty in processing skills. This can be helped by using the visual resources suggested.

For a child with Down syndrome to utilise their excellent visual learning skills and see and hear a teacher clearly, they should be sat closer to the class teacher and white board and not at the back of the classroom. At carpet times, sit a student with Down syndrome near the front and middle.

Pupils with Down syndrome may have some language difficulties and if so, should be having regular sessions with a speech and language therapist. Speech clarity often improves with practice and time. It is important that children are given lots of opportunities to practice their speech and conversational skills, however it is often the case that children with Down syndrome are given fewer opportunities to do this, due to adults asking closed questions or rushing and not having the time to wait for an answer. Ensure enough time is given to this area of development as children who learn to communicate clearly show less frustration and often have better social and life opportunities as they progress through to adulthood.

Many children with Down syndrome have a larger receptive vocabulary than they can verbalise and so they often understand much more than they are able to express, which should be considered when planning. Although this is true for many children, this is especially so for a child with Down syndrome and can lead staff (and sometimes parents) to underestimate their ability.

Learning by imitation is a great learning strength and so encourage them to work together with their peers when appropriate to do so. This also has the added benefit of encouraging friendships to develop and encourages social inclusion.

Children with Down syndrome can have difficulty with their short-term memory and some problems with generalisation and so will require repetition to learn new skills. It also means that responding to instructions can take extra time. Giving one instruction at a time, with visual prompts such as Makaton and then giving a pupil longer than is usual to respond, can certainly help.

Is there anything they should avoid doing?

We often discuss the extra support that children with Down syndrome may need at school, but over supporting a child can also lead to problems in self-esteem, confidence, independence, and social inclusion and so should be avoided. Staff need to find the right balance of supporting whilst at the same time encouraging and allowing independence to develop when appropriate. This can be a tricky balance to find in the beginning but will become easier as children and staff get to know each other better.

Avoid having 1 full time TA supporting the pupil to prevent over dependence, and do not refer to a TA as the child's TA, or 'your TA'.

Children with Down syndrome should be in the classroom with their peers for most of the day and only taken out of the classroom when absolutely necessary. Being with their typically developing peers in the classroom environment means children with Down syndrome have the opportunity to learn typical behaviours for their age, gain skills by imitation and be more socially included.



Are there any strengths that should be celebrated?

Children with Down syndrome have a range of learning strengths that can be utilised in the classroom such as their ability to learn using:

- ▶ Visual supports
- ▶ Structure and routine
- ▶ Imitation
- ▶ Responding exceptionally well to praise as reward

But something which often surprises people is that many children with Down syndrome can learn to read at a relatively young age.

Reading is a strength for children with Down syndrome due to its visual nature, and many children with Down syndrome can begin to learn to read from as young as 18 months or 2 years old using a whole word (or logographic rather than phonic) reading technique. Do not wait for the child to be speaking before introducing reading. We recommend Special iApps to create individualised reading resources and the Reading and Language intervention created by Down syndrome education international.

Children with Down syndrome have a strong ability to learn using the written word and this can be extremely helpful in a classroom environment, and we certainly think should be celebrated!



What do you feel all educators should know about Down syndrome?

In our experience, all the resources and adaptations that are implemented to help and support a child with Down syndrome in the classroom, will always help and never hinder other learners. It also helps educators to think outside the box, become more creative teachers and better communicators whilst promoting understanding and opportunity within local communities. Therefore, having a pupil with Down syndrome in your class is beneficial for everyone.

We regularly hear from schools about the increased levels of empathy, patience and understanding fellow pupils demonstrate from learning and playing alongside a pupil with Down syndrome.

We know that many children with Down syndrome, with the correct information and support can be toilet trained before they start school. For those who are not, we recommend our [pants4school 4 step programme](#).

Anything else you would like to share?

Don't forget about training for lunchtime supervisors and other non-teaching staff that children see regularly. Having all staff well trained in areas such as the learning profile and Makaton is hugely beneficial.

Have high expectations around behaviour and discourage pupils and certainly staff from babying a pupil with Down syndrome. Since speech is generally delayed, there can often be a tendency to speak for the child, make decisions for them and lower expectations around their behaviour.

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Other resources:

- ▶ [Starting School Guide](#)
- ▶ [Choosing a Primary School](#)
- ▶ [‘This is Me’ Template](#)
- ▶ [Advice for Professionals](#)
- ▶ [Primary Best Practice Guidelines](#)
- ▶ [Dear Future Teacher](#)
- ▶ [Toilet training](#)

These toolkits aims to provide parents and practitioners with insight, advice and tips around specific topics.

- ▶ [Behaviour Cue Cards](#)
- ▶ [Teaching Numbers](#)
- ▶ [Teaching Reading](#)
- ▶ [Hand Strength](#)

Additional information can be accessed via **ST&R Facebook groups**:

ST&R for professionals



ST&R for parents



[Down Syndrome UK](#)

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

