

# Education

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## Becoming school ready – transition from reception to year 1

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Learning with same-age peers in mainstream primary schools has changed the quality of life for children and young people who have Down's syndrome, through raised expectations, improved outcomes and better inclusion in society. Inclusion has, we believe, played a significant role in raising awareness and altering public perceptions of people with Down's syndrome for the better. Pupils with Down's syndrome in mainstream settings have also consistently demonstrated how inclusion impacts positively not only on them, but also on the whole school population.

In recent years though, the Down's Syndrome Association's Helpline has seen an increased number of calls for advice and support regarding the transition from Reception into Year 1 classes. The main thrust of these calls is that children cannot be included in Year 1 classes because they lack the necessary skills to access the curriculum. There has also been a resurgence in school requests for pupils to return to younger classes, and in proposals for these very young learners to continue their education in specialist provision rather than to progress through primary school. The majority of these enquiries have been for children who are progressing well and who are developing in a typical way for learners of their age who have Down's syndrome.

Most learners who have Down's syndrome will show development of attention skills and learning habits in the first two years of school that can enable teachers to include them in class more easily as they get older, provided teachers differentiate learning objectives and activities in suitable ways. The need for teachers to differentiate to engage learners with same-age class peers is likely to increase with each new school class; however, gains in attention, learning behaviours (for example, engaging in tabletop/seated learning activities) and more advanced understanding of language and school routines can all help to increase learning opportunities with peers. For many learners, this means they can be included in junior classes, with less time out of class on focused individual activities than when they were in infant classes.

An understanding of Down's syndrome, and the uniqueness of each individual person with the condition, across the school environment will support inclusive practice.

## Planning and preparation

Positive attitudes, planning, support and differentiation will go a long way to ensuring the successful inclusion of a child who has Down's syndrome.

During the term preceding the move to KS1 school staff should meet to share information and look at what support should be provided for their pupil who has Down's syndrome to make a successful transition. For example, are the learner's strengths and support needs clearly documented for the new teacher to understand and to be able to use them? What are the qualities of the class member's peer relationships, and the learner's relationships with additional needs support staff? Can the learner spend short (successful) periods of time in their new classroom with their existing support staff? Support from additional needs support staff, sourcing of resources, seating arrangements, and supports for hearing, vision or any other relevant adjustment for health and learning needs should be discussed with the SENCO, parents and supporters, so everyone is clear about what is going to happen.

The SEN and Disabilities Code of Practice says that "Transition should be seen as a process which involves parents/carers, child, setting and receiving setting. (EYFS 2008) A child's transition from home to a preschool setting or from a setting to school can be an anxious time, particularly if there are additional needs with regard to their development of speech and language and communication, health and physical needs or general development. Periods of change can be made less daunting if parents' and carers' views are respected and they feel that they have made a suitable contribution to what will happen when their child moves to a new setting."

There will be measures schools put in place for all children making the move to KS1 that will be of just as much benefit to children who have Down's syndrome. These might include introducing some of the more formal aspects of learning from Year 1 at the end of Reception year and carrying over some practices that will be familiar to the children from Reception.

## Understanding the individual

Every child who has Down's syndrome will be different. Each learner will have their own learning preferences, as well as some of the learning strengths associated with Down's syndrome. Learners who have Down's syndrome are likely to have a spiky learning profile and their learning opportunities should not be based on preconceptions about developmental readiness.

As for any pupil, the starting point for the teacher is knowing where their new pupil is in their development and skills, as well as their motivation and interests, and to decide what their next steps forward are likely to be. The teacher will then need to aim for these next steps through adapting objectives and activities to suit the learning needs of the pupil, while including them as much as possible in the class with their peers. The teacher must be prepared to make adjustments according to individual need. Making adjustments might mean that, for example, should a child need a play break during class time for five minutes, they can have this.

It is vital that the child's learning activities are designed and monitored by the class or subject teacher, who can plan and then delegate tasks and activities to the additional needs support assistant to carry out. Time spent liaising between the class teacher and the assistant, with some input from another member of staff with knowledge and experience, will reap huge rewards. The child can be given prepared meaningful activities to carry out with the assistant in small groups, with a partner or on a one-to one basis within the whole class session.

## Learning styles

Hopefully, it will be reassuring for teachers to know that they already have the skills to successfully include pupils who have Down's syndrome and to meet their individual learning needs. What teachers may need support around is with information about the specific learning profile of children who have Down's syndrome\*. This knowledge will help you to support your pupil's learning strengths and to put strategies in place to overcome the barriers they face.

The learning style for most children who have Down's syndrome includes using visual-spatial information and supports and language they can understand. This means modelling activities or showing children, using: pictures/photos; gestures/signs; manipulatives for written letters, words, sentences and numerals; computers and tablets; objects; practical number equipment; number lines; and more – everything that can be considered a "visual support". Teachers will be fully conversant with these as they are used for other children, often younger. Schools often subscribe to resource providers to get some of these, although photos, pictures and school-made visual resources are useful as well. Visual supports can be used for every area of learning, to help children to understand language and to know what they are being asked or expected to do.

Inclusion does not necessarily mean working on the same activity as peers; the tasks for a child who has Down's syndrome may be related to those of peers. Activities will have to be adapted and modified to the pupil's level of interest and ability and, although it may mean that the child will be working at a different level, it doesn't mean that they can't be working on the same topics in the same room but with more visual and simplified materials and explanations. The vital element is that the child should be enabled to learn with peers for as many parts of lessons as possible. The cognitive and linguistic differences between learners who have Down's syndrome and the majority of class peers should not be the focus for decision making about inclusion; the focus should be on celebrating learning and the individual achievements of each child.

### What helps?

The reference guide below provides some useful ideas about what helps (and what doesn't help) the successful inclusion of children who have Down's syndrome.

- Practising targeted skills daily.  
It is better to practice for short periods daily than for longer periods, less often.
- Teaching reading of whole words and also phonic teaching, with letters and sounds.
- Targeting vocabulary learning for language across the curriculum.  
Use written words and sentences as well as pictures.
- Using pictures and photos to support learning about new concepts.
- Teaching number symbols and linking these to number words and quantity.
- Ensuring there is more than one additional needs support staff member who can work effectively with the child in the classroom.
- Keeping a home/school communication book and using it positively.
- Taking advice from a hearing specialist and implementing it.  
The majority of children who have Down's syndrome will have at least fluctuating hearing and some will have serious hearing impairments.
- Checking that they have had their eyes tested regularly and are wearing correctly fitting glasses.
- Including targets for positive behaviour and independence within the learning plan.
- Giving jobs and responsibilities to encourage self-esteem and self-worth.
- Celebrate success  
Rewarding positive behaviour and taking time to explain things.

- Using visual-spatial learning strengths, so the child can see a series of visual information, for example, as in a visual timetable, visual plan or story board format.  
This can help with all aspects of learning, from positive behaviour to story comprehension.
- Establishing a clear and consistent routine and ensuring the child knows it well.
- Having additional tasks ready as learners may not attend to activities for as long as their peers, and their levels and physical energy can differ from day to day.
- Using role models. Pupils who have Down's syndrome copy and take their cue from their peers, so place them with good role models as often as possible.
- Allowing for remembering issues associated with short-term and working memory, such as forgetting instructions and being easily distracted. Offer visual supports the learner can refer to, such as visual timetables and memory aids.
- Engaging in regular communication with parents, this is a helpful way to discover motivators and strategies that do/don't work with the child.
- Asking for expert support when needed.
- Trying to understand why a behaviour might be occurring; this can often be down to the child trying to communicate something.

### What doesn't help?

- Keeping children back another year after they have entered Year 1.
- Taking children out to lower year groups (because that's closer to the level they're at).
- Sending them home because they appear too tired (it's amazing how tired a child can look until you get them home in front of their favourite TV show or computer game!).
- Working one-to-one in the corridor (because the topic in the classroom is just way above their head).
- Working on "life skills" instead of taking part in curriculum activities.
- Removing them from the National Curriculum, in part or as a whole (because they won't understand it all).
- Working only alongside their assistant with little or no direct interaction with their peers.
- Support that is too intense, with no breaks in between tasks, and not allowing the child space to work, sit or play on their own even for brief periods of time.
- Scribing for children for too long; they need to be encouraged to construct their own sentences and text as much as possible through aids such as sentence strips, flash cards, mind maps and writing frames.

Please see the education section of our website for the factsheet 'Helping children to learn' and the resource 'International guidelines for the education of learners with Down syndrome'

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