DOWN'S SYNDROME ASSOCIATION
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For further information and guidance, please see the International Guidelines for the Education of Learners with Down's syndrome.

ENCOURAGING BEHAVIOUR FOR LEARNING

The content below has been adapted from the Down Syndrome International's International Guidelines for the Education of Learners with Down Syndrome.

Behaviour is communication and it has an underlying purpose. It is necessary to determine the purpose behind the behaviour and act on the cause. Behaviour that achieves its purpose is rewarded and therefore reinforced, meaning that it is likely to be repeated. Behaviour that does not achieve its purpose will disappear. Humans are very good at learning from their experiences, including learning which behaviours produce desired results.

Challenging behaviour is not in itself a characteristic of having Down's syndrome, and the underlying cause or motivation for any challenging behaviours being exhibited by learners who have Down's syndrome therefore needs to be addressed.

Students attending mainstream classrooms tend to exhibit fewer behavioural challenges and enjoy benefits such as social and emotional development, improved peer relationships and enhanced cognitive and psychological development.

Reasons why learners who have Down's syndrome might exhibit challenging behaviours in a classroom

- **To avoid engaging in learning tasks that they are finding too challenging.**
- **Differences in the limbic system, meaning that that emotional responses last longer and lead to strong long-term memory associations.**

- **Expressive language levels are most often below normative age expectations. This has the effect of reducing the ability of individuals to negotiate, so that they may appear stubborn or defiant.**

- **Pain or discomfort may be a possible cause for a learning exhibiting challenging behaviour. Even articulate people with Down's syndrome are known to have difficulty expressing the extent of their pain and locating it on their body. The learner might have wax in their ear drums, menstrual pain or be constipated for example.**

Learners who have Down's syndrome may use their social skills to avoid engaging in potentially challenging tasks. It is not always appropriate to make the task easier, instead it is important to support the learner to persist and then to acknowledge achievement, which will build positive habits of learning.

A myth related to people who have Down's syndrome is that they are stubborn. Stubbornness is a trait that might be described as 'tenacious' in non-disabled people. Being identified as stubborn is usually an indication that the learner is not complying with what they have been asked to do. It is important, however, to ask whether the learner who has Down's syndrome has the speech and language skills to explain their situation or any difficulties they are facing.

CONSIDER:

- **Setting up and scaffolding situations for learning by imitation.**

- **Providing choices.**

- **Providing support for positive behaviour and for friendships.**

- **Giving a more explicit explanation of the reason for the request.**

- **Giving careful attention to the steps required to undertake the task. It could be that the person does not understand or is unable to do what they have been asked to do.**

- **Developing adaptations which use learning strengths and support areas of difficulty.**

Teaching in an inclusive classroom requires the learning needs of all students to be accommodated. It is helpful for learners who have Down's syndrome if the teacher establishes productive behaviour for learning for all, and if positive interaction with peers can be fostered.

Teachers should not assign the lowest attaining students or those exhibiting challenging behaviours to learning support assistants, resulting in them having less time with a qualified teacher.

Resources and training should be made available for teachers who need targeted support, for instance to implement positive behaviour support strategies or general classroom management approaches.

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