STARTING SCHOOL

Most children who have Down's syndrome enjoy attending their local preschool playgroup or nursery.

Many of the basic building blocks to prepare children for inclusion into mainstream school can be learned in such environments.

It's important to plan early so that your child can have a smooth transition to primary school. Most children who have Down's syndrome attend their local mainstream primary school along with their brothers and sisters and/or friends.

Ensure that the child's Education, Health and Care Plan (England) (or Individual Development Plan (Wales)/Statement of special educational needs (NI)) is finalised and that all provision mentioned in it are ready to be put into place.

In the term before your child starts school, a transition meeting should be arranged. This is an opportunity for information to be shared with staff at school and parents/carers where any anxieties, however trivial, can be aired so that strategies can be put into place to make for a successful and inclusive placement.

A transition plan should then be drawn up to enable a smooth transition into school. Schools will have a settling in plan for all children, which is likely to include familiarisation visits (eg for storytime or to watch the school play) but you should discuss an individual transition plan for your child if you think they are likely to need additional support. Make sure that everybody involved with your child is invited to help design the transition plan and set up regular meetings to monitor the progress of the transition plan.

The transition planning may involve:

- **Additional visits to school before your child starts there.**
- **A meeting with the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) and teachers.**
- **A home visit.**

- **Social stories or reading books about starting school.**
- **A transition book for your child with photo's of the school, their classroom and their teachers – the photographs should each have a sentence written underneath, for example, 'This is my teacher. She is called…'**
- **Agree targets for your child's first IEP and how you as parents/carers will be involved in both planning and evaluation. A target for independence should always be included both in lessons without TA support when possible and in moving around the school. This will vary depending on each individual student's needs. This enables friendships with peers to develop as well as increasing self-esteem.**

It is important that there is good communication between home and school. Your child may not yet be able to tell you or their teachers about things they have done or things that matter to them.

Useful strategies include:

- **A communication book for you and the school to share information that may affect your child during the day, for example, about their health and things they need for school. This is important if your child does not have sufficiently developed language to tell you about what's going on at school. Make sure that the home school book is used to communicate what your child has done well.**

- **An agreed way for you and your child's teacher or SENCO to arrange to talk about any concerns. Think carefully about whether you want this to be by email, telephone or face to face at the end of the school day and agree this with the school.**

- **A 'conversation diary' to support your child's communication and help to develop meaningful reading and writing over time. This is very much about what is important to the child. It will have a sentence on each page in the first person about something the child has enjoyed that day with a picture. This can then prompt conversation at home about the child's day. Over time your child will hopefully play a part in helping to make the book, eg writing in it or drawing pictures.**

- **Schedule regular catch-up meetings with your child's class teacher. There will also be a formal review of your child's plan once a year and more frequent target setting throughout the year.**

- **Some families make a communication passport about their child, which helps to avoid repeating the same information to every practitioner involved. It's a very simple way of summarising aspects of a child's life and emphasising the best way to communicate using the child's preferred communication method.**