

A booklet for teachers,  
classroom assistants and  
school staff on supporting a  
child with Down's Syndrome  
when they start school



Down's  
Syndrome  
Scotland

helping people realise their potential

# Preparing to Welcome a Pupil with Down's Syndrome to your Primary School



For more information or to obtain  
any of our other publications  
please visit [www.dsscotland.org.uk](http://www.dsscotland.org.uk)



Hi, I'm Rian

I am so looking forward to meeting you. I know you will be wondering about me and wanting to make sure you meet my needs, but don't worry, if you are already thinking this then you are already doing a great job, so thank you.

I am looking forward to learning new things and making new friends.

We can learn so much from each other when we are all different, there is so much more to me than having Down's syndrome and you will get to see that.

Please don't shy away from asking my mum or dad questions about me, they will be more than happy to share all you need to know about me and how to give me a good experience of school.

## Introduction

Every child with Down's syndrome is a unique individual full of potential and their school years offer so much opportunity to reach this to their fullest.

Successful education is achieved by understanding how each individual child learns, their individual needs, the importance of interaction, and that all children need to feel included. Children with Down's syndrome need an environment that is rich in positive learning activities with lots of opportunities to interact with and explore. The range of skills that can be developed with effective adult guidance and encouragement goes way beyond what can be attained alone.

Children with Down's syndrome have a specific learning profile which tends to be uneven, they are not just generally delayed. Developmental milestones may be reached later, and, at certain times, children may appear to slow down in one area whilst making progress in another. The specific learning styles and individual needs of each child must be considered when planning new learning activities.

There are many factors that have a positive influence upon learning. Children with Down's syndrome model their behaviour and attitudes on peers and adults. Generally, they have good visual learning skills and can learn using signs and gestures. They acquire new concepts and skills best by using practical materials and hands-on activities and can be taught to read and write using the written word or whole word approach.

# Preparing to welcome a pupil with Down's Syndrome

## Suggested Checklist

- If there is an **Educational Psychologist** involved with supporting the child's transition to school, they usually provide a **collaborative report** to the school the child will be going to which outlines the level of support they recommend for the child in their new setting. This report should help guide you to understand the needs of the child coming into your school.
- If there is **no Educational Psychologist** involved, the child's nursery/early years development centre (EYDC), should be able to provide a report about the child's development stage, any additional support needs and suggested level of support the child may require based on their experience of them within the nursery setting. Our **Family Support Team** can offer advice about this and talk through any concerns you may have about what support you feel the child needs in school and how you can meet those needs.
- Encourage the child's parents/carers to create a **Communication passport**, (sometimes called 'All About Me' ) which gives you important information about the child's communication needs, likes and dislikes and includes details of any health or developmental issues, sensory needs and family details, pets etc. See resources at the back of this booklet for examples of these.
- Children with additional educational support needs are entitled to an **Enhanced transition**. This means they usually receive extra visits to their new school before they start so they can meet some of the staff and become familiar with the environment. It usually also involves opportunities for you to have joint meetings with staff from the child's nursery and any other professionals who work with them so that you can discuss and agree the support the child will need.

It is useful to provide the child with photos/videos of the new school environment and staff who will be working with them so that parents can use these to create a simple story board for their child to talk through with them over the summer holidays to help him/her remember what the new setting will look like and create a feeling of familiarity before their first day. Summer can feel like a very long time for a child with Down's Syndrome to remember what school looked like when they last visited.

It is recommended that an **Occupational Therapist (OT)** completes an assessment of the school environment before the child starts school, so they can provide appropriate resources or tools to support the child's development needs and if any adjustments to the school environment need to be made, they will be ready before the child starts school.

- **Communication-** Children with Down's syndrome experience additional speech and language difficulties from having **short term auditory memory**, the store we use to hold, process, and understand spoken language.

A child's short-term auditory memory can greatly affect their ability to respond to or learn from spoken instruction or information. Children with Down's syndrome are strong visual learners, but often poor auditory learners due to having poor short-term auditory memory. It is best to limit the amount of verbal instruction given and allow extra time for processing verbal information. Using short simple sentences and giving instructions one at a time will positively support them in this area.

If child uses visual forms of communication and responds to Makaton, PECS, symbols or any other forms of Alternative Augmentative Communication (AAC) you will need to upskill the staff to use this. Introducing Makaton/Signalong/Board maker sign of the week for the class to learn helps everyone to positively learn about different ways to communicate. Using a visual board with Now and Next to keep the child on task and motivated.

- To support the child's **Speech and Language** development it is vital that the child and school receive regular input from a Speech and Language Therapist to support with a programme of individualised activities that school can use to support development of the child's language, understanding, communication and speech articulation. Some children with Down's syndrome can have **issues with chewing, swallowing/choking and acid reflux due to low muscle tone and poor oral motor skills**. It is therefore recommended that a risk assessment of the child's eating and drinking is completed if there is a hazard of choking or reflux.

- Most children with Down's syndrome often have issues with their **vision** i.e., difficulties with depth perception, visual acuity (low muscle tone in the eyes), poor peripheral vision and difficulty when focusing on near targets. If a child has been prescribed glasses it is essential they are encouraged to wear them throughout the school day. It can be useful to ask parents/carers for a spare pair to keep in school so they are never without them if they damage or lose them at home. Occupational Therapy (OT) can provide equipment to support the child's vision in the school environment and if a child has a diagnosed vision impairment you can also get input from the Visual Impairment (VI) team.
- Children with Down's syndrome often have **hearing issues**, most commonly conductive hearing loss, commonly known as Glue Ear which is caused by a build-up of wax or fluid in the ear often associated with them having a bad cold or from being congested which causes their hearing to be reduced. It is important to find out from the child's parents/carers if there are any issues with the child's hearing.
- In class it can be helpful to ensure that the child is seated within their own hearing distance and to speak directly to them, gain eye contact when speaking with them and reinforce speech with facial expression, sign, and gesture. There can also be difficulties with **auditory discrimination** and **auditory processing** and we encourage you to provide visual reinforcement for all verbal instructions given and when other children give an answer repeat this aloud to ensure that it has been heard. **Input from the Hearing Impairment (HI) team may be required for further advice.**

- Many children with Down's syndrome have a **short concentration span** and are **easily distracted**. They will benefit from having a range of short, focused and clearly defined tasks with short breaks in between. At carpet times it is recommended that the child should sit at (not on!) the class teacher's knee. A carpet square may help to encourage the child to sit in one place. An activity box containing a range of things that the child enjoys such as books, card games and fine motor skill games can be used when the child needs a change of activity or time out and can encourage choice within a structured situation. Allowing one other child to join in, can also be a good way of encouraging friendships and cooperation. It can also be useful for school to have a safe and quiet space where the child can go to if they need to take a break if they are feeling overwhelmed and to support them to engage in the situation better.
- Some children with Down's syndrome may not yet be **toilet trained** when they start school or might need **prompting to go to the toilet, need support with dressing/undressing, washing their hands or with personal care**. It is useful to be aware of these needs before the child starts to ensure you have adequate staffing to provide this support. Many children, including those with additional needs and disabilities do not show the signs that families have been encouraged to rely on to know when to start toilet training. Not showing the signs does not mean the child cannot toilet train. Rather than waiting for the child to appear to be ready to toilet train, it is recommended that you start to teach the child the skills that they will need to use the toilet. Some useful resources can be found at the back of this booklet.

- **Executive function** in children with Down's syndrome can be delayed and in addition to difficulties with staying on task and maintaining focus the child may also have difficulty with controlling impulses. The child may have no concept of danger therefore it is recommended that school complete a safety risk assessment before they start. This may include recommendations such as ensuring the playground is fenced off and that doors, gates and other areas of potential danger are always closed and the child having adequate support during the school day to keep them safe.
- **Difficulties with consolidation and retention** - Children with Down's syndrome may take longer to learn and consolidate new skills. Fluctuations in their ability to learn may occur daily. The child needs to acquire all new skills in a variety of different ways using concrete, hands-on activities in a carefully graded steps approach. They will also require additional time and opportunities for reinforcing and practising these skills.

- **Fine and gross motor skills**- Poor muscle tone and loose joints (hypotonia) are common in children with Down's syndrome and can affect their fine and gross motor skills. Milestones in motor development may be delayed which can limit experiences in the early years and slow down cognitive development. Many children take longer to process information from the senses resulting in slower reaction times when coordinating movements. There is also evidence of difficulties in adapting movements.

For example, when asked to finger tap faster a child may respond with more pressure. The physical structure of the hands often affects fine motor skills. The fingers tend to be shorter and stubbier with the thumb set lower down. Some children may not have all the bones present in the wrist. Motor skills improve with practice. It is essential to offer lots of opportunities for wrist and finger strengthening activities such as threading, drawing, tracing, sorting, cutting, and squeezing. Occupational Therapy can also support school with specialist fine motor activities and resources for the child.

- **Structure and routine** - Children with Down's Syndrome will prefer and succeed best in a structured environment with familiar routines and clearly focused activities. Informal times of the day are more difficult as children with Down's syndrome can be upset by sudden changes in their routine. Simple visual timetables using photographs or signs as prompt cards, will help prepare the child for each new activity in advance. Should there be any changes to the routine it is important to give plenty of advanced warning and inform the parent of changes so they can talk about it at home with the child, to prepare them for the change.

- The **curriculum may need to be differentiated** for subjects such as literacy and numeracy and possibly PE and other subjects depending on the child's level of comprehension, development and vocabulary. Local Authorities have a responsibility to ensure that the needs of each individual pupil (whose education they are responsible for) are met, provide 'adequate and efficient' education and additional support that enables each child to 'fully benefit' from their education.

**Down's Syndrome Scotland can provide training and support** for schools and our Teaching Reading and Numeracy modules are specifically designed to help schools differentiate the curriculum in these subjects.

- One of the biggest areas parents tell us they worry about is the **social gap** widening as their child progresses through school. Providing structured activities at play time to support the child to have positive opportunities to mix with their peers will support their social development. Schools can consider creating a Circle of Friends for the child and support their social development through teaching them using social stories about how to ask someone to play. Some schools also have a buddy system which can positively support a child during social breaks at school. You can find resources on this at the back of this booklet.
- For children first starting school it can feel like a noisy and busy environment, and especially so for children with Down's syndrome who may have **sensory issues** and are either overly (hyper) sensitive or under (hypo) sensitive to certain things like noise, textures, lighting etc. If the child starting your school has sensory issues it is recommended that you seek specialist guidance from an Occupational Therapist (OT) to help you to effectively support the child's sensory needs in school.

- Many schools who have a child/children with Down's syndrome in their school access our **Achieving Better Communication (ABC) programme** to support the child's communication development and for school staff to learn the specific techniques and strategies that we use on the programme. You can find out more about our ABC programme [here](#).

If the child joining your school currently accesses the ABC programme you could consider facilitating their session in school so that the child can continue receiving consistent support for their communication development.

Please speak to the child's parent and our ABC team who can advise on how you can facilitate this, you can contact them here [ABC@dsscotland.org.uk](mailto:ABC@dsscotland.org.uk).

- It is a good idea to identify how you will communicate with parents /carers to inform them how the child has been during their school day. We recommend that a **two-way communication diary** is used so that you can keep the parent/carer up to date with the child's day at school and have a mechanism so the parent/carer can also keep school informed about the child's wellbeing and any factors that may affect their time at school such as their child has not had a good night's sleep, has been unwell, or upset.

# Support For you

We are here to help teachers and educational support staff in supporting and positively including children with Down's syndrome in school.

We provide support to educational professionals on a variety of topics including;

- IEP Target setting and reviews
- Classroom support strategies
- Teaching and differentiating literacy and numeracy
- Transitions planning
- Positive behaviour support
- Supporting Friendships and Relationships
- Teaching and managing understanding about Puberty & Adolescence

We can also attend meetings to help transition planning through education as well as annual reviews, IEP, CSP reviews or Child Plan Meetings.

We work jointly with a large variety of professionals supporting children or young people with Down's syndrome, providing information, strategies, and support, although not direct support to the child or young person.

Our Family Support Service Team are here to help with any information or support you need. You can get in touch at

[familysupportservice@dsscotland.org.uk](mailto:familysupportservice@dsscotland.org.uk) or give us a call on 0300 030 2121.

## Meet the Team

Our Team are available to support and help you in supporting and positively including children with Down's syndrome at your school.

You can get in touch by calling us on [0300 030 2121](tel:03000302121) or by emailing us on [familysupportservice@dsscotland.org.uk](mailto:familysupportservice@dsscotland.org.uk).



Shona Robertson

Family Support Lead  
North West



Debbie Campbell

North East



Karen Philip

Central



Laura Traynor



Lauren Lockhart

South



[0300 030 2121](tel:03000302121)



[familysupportservice@dsscotland.org.uk](mailto:familysupportservice@dsscotland.org.uk)

## Training and Consultation Support

We offer bespoke training and support on specific topics as well as dedicated consultation sessions and a series of four on-line interactive training modules with one of our Support Team.

Our Training modules cover:

- Meeting the Learning needs of Children with Down's syndrome
- Teaching Reading Using the Whole Word Approach
- Teaching Numbers and Everyday Maths Skills
- Understanding & Supporting Behaviour that Communicates
- Supporting Young People with Growing up, Relationships and Boundaries

Our **bespoke consultation service** can support you with specific guidance or information related to the development or learning for a child with Down's syndrome and provide practical and effective strategies to positively support their inclusion in your nursery. A dedicated, in-person consultation visit includes observation of an individual child within the nursery environment and a feedback and support session with key staff. These sessions can also include support with how to differentiate curriculum learning materials and a written feedback consultation summary report is provided.

More information about the training and support we can provide for educational professionals can be found at our website [here](#) or by contacting Varshali Swadi our Professional Engagement and Training Coordinator at [varshali@dsscotland.org.uk](mailto:varshali@dsscotland.org.uk).



## Communication Training and Support

Many nurseries and schools access our Achieving Better Communication (ABC) programme to support communication development. You can find out more about our ABC Programme [here](#).

We can also provide Makaton workshops and Communication Skills training in schools. Our ABC Lead, Katy Lironi, is a qualified Makaton Tutor and is available to support you and nursery with Makaton training, workshops, resources, and enquiries.

You can email Katy at: [katy@dsscotland.org.uk](mailto:katy@dsscotland.org.uk)



# Resources

- Examples of Communication Passports
  - [All about me](#)
  - [PAMIS Communication Passport](#)
- Help with Toileting
  - Eric (The Children's Bowel & Bladder Charity) have lots of resources including a social script, flashcards and videos - you can view these [here](#)
  - Do2Learn also have helpful visuals and cards you can use in the classroom - you can view these [here](#)
- Fostering Friendships
  - Twinkl have resources on activities and practical tips for helping support friendships you can view these [here](#)
  - Teach starter have a social story that you can use prior to playtime to help develop social skills when asking friends to play - you can view this [here](#)

## Our Resources

We have a number of resources which might be useful to you;

- [Makaton for the School Day](#)
- [Developing Maths Skills](#)
- [Developing Early Skills](#)
- [Developing Language Skills](#)

You can find out more and view these resources [here](#).

---

# This booklet is designed to help you support and positively include children with Down's syndrome in your school.

Down's Syndrome Scotland provides support to families, carers and professionals who support for people with Down's syndrome.

If you would like to access further support please call us on 0300 030 2121 or email [familysupportservice@dsscotland.org.uk](mailto:familysupportservice@dsscotland.org.uk).

For further information visit:

[www.dsscotland.org.uk](http://www.dsscotland.org.uk)



T: 0300 030 2121  
E: [info@dsscotland.org.uk](mailto:info@dsscotland.org.uk)  
W: [www.dsscotland.org.uk](http://www.dsscotland.org.uk)

 [facebook.com/dsscotland](https://facebook.com/dsscotland)  
 [twitter.com/DSScotland](https://twitter.com/DSScotland)

Down's Syndrome Scotland is a Charitable Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in Scotland No. 356717. Scottish Charity No. SC011012

