



## Teaching new skills and building competence

*The development of new skills is a lifelong occupation for all of us. Often we are not aware that we are assimilating a new skill, it just happens automatically. But for people who have an intellectual disability this natural assimilation of skills may not happen as easily, or may not happen at all. Often skills that are easily picked up by others need to be explicitly taught to people with Down syndrome. People with Down syndrome are also likely to need structured assistance to learn skills that their peers may achieve just by watching others do them or by “experience”.*

It may be tempting to think that a particular skill may be beyond the reach of your family member with Down syndrome, but you should try to always keep your expectations high. The challenge is to consider each new skill not in terms of whether it can be achieved, but how to make it accessible so that it can be achieved. Most people can learn most things if presented and taught in an appropriate way and with plenty of practice and repetition to help become accomplished. Very often the key to success is breaking the skill down into manageable tasks or steps and presenting it in a way which builds on the learning strengths of the person. More on this later.

### What to teach

Skills can be categorised into a wide spectrum of areas such as self-care, household, play and leisure, physical, safety, and functional academic. Here are some tips to help you decide particular skills that could be taught:

- Look at prepared checklists of skills in different areas.
- Draw up a list of specific skills that your child would benefit from at this time and in the near future. It might be useful to consider what skills age peers have already mastered and those they are working on and to use that list as a basic reference.
- Consider the skills needed for a regular day. Think about what the person can do in a particular

skills area and what they currently need assistance with, and use this to think about an appropriate sequence of skills that would be useful.

Now target a particular skill. Here are some considerations to help you choose the skill to teach:

#### 1. Build on existing skills – you can’t run afore you can walk.

Skills acquisition happens in a natural progression from simple to more complex, with each new skill acting as a building block supporting the next. Imagine trying to learn to tie your shoelaces if you have not yet learned how to put the shoes on. Think about what the individual can already do and what they are good at.

#### 2. Choose skills needed in daily activities.

Teach skills that will facilitate everyday life as experienced by your child. You may think it is important for your child to learn to clean their shoes (and it is!) but it may be more important right now for your child that they can make their own breakfast drink.

#### 3. Choose skills that will be used often.

It is important to choose skills that are used often not only because there is obviously more need to learn them, but also because success builds motivation and success is more likely in skills that get frequent and repeated practice. For example, if the person is not currently in a situation where they need to cross the road each day and will only rarely need this skill, it may be better to defer it to a later time.

#### 4. Choose skills that build on positive social image – or that facilitate a role or responsibility.

The abilities of people with Down syndrome might often be underestimated and it is beneficial to learn skills that not only support living an ordinary life but also build positive self esteem and social image. Consider the skills that age peers would have mastered or be learning. For example, for teenagers and young adults, learning to use a mobile phone is critical.

#### 5. Choose skills the person wants to learn.

Ask or give a choice of which skills to learn. Use picture communication symbols or other visuals if needed. Choice is a powerful motivator to learn and succeed. Even if the person does not directly communicate a choice, they may show you by attempting a skill. For example, trying to tie shoelaces or get on their bike, or “borrowing” a mobile phone. You can also probably guess what they would like to learn. We all learn better things that we are interested in learning, and succeeding at a skill which your child really wanted to learn may help motivation to then learn a skill that they might not enjoy as much but is nonetheless important, such as brushing teeth or doing the laundry.

#### 6. Choose skills that increase independence.

All the skills you teach will have some bearing on the individual’s level of independence, even though this impact may not always be immediately obvious. In choosing a skill to teach, consider in what way this learning will enhance the person’s ability to do something for themselves or without assistance. Consider which would have a beneficial impact on you or other members of the family too. For example, if a child can make their own lunch, that may free up some of your time in the morning.

### How to teach

For this we need to know something about the way in which people with Down syndrome learn. The following points will be helpful:

- Visual learning: People with Down syndrome generally have comparatively strong visual learning skills - learning is made easier by adding visuals, concrete materials and demonstration. It is easier for people with Down syndrome to learn by seeing or doing than by listening.
- Errorless learning: Learning will be more successful if it is made into achievable steps that the learner can succeed at. Individuals with Down syndrome may not derive benefit by “learning from mistakes”. In fact, once a mistake has been made there may be a maddening tendency to repeat it. It is better to ensure success the first time.
- Practice, practice, practice: Lots of repetition will be helpful, and in different contexts, in order to

generalise a skill and ensure it doesn’t only apply it to a particular situation or context.

- Small steps: New learning should be broken down into small component steps (see below) which can be systematically learned.
- Praise is always the best motivator.

#### Modelling

Modelling can be a very effective way of teaching new skills and good habits because people with Down syndrome have comparatively strong visual awareness and visual learning skills. Consciously modelling actions and skills as you go about your everyday life is helpful. In the case of adults, it may also be a more respectful way of teaching than simply telling them what to do. As you model a skill, talk aloud to yourself to help show the thought processes. For example, “Let me see... Should I wear a coat today? It’s winter and it’s going to be cold outside so I’d better wear a coat.” Other people in your household can also act as models.

Remember that you aren’t teaching or telling. Don’t tell the person to “do it this way”. Modelling communicates that “this is the way I do something” without implying that the other person must do it the same way. Modeling can be used to teach many daily living skills and health and safety skills at home, such as healthy food choices, using and cleaning up the kitchen, personal hygiene and road safety.

Source: Judith Greenbaum (2007) “Modeling” in Life planning for adults with developmental disabilities. A guide for parents and family members.

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## Breaking a skill into parts – task analysis

All skills can be broken down into component parts or steps. The number of steps will depend on the skills the person already has and how quickly or easily they learn new things. For example, here are three possible versions of the skill of making a cup of tea:

Version 1	Version 2	Version 3
1. Boil the kettle.	1. Fill the kettle with water.	1. Pick up the kettle.
2. Put the teabag in the cup.	2. Plug the kettle in to the electricity.	2. Open the lid on the kettle.
3. Pour boiling water into the cup.	3. Switch on the kettle.	3. Hold the kettle under the tap.
4. Stir the tea.	4. Fetch a cup.	4. Turn the tap on.
5. Remove the teabag.	5. Put a teabag in the cup.	5. Turn the tap off when the water reaches the mark.
6. Add milk and sugar if you wish.	6. Wait for the kettle to boil.	6. Replace the lid... etc
	7. Switch off the kettle when it boils... etc	

When breaking down a skill you will teach, consider which steps are needed to make the skill accessible to the individual. Those with fewer prior skills, or who learn more slowly, will need the skill to be broken into smaller component parts and will need more practice in order to master the skill. It will help if you write down the component parts of a skill while actually doing it yourself. This helps to ensure that you don't inadvertently miss out needed steps because you yourself do them without thinking, and that you get the right sequence of steps.

## Teaching the skill

Bring on the patience! New skills take time and will usually be learned gradually and require lots of repetition and practice before competence is reached. In many cases the best way of teaching a new skill will be simply by showing or demonstrating what to do, using simple language to explain as you go, and then providing the opportunity for the person to do it themselves.

"Watch me, this is how you do it... Fill the kettle to this mark..."

"OK, now you have a go"

Remember to praise the effort, or single out steps that are accomplished successfully and praise them, even though complete success may not have been achieved. For example:

"You filled the cup to just the right level. Weltl done. Let's do it again – remember to wait until the light goes off on the kettle, so you know it has boiled properly."

"You did a great job with that. Let's do some more practice adding the sugar."

Try to ignore the bits that have not gone right and focus and praise what has been successful.

In most cases it will help with mastery of the skill to have a visual sequence of the steps needed available for reference (on the wall, in a visual notebook, in a set of

cue cards on a keyring or lanyard).

For skills which are more complex or will be more challenging for the person to learn, it will not be possible to teach simply by demonstrating and/or with reference to visual supports. In these cases you may need to adopt a more detailed and structured step-by-step approach in which each part of a skill is taught individually and mastery progresses through success in each step.

Before you start teaching a skill, think about what sort of assistance may be needed for the person to complete each step. For some parts little or no assistance may be needed whilst others may need a lot of assistance initially, such as physical assistance to hold or direct things. Once you start teaching, follow through to complete the whole skill. Be aware of the level of help you are providing, being mindful that you are aiming for independent mastery of the skill:

- Provide only as much help as is needed – if physical assistance is not needed, don't give it.
- The amount of help given should be progressively reduced as the person gets better at doing it.

Another useful strategy is "backward chaining" a skill. Having broken the skill down into the steps that you feel will be needed to achieve success, start teaching with the last step of the skill – the one that is needed to complete the task. Once this has been mastered,

move backwards in the sequence to include the one before that, and so on until the whole skill can be accomplished. For example, start teaching a child to make their bed by pre-doing most of it yourself and showing them only how to do the final straightening of the doona. When they can do this successfully each time, move on to teach how to pull up and straighten the doona, then add in shaking and positioning the pillow, and so on. By starting with the last step of a task or skill, success is immediate.

Building competence may look like a never-ending (and time-consuming) journey when you start to consider all the skills that you could usefully teach your child or family member with Down syndrome. But before you allow yourself to get completely overwhelmed, make sure you stop and think. This is the time to look at setting a couple of achievable goals for a fixed time period, such as a couple of really useful skills, or steps towards a skill, to master this year. Remember that none of us ever learns everything that we could possibly learn, and we all make choices as to what is the most useful, appropriate or realistically achievable learning that we aim for. The important thing is to keep moving in the direction of increased competence, at whatever pace works for the individual. And always remember to celebrate the achievements, big and small, along the way.

### Bibliography

This article is based on material derived from:

Karen Nankervis & Alan Hudson (2003) "Module 5: Developing more skills in your child" in Signposts for Building Better Behaviour RMIT University in association with Parenting Research Centre, Melbourne

The Signposts program, developed by Parenting Research Centre, helps families develop strategies to prevent difficult behaviour, encourage appropriate behaviour and to teach children new skills. You can obtain more information by calling PRC on (03) 8660 3562 or at [www.parentingrc.org.au](http://www.parentingrc.org.au)

Bruce L Baker & Alan J Brightman (2004) Steps to independence. Teaching everyday skills to children with special needs (fourth edition)

This useful book deals comprehensively with both general principles for teaching new skills and specific skills' areas, with lots of examples, visuals and skill checklists. It is available for Down Syndrome Victoria members to borrow from our Resource Library.

Down Syndrome Victoria (2009) Learners with Down syndrome. A handbook for teaching professionals

An introduction to the learning strengths and challenges associated with Down syndrome, and other considerations for teaching professionals who have a child with Down syndrome in their class. Available (RRP \$9.90) from Down Syndrome Victoria.

Judith Greenbaum (2007) Life planning for adults with developmental disabilities. A guide for parents and family members

This handbook provides a great starting point for families supporting young people and adults in planning for their adult life. Putting the individual with a disability at the centre of the process, it provides helpful advice and planning tools for different aspects of adult life including accommodation, employment and social networking. It is available for Down Syndrome Victoria members to borrow from our Resource Library.



This is an example of how Boardmaker software can be used to produce picture communication symbols representing the tasks involved with road safety. Boardmaker is now available for member use at the Down Syndrome Victoria office in Fitzroy (by appointment only).

Pic: Boardmaker image