



Children with Down syndrome may find verbal instructions difficult to follow and may 'zone out' during instructions or group discussions.

Including a child with Down syndrome in community activities

There is a specific development profile associated with Down syndrome which highlights relative strengths and weaknesses. Understanding these will assist you in including a child with Down syndrome in recreation, sport and leisure activities.

Developmental strengths and weaknesses associated with Down syndrome!

Children with Down syndrome usually enjoy interacting with others, learn from watching and copying and will learn a lot from working with other children.

- ★ Maximise opportunities for working in pairs and small groups with children who can demonstrate the right thing to do.
- ★ Only attach an adult helper to the child when absolutely necessary.

Children with Down syndrome can usually understand considerably more than they can express verbally (use of signing and gesture to communicate is an area of strength).

- ★ Avoid relying on spoken language for communication.
- ★ Where possible, ask the child to demonstrate understanding, rather than showing it by speaking.
- ★ Adopt gestures or signs (or visual supports) for key communication and teach them to the whole group.
- ★ Allow some time to become used to the child's speech... it is OK to ask the child to speak slowly and clearly, or show you, because you have not understood properly.

Speech intelligibility can also be an issue.

Difficulties with short term memory make listening difficult, and affect abilities in thinking, reasoning and problem solving. Children with Down syndrome may find verbal instructions difficult to follow and may 'zone out' during instructions or group discussions.

- ★ Keep the child close to the instructor and watch for signs of lost attention.
- ★ Develop strategies to maintain focus – eye contact, praise, repeating a key point.
- ★ Use plain language supported by gestures, signs and visual cues.
- ★ Slow down and break information into small chunks.
- ★ Recap and check understanding from group – repeat it!
- ★ WAIT! Allow the child several extra seconds to process information and/or formulate a response.

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Successful inclusion rests on positive attitude so the key to making a success of this is the way you approach it.

Children with Down syndrome generally have a good visual memory and are good visual learners. They will benefit significantly from the use of visual reinforcement, visual cues and concrete materials.

- ★ Use visual support (sign, gesture, visual aids) wherever practical and appropriate.
- ★ When explaining a task, model what the child needs to do.

Motor development is usually delayed and may delay progress in physical and sport activities, self-care and handling equipment. Most children with Down syndrome have hypotonia at birth (their muscles are less well developed than usual). This improves with age but may still impact on physical abilities during school age years.

- ★ Assign tasks, responsibilities and roles at a level appropriate to the child's abilities.

Social behaviour is a strength in young people with Down syndrome – if encouraged and expected to do so, young people with Down syndrome generally develop age-appropriate social behaviour.

- ★ Apply the same behaviour norms as for everyone in the group.
- ★ Be prepared to put in a little extra effort to help the child learn these: break into small steps that are easily understood, demonstrate the right thing to do, give plenty of reminders, praise instances of good behaviour or doing the right thing.

¹'Developmental profile associated with Down syndrome' in Sue Buckley & Ben Sacks (2002) *An overview of the development of children with Down syndrome*

Successful inclusion rests on positive attitude so the key to making a success of this is the way you approach it. The attitude of the group leader is very important, both for the self esteem and confidence of the child with Down syndrome, and as a model for the rest of the group and their interaction with the child. Expect and encourage participation in all activities, support developing independence, and model and expect respect and tolerance for the individual differences within your group. Where possible, facilitate connections between the child with Down syndrome and other children in the group, and encourage the building of friendships.

Please do not hesitate to contact the staff at Down Syndrome Victoria if you need more information or would like to discuss anything with us.

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