

Early Reading Development



Reading accelerates spoken language progress. Children w/ Down syndrome of all ages are usually able to learn more effectively from what they can **see** than from what they hear. Therefore, children will understand and remember how to say words and sentences earlier if they learn to read from a young age.

The progress of children varies. The range of reading vocabulary learned by children with Down syndrome by 4 years-old may vary between 1 or 2 words up to 400 words or more.

A small number of children find it difficult to remember words even with structured teaching, but can still gain from the language activities and games that are used to teach reading, especially if the activities are supported by pictures.

Children benefit from reading, even when they cannot read themselves. Being involved in the literate community is the right of every child and does not depend on their ability to read or write independently. Many of the benefits for knowledge and for language learning that come from being able to read can be gained from being read to every day. This includes daily reading of storybooks to children and making individual books (e.g. Billy's 'Family book) and topic books (e.g. Zoo Animals book).

Some children will first need to learn the basic skills used for learning how to read, for example, how to watch, listen, match, and select, and they require positive teaching methods (e.g. errorless learning) to successfully learn these skills. Once they have them, these skills will be used for learning across the curriculum for many years.

Early reading accelerates reading progress in school. Most children with Down syndrome will learn to read at school, even if they have not started earlier, but introducing reading at an earlier stage is likely to accelerate their progress, even if the child can only read one or two words when he or she starts school. Showing that children have already begun to learn to read and enjoy this activity may prevent unnecessary delays in teaching reading at school, especially if teachers are waiting for signs of 'reading readiness', as such signs may not apply to children with Down syndrome. In general, use structured reading activities from the stage when the child understands 50 words and is beginning to link 2 words together.

Many children with Down syndrome between the ages of 4 and 5 years, who have received reading instruction from a young age, will have a sight vocabulary, will be able to read words in sentences, will be able to make short sentences from words they can read, to read 'home-made books' to others, and will know letter names and sounds (although they may not be able to say all of these) when they start school.

Listen to the child and once they can communicate, take the child's own words and make the shortest correct sentence for them. For example, if the child says "sand" or "play sand" when asked "what did you do today?" write 'I played in the sand'. This strategy, called expansion, is used to help children develop their spoken language. Start by teaching your child words you know they understand and then introduce new ones in order to use reading activities to teach comprehension of new words and grammar, once your child is showing he can read with understanding.

As with all teaching activities, it is important to make learning enjoyable and successful by planning appropriate activities for the individual child and by supporting success by taking turns at the activity with your child, by modeling correct responses, by prompting the child to succeed and by creating an atmosphere of fun. Remember that repetition and correct practice are the keys to successful learning and that the main difference between faster and slower learners is that slower learners need more practice and praise. Do not assume that the slower learner cannot learn and give up too soon. In addition to teaching a planned sight vocabulary in small steps, make simple books for language teaching and read them with your child, put names on items at home and at school, wear name badges, play games with words and you will find that your child will progress.

If a child is going to enjoy learning to read, and if reading activities are going to help speech and language development, the child must be actively involved in the whole activity, not just passively reading or copying work prepared for him. Use word cards and to build sentences. Active thinking and engagement in the task is necessary for learning.

The materials for structured learning can be made at home and include:

- word cards (purchased or home-made, hand written or computer printed)
- home-made books and games, such as matching games, lift-the-flap books, 'fishing' games, 'finding' games, and 'shopping' games
- photographs and pictures
- published reading books and vocabulary and topic books
- early phonics activities and schemes to learn about letter sounds and names.

In general, children with DS learn to read in the same ways as all other children but they may need smaller steps, more practice and more structured guidance to achieve success.

Teaching methods can include:

- matching games of various types – matching words to pictures and objects, sorting games
- selecting games (e.g. ‘give me the word for?’, ‘Where’s the ...?’, ‘Let’s find...’, ‘Show me...?’)
- offering limited choices to help children choose words correctly
- lift-the-flap books where the word is printed on the outside and the picture is underneath
- action games where the word is read and the action is then undertaken.

The choice of words for any child will depend on the stage the child has reached in learning language, the child’s age, cultural and family background, the child’s interests and the things he likes to communicate about, and the curriculum the child is learning from. Words that are very different in size or outline shape are likely to help beginners to succeed, such as ‘cat’ and ‘airplane’ or ‘dog’ and ‘banana’.

Children who have 50 to 100 single words (signed or spoken) in their expressive vocabularies and are developing two-word comprehension should learn to read words that they already understand. These are likely to be children w/ DS between the ages of 30 to 42 months, but some children will be school-age when they reach the 100-word stage and a 2-word comprehension.

First, reading activities should be used to teach them how to link 2 words and ideas together, therefore the first words chosen for reading should be words to make 2-word phrases, such as ‘more dinner’ or ‘Daddy gone’. Practice reading two words together often helps children to start saying two words together.

For children who are not yet joining 2 words together, but who can read some words, teach possessives, such as ‘Mommy’s car’ or ‘Daddy’s bag’. Add color and other attribute words, such as ‘red car’ or ‘big ball’.

To help children join 3 words in their speech, make three-word phrases, such as ‘Sarah likes bananas’ or ‘Sam drinks juice’. 4 family names, 4 food types and one verb will generate 16 different 3-word phrases.

How to teach matching, selecting and naming games:

- make 2 identical flashcards for each of 4 words
- put one word in front of the child and give the duplicate to the child and say “This says” – put it with the one that is the same
- match a photo to the word or turn a card over to show the corresponding picture
- use lotto games or 4-6 words of the same theme (e.g. family members, foods, animals, et)
- match picture to picture – word to word – then picture to word.

Matching words to pictures allows children to demonstrate that they can read them without having to verbalize the words.

Reading games should be short and end on a successful note, using turn-taking and asking the child if they would like to play again. Make materials interesting, personalized and let them show others when they visit. Also, teach new words in categories (animals, colors, foods, etc.)

What about phonics?

Young children w/ DS learn to read by remembering whole words and their meanings before they are able to separate out the sounds in words and apply their letter-sound knowledge to the task of reading and writing. They are, however able to learn about letters, the sounds associated with the letters and their names, and this ability can be used to help their speech perception, production and literacy skills in primary school. Therefore, young children should have access to typical preschool learning games about letters and sounds of their language and success in this area can be used explicitly to help them to speak more clearly. Learning about letters will help them in school, where they will continue to participate in phonic teaching activities with their peers. Meanwhile, their sight word vocabulary for reading whole words will be increasing and at a later stage in their reading than is usual for typically-developing peers, they will be able to use phonic skills for reading and writing. Children will learn how to ‘hear’ and ‘see’ the letters within words, beginning with short, phonetically regular words of 2 and 3 letters. Working with rhyming sets of words helps to simplify the task.

A child should have a sight vocabulary of at least 50 words, which he or she can read with confidence, in different sentences, with understanding, before teaching any phonics. The words that the child can already read with confidence can then be used to teach him/her letter sound links by putting together several of the child's own 'sight' words which rhyme (e.g. word families – ing, -at, -ake). Children with Down Syndrome proceed through the same stages as other children in first establishing a sight vocabulary (logographic reading) and then being able to use phonic knowledge to spell and to decode words (alphabetic reading) but they rely on logographic strategies to read for longer (that is at higher reading levels) than typically-developing children.

Reading and phonetic awareness requires good auditory discrimination; therefore for all children with DS it is advisable to take into account possible hearing difficulties at all times, by gaining children's full attention and working in environments that do not have competing background noise.

References:

Gillian Bird and Sue Buckley, *Reading and Writing Development for Children with Down Syndrome (0-5 years)*, 2001.

Patricia Logan Oelwein, *Teaching Reading to Children with Down Syndrome* (2009).

Revised 2015