

Supporting Children with Down Syndrome in the Classroom

Children with Down syndrome have physical and health conditions that affect their success in the classroom. Here are some things you need to be aware of and tips to help support the student.

Hearing & Vision

Many children with Down syndrome have hearing loss and vision problems. Recognize that a student may seem to be ignoring instructions, but actually may not be able to hear you. If you notice this happening, alert the parents as these problems can greatly affect the student's ability to succeed academically and socially.

How to help:

- Place the student's desk close to the front of the classroom.
- Use consistent verbal prompts.
- Use visual support, including a larger font.

Working Memory

Most students with Down syndrome have short-term and working memory difficulties. This makes it difficult to access, understand, and process information at the same speed as other students. They may have difficulty retaining verbal and complex (multi-step) directions.

How to help:

- Use visual reminders, prompts, and repetition.
- Allow more time for responses.
- Use *simple* directions (e.g., "First work, then lunch.").
- Break down directions into small steps.

Sleep Apnea

Sleep apnea is common in children with Down syndrome. It can cause difficulties with memory and lead students to become more tired and lethargic. Sleep apnea may also cause hyperactivity in students.

How to help:

- Talk to parents if you recognize these issues so sleep patterns can be explored.
- Schedule the challenging activities at the beginning of the day.

Speech Intelligibility

It can be difficult at times to understand students with Down syndrome. Their low muscle tone, jaw movement, and hearing problems make speaking difficult.

How to help:

- Allow more time for responses.
- Allow use of a communication device.
- If the student uses ASL, learn basic signs to help with communication.
- Don't say, "I can't understand you." Try something more positive like, "Tell me more," or "Show me."

Ear, Nose, and Throat

Students with Down syndrome typically have compact bone and soft tissue structures in the ear, nose, and throat. This increases susceptibility to upper respiratory infections and increases sensitivity to loud sounds and vibrations.

How to help:

- Be aware of the classroom noise level.
- Warn the student ahead of time if a loud noise is expected (e.g., fire drill).
- If appropriate, noise-blocking headphones can help.

Low Muscle Tone

You may notice mobility, posture, breathing, and speech difficulties, lethargy, and poor reflexes. This is due to the low muscle tone of your student with Down syndrome.

How to help:

- Allow extra time to complete tasks.
- Use a slant board and multi-sensory activities.
- Adjust desk height so feet touch the floor.
- Allow positional support when floor sitting (e.g., pillow or chair).