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## Down syndrome and learning

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### Summary

- Early intervention programs help children with Down syndrome reach their potential.
  - Most babies and young children with Down syndrome can and do attend childcare centres, playgroups and preschool settings.
  - Children with Down syndrome can attend mainstream schools.
  - Many students with Down syndrome reach Year 12 and go on to post-school training or tertiary education.
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Although the most important influence on early development is daily interaction and activities within the family, children with Down syndrome also benefit from structured learning opportunities. Families are encouraged to access the early learning and intervention services that are available from infancy. This will support the development of some of the most important early childhood skills.

Socially appropriate behaviour should be encouraged and expected right from the beginning. Children with Down syndrome benefit from boundary setting in the same way as other children. Parenting a child with Down syndrome will, in many ways, not be very different from parenting any other child. Good parenting practices apply to all children. And for all children, consistency of approach is important.

### Early intervention programs and preschool

Most babies and young children with Down syndrome can and do attend childcare centres, playgroups and preschool settings alongside children of the same age. They will learn a great deal from joining in with other young children.

Early learning and intervention specialists work with families to encourage learning and development in the daily life of the child.

Children with Down syndrome can be included in all activities and should have the same expectations placed on them for good behaviour and responsibility as other children do. There are no behaviours specific to children with Down syndrome. However, sometimes the inability to express themselves with words can lead to frustration. Instead, children with Down syndrome will try to express themselves through behaviours – sometimes undesirable ones.

It is often necessary to look beyond a behaviour and find the real message that the child is trying to express. This helps to understand and deal with the behaviour. It is often because of a lack of understanding about the underlying cause of a behaviour that people with Down syndrome are labelled as being stubborn.

### School years

Children with Down syndrome can attend the school of their parents' choice. In the past, many young people with Down syndrome have attended separate schools for students with intellectual disabilities. However, research shows that the majority of children with Down syndrome make the best progress when they are educated in mainstream schools alongside their peers.

A student with Down syndrome is more likely to experience success in a school where inclusion is embraced and supported as part of the school culture, and where the different learning needs of all the students are acknowledged and properly addressed.

Research also shows that the whole school benefits from including students with disabilities as part of the school community. A range of students in every class will benefit from strategies developed to meet the learning needs of a student with Down syndrome. The best outcomes are achieved when appropriate support is provided to

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teachers to fully include the student in the class.

Children with Down syndrome should be provided with additional support to access the regular curriculum. The level of support and amount of program modification required will vary from one student to another.

### **Learning potential**

People with Down syndrome generally take longer to learn new things. New skills may need to be broken down into smaller steps than for other learners and more repetition may be needed to retain learned skills. Children with Down syndrome may require more structure in their activities so that they can work independently in class.

The gap in skills and learning between children with Down syndrome and other children will grow with age. By secondary school, the gap may be quite significant. People with Down syndrome do not plateau or stop learning new skills in their teenage or adult years. They will continue to make steady progress and continue learning throughout life if given the opportunity to do so.

Many students with Down syndrome reach Year 12 and go on to post-school training or tertiary education. Access to a range of work experience opportunities is very important in helping young people with Down syndrome to make informed choices about their life after school. Young people with Down syndrome face greater challenges in leaving school and making the transition to adult life than their peers, and more planning is likely to be needed than for other young people.

While everyone wants their child to experience success in school, it is also important to note that academic success is not the key to being able to lead an ordinary life. Many young people leave school with limited academic skills, yet are well equipped to lead a happy, fulfilling and independent life as a productive member of the community.

### **Where to get help**

- Down Syndrome Victoria Tel. 1300 658 873
- Better Start for Children with Disability Tel. 1800 242 636

### **Things to remember**

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- Children with Down syndrome can attend mainstream schools.
- Many students with Down syndrome reach Year 12 and go on to post-school training or tertiary education.

**This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:**

Down Syndrome Association of Victoria

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