



Informing, Empowering and Changing Lives Training Conference 2014

Supporting friends and siblings of children with Down's syndrome

Compiled by Claire Fisher, with contributions by the parents of WDDSSG

Supporting Friends and Siblings of Children with Down's Syndrome

Most siblings of a child with Down's syndrome grow up accepting their brother or sister for who they are. Many will, at some point, realise that there are differences between their sibling and other children. In a school environment it is common for children to have questions about why a child with Down's syndrome behaves in the way they do? Why they are allowed to 'get away' with things that other children aren't allowed to do? Why they have an adult with them all the time? In the early years, children often just see play mates and do not notice the differences. But as the children grow older it can be helpful to explain more about Down's syndrome and disabilities in general.



We are all children

We believe that the most important lesson you can teach children when learning about disability, is that everyone is a person, and everyone should be valued. Children with Down's syndrome have feelings and emotions and other children should be asked to treat them how they would like to be treated.

The best way to explain that a child with Down's syndrome is a valued member of our community, is to model it by example. Ensuring that all children in a class feel valued, and encouraging inclusion will help children to see that a child with Down's syndrome is a child too, no different to the other children in the class. Be sure to celebrate the achievements of the child with Down's syndrome no matter how small. Give opportunities for peers to do the same. Make sure the small achievements of the child with Down's syndrome are given the same recognition as other children's achievements. Put their work on display with the other children's work. Let them be proud of what they have created – do not be tempted to alter it to make it up to the same standard as their peers. Children with Down's syndrome have the same desires to form friendships as their peers. It can be really beneficial to show other children in the class how to play with the child with Down's syndrome, how to engage them with things they are interested and how to help and support them. As the children get older, it may be appropriate to remind them that bullying will not be tolerated. Mostly, WDDSSG members have not needed to worry about this as the peers around their child have been supportive and have genuinely liked their child.





“Last week she was doing the 200m sprint in games. My child is not good at running. She was last but when she got to the finish line she was cheered and clapped by everyone – but she did it and that’s why she was cheered – everyone was genuinely happy for her because she did what was asked of her”

We are all different

All children are the same but different. Everybody has different strengths and faces different challenges. Although people with Down’s syndrome appear different, it is important to remember we are all different. Girls are different to boys, yet they are all children. This is the same for children with and without Down’s syndrome; it is helpful to focus on what the child can do as opposed to what they can’t. Children should be helped to realise this diversity in life should be something to be celebrated and a child with any disability is no more different than anyone else.



“We’ve always told our children that it doesn’t matter how different we all are, we should always be accepted for who we are. We celebrate our achievements together”



Children with Down’s syndrome may need extra help and time to learn new skills. They may start walking and talking at an older age than their peers. They may need help from a teaching assistant in class all the time to help them with their learning. Try to use positive language when talking to other children about the challenges children with Down’s syndrome face. Help children to see that the child is still learning and give them strategies for helping with this. Simple things like teaching peers Makaton signs and encouraging them to use them around the child with Down’s syndrome can help a young child engage a child with Down’s syndrome. Children with Down’s syndrome may learn in a different way to other children in the class which is why they may have their own separate lessons. At WDDSSG we have often found that other children are really willing to help children with Down’s syndrome. As the child gets older though, it is important they get a chance to accomplish tasks themselves and other children don’t take over and do it for them.

“If I was to tell someone how to explain to other children what to say, I would say children with Down’s syndrome are just like you and me – sometimes they may struggle with things and you should ask if you can help (but don’t try to take over and do it for them). People with Down’s syndrome learn at a slower pace but are the same as you with feelings and emotions, so just treat them as you want to be treated”

We can learn about Down's syndrome

Some children will just accept the child with Down's syndrome without questioning their differences whereas others will have questions. It is important to be honest with the answers children may have about Down's syndrome. Different children will have different reactions to news that another child may never walk or talk properly, or may be saddened if there are health issues involved. Depending on the age of the child, there may be different explanations and levels of details given. There are various children's books and other resources on Down's syndrome which may help the more inquisitive child. For some children it may be appropriate to address issues in a more formal manner such as an assembly or a talk with the child's class. We would encourage schools to talk to parents before this happens as some would prefer their child not to be present, but others would like their child to explain themselves.



"We talked about cake mix ingredients and how they compared to chromosomes. Our daughter has a bit more sugar (also known as chromosome 21) which means her cake takes a little longer to mix and bake but still tastes the same at the end"

Practical activities

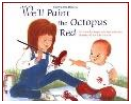
Many children will not truly understand the challenges children with Down's syndrome face. It can be helpful for them to experience the difficulties in a fun way so they can understand their friend with Down's syndrome better. Through some of these activities they may learn how to talk to and interact with a child with Down's syndrome. Here are some examples which aren't necessarily specific to Down's syndrome but cover a wide range of issues:



- Try getting the children to cut up a bar of chocolate using a flimsy plastic knife and fork. This can help children to understand how hard it is to cut food up with poor fine motor skills.
- Hide some familiar objects in a box. Ask the children to put gloves on and see if they can identify the objects in the box. Try gloves of different thicknesses (thin latex ones, thick gardening ones) and notice how hard it is to identify the objects compared to solely using your hands.
- Ask the children to try to write with the opposite hand to their dominant hand. Try to get them to see how hard it is to control the pencil. Help them to see how hard it is to write correctly when you are focusing all your attention on holding the pencil.
- Ask the children to wear bug glasses and get them to do a small obstacle course, or simply walk in a straight line. Or give them strong prescription glasses and let them find out how hard it is to read something they can normally read. Help the children discover how simple tasks become difficult without clear vision.
- Give instructions on how to colour in a picture. Have several different sources of noises whilst you are speaking (e.g. loud music, maracas, drumming). Talk quietly so the children discover how hard it is to hear when you cannot discriminate between sounds.
- Get the children to follow your instructions whilst wearing headphones facing you and then again with their back to you. Help them to understand how important it is to be able to see the person you are talking to.
- Get the children to describe a picture only using actions and not words. Get another child to try to draw the picture. Let them discover how hard and frustrating it can be to communicate when you don't have language.
- Ask one child to draw an animal, and get another to try to act out what the animal is. Have a race to see who can guess the animal the quickest.

Books to read

Books on being different



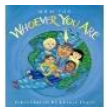
We'll paint the Octopus Red – Stephanie Stuve-Bodee. A heart-warming story from a sibling's perspective. Very positive, yet very honest. Well worth sharing with children who are expecting a child with DS or have a family member or friends with DS.

I can, can you? – Marorie W Pitzer. This book shows several babies and toddlers with Down's syndrome performing normal tasks that babies and toddlers achieve. A great book to promote the similarities between children with and without Down's syndrome.



It's ok to be different – Todd Parr. This book really emphasises how all children are different and how all children are special and important because of who they are.

Sometimes – Rebecca Elliot. A lovely book explaining some of the differences around a child with more complex medical needs



Whoever you are – Mem Fox. This book is mainly written to explain that people from different countries in the world are the same but different. All of the pages are also true for a child with Down's syndrome.

It is a really good book to explain to children that despite our differences we all have many similarities and there are children like you all over the world

Books specifically about Down's syndrome

What's it like? Down syndrome – Angela Royston. This book introduces young readers (5-7) to Down's syndrome and gives most of the basic facts any child may need.

