

EDUCATION

HELP FOR PEOPLE WITH DOWN'S SYNDROME



**DOWN'S
SYNDROME
ASSOCIATION**

A Registered Charity
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Behaviour - Information Sheet

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Introduction

There are no behaviour problems unique to children with Down's syndrome. However, much of their behaviour will be related to their level of development and not to their chronological age. So, when problems occur, they are generally similar to those seen in typically developing children of a younger age.

In addition, many children with Down's syndrome have to cope with more difficulties than many of their peers. Much of what they are expected to do in their everyday lives will be much harder to accomplish due to problems with their speech and language, auditory short-term memory, motor co-ordination, shorter concentration span, and learning difficulties. Children with Down's syndrome can also take longer to "learn the rules" and understand changes in their environment. As a result, they may feel more insecure and anxious and need additional, specific help.

Their thresholds for problem behaviours may therefore be lower than in typically developing children, i.e. they are likely to become frustrated or anxious more easily. So, having Down's syndrome does not lead inevitably to behavioural problems; but the nature of their learning difficulties makes such children more vulnerable to the development of such problems.

One aspect of problem behaviour is the use of avoidance strategies such as frequent visits to the toilet, refusing to line up after break, hiding under the table or losing their glasses. Many children with Down's syndrome tend to adopt these, thus undermining their progress. Some children use social skills and attention seeking behaviours to avoid tasks - refusing, pretending to be less capable than they really are or distracting the adult by talking about their holiday or their dog.

Causes of Problem Behaviours

Often at the root of inappropriate behaviour are the increasing cognitive demands facing the child with Down's syndrome. The child may well be finding it difficult to cope with current activities and goals. Children with Down's syndrome are often sensitive to failure. Recognition of this and a corresponding look at the child's curriculum to ensure that it is suitably differentiated are therefore critical in responding to behaviour problems.

Investigate any inappropriate behaviours. Observe the child over a period of time in different settings. Try to work out WHY the child is acting so?

- Do they feel that they need more attention in a large class? Do they dislike waiting their turn or sitting quietly on the carpet? Have they learned that by being silly they can gain adult attention?
- Is the work suitably differentiated? i.e. is the task too hard to be achievable, too long to be completed or too easy to sustain interest? Alternatively – is the task too different? Children with Down's syndrome often dislike being 'singled out' or given totally different work to their peers.
- Does the child understand what is expected? Have you explained the task clearly in language they can understand? Have you reminded them regularly about what they were told, or provided a visual prompt such as a picture of what they should do?
- Are they frustrated because others don't take the time to understand what they are saying? Do they get cross if they are taken out of class for therapy or special work without their friends?
- Are they trying to exert some control over their world by being stubborn or difficult? Do they feel they are given insufficient personal space or the opportunity to choose their activity? Do they have a 'velcro' teaching assistant constantly by their side who follows them everywhere and makes decisions for them?

Addressing Problem Behaviours

It is important that all adults involved with the child follow the same strategies. So, for all involved with the child:

- Ensure that the children's developmental, not chronological, age is taken into account, together with their level of oral understanding.
- Distinguish "can't do" from "won't do".
- Separate immature behaviour from deliberately bad behaviour.
- Teach rules explicitly. Ensure they are understood and reinforce them visually.
- Use short, clear instructions and clear body language for reinforcement: overlong explanations and excessively complex reasoning are not appropriate.
- Encourage positive behaviour by using visual reinforcement. Use a photo book with pictures of the child behaving appropriately in different situations, e.g. tidying up, sitting nicely on the carpet or lining up, together with short sentence descriptors.
- Ensure the child is working with peers who are acting as good role models.
- Give plenty of praise and encouragement. Be clear and specific when praising.
- Reinforce the desired behaviour immediately with visual, oral or tangible rewards. For older children where rewards are not given immediately ensure the child is able to understand and cope with this situation.
- Make sure they are involved in whatever is going on. Let them hold the big book, hold up puppets from the story or act it out. Never expect them to sit at the back of the group and listen.
- Give them choices and time without close supervision.
- For staff (teaching and non-teaching) involved with the child:
- Ensure that all staff are aware that the child must be disciplined along with their peers at all times, and are aware of the strategies to be employed.
- Ensure that all staff are firm and consistent at all times.
- Ensure that the LSA is not the only adult having to deal with the behaviour. The class teacher has ultimate responsibility.
- For older children agree the name of a key person who will act as first point of contact in cases of difficulty.

- Ensure that the child, staff and peers know the contact person, what procedure to follow and where to go if there is a problem.
- Establish good liaison with parents and discuss behavioural strategies jointly. Remember, parents can provide expert knowledge of their child.
- Develop a range of strategies to deal with problems: some will work, others won't.
- Be flexible: some strategies will work one day and not the next!
- Try distraction rather than confrontation.
- Be consistent. Make sure everyone responds to the behaviour in the same way.
- Look for ways of reinforcing good behaviour: star charts, extra time on computer etc. Punishments rarely work.
- Ignore attention-seeking behaviour within reasonable limits: it is aimed to distract. Encourage the other children to do the same.
- Do not respond to attention-seeking behaviour by giving attention e.g. by telling the child off; this will only reinforce the behaviour. Deal with it in as swift and impersonal a manner as possible with minimal speech and eye contact.
- Try a 'time out' chair. Leave them there for a couple of minutes only, to make the point, then allow them to make a fresh start.
- An egg timer placed in front of the child can be useful for keeping the child focused and more likely to remain seated.
- Alternate periods of 'work' and 'play' to give the child a break. 'Work' is chosen by the adult, 'play' by the child. Use a kitchen timer to define the sessions.
- Do not attempt to target too many aspects of behaviour at one time. Decide on one or two behaviours to focus on and make clear what is not acceptable and what is desired. Decide on ways to reinforce the desired behaviour and record and chart progress if need be.

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