

Down Syndrome Tip Sheet

What is it?

Down Syndrome is a chromosomal disorder that causes intellectual and developmental delays. People born with Down Syndrome often have heart defects and are predisposed to childhood leukemia. Common features include short stature and a rounded face with almond shaped eyes. While those with Down Syndrome share some common facial features, they still look more like their immediate family members than they do each other.

Main Characteristics:

- Developmental delays: different timelines for progression in the development of motor, speech and language, cognitive, and/or social skills
- Intellectual Impairment: varying degrees of cognitive abilities
- Heart defects: often corrected by surgical intervention
- Hypothyroidism: a low functioning thyroid can contribute to obesity and joint problems
- Hearing loss: can vary from no loss to moderate loss
- Vision impairment: can vary from no impairment to moderate impairment
- Hypotonia: low muscle tone which can impact balance, eating, and speech

How can I help?

First, learn if there are any medical conditions you need to be aware of and accommodate for. Next, consider the individual's muscle tone. They may need additional time to complete tasks and support for others. Sitting or standing for long periods of time can cause muscle fatigue. Speech intelligibility can complicate communication so be patient. Find out if they use a communication device and learn how to support its use. Use simple questions and allow extra time for responses. If speech is especially challenging, provide two options or ask 'yes' or 'no' questions. Memory difficulties can be compounded by the speed at which information is shared, so provide processing time and repetition. Provide visuals paired with spoken words, opportunities for hands-on learning, single-step directions, and literal instruction. Partner with parents to learn about an individual's nuances, tendencies, and specific strategies that work best for them.

Strategies for Physical Needs:

- Provide a seat with a back for support at height so their feet can touch the floor.
- Avoid floor seating.
- Offer breaks during gross motor activity, due to fatigue.
- Be aware of balance needs and provide physical support, if needed.

Strategies for Cognitive Needs:

- Break skills into small, manageable parts
- Set goals with the child to teach prioritization
- Structure time consistently to help the child move from one activity to the next
- Use visuals to enhance new concepts or clarify understanding
- Engage multiple senses, specifically auditory, tactile, and visual senses to reinforce concepts

- Provide additional time for responses and task completion
- Minimize distractions to encourage focused attention
- Provide support for initiating and building relationships
- Find a way to incorporate interests in activities to build engagement
- Commit to repetition and be patient in doing so
- Incorporate fun in whatever you're doing
- Seek to understand, even when speech is difficult to comprehend
- Be patient and allow for extra processing time

Sources:

<https://dsagsl.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Supporting-the-Student-With-DS-Information-for-Teachers-2014new.pdf>

<https://www.childrensmn.org/educationmaterials/childrensmn/article/15511/down-syndrome/>

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