



Dance instructors (for groups with children under 12)

This resource has been developed to help dance instructors understand and support inclusion for children aged up to 12 years with Down syndrome in mainstream dance groups. Many dance instructors want to be inclusive but aren't sure how to take the next steps. Below are some important, yet simple, steps that you can embrace to reduce the barriers for people with Down syndrome and their families to being involved and included.

Things you should know about Down syndrome

Down syndrome is the most common genetic disability. Approximately 13,000 people in Australia have Down syndrome. It is a disability that impacts intellectual development, some physical characteristics, and aspects of a person's physical health. Because no two people are alike, this will vary from one person to another.

People with Down syndrome often have low muscle tone. This can affect how they move and may mean that they need some extra support when participating in physical activity like a dance class.

Principles of inclusion

Every person, regardless of disability or other difference, has a right to choose and participate in community activities. The *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* makes it unlawful to exclude someone based on having a disability.

Being inclusive is about providing a range of opportunities for people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds to participate, learn, contribute and belong by supporting them to take part in the most appropriate manner possible for each individual. Inclusion can mean different things in different settings but the goal is to ensure fair participation for people with and without a disability.

It's important to see each person as an individual. Get to know the person and work with them and their family to understand their abilities and develop strategies to support the person in the activity.

“Be positive. Be patient. Be supportive. Embrace difference. Create a culture of inclusion and support. This works for everyone, not just the person with Down syndrome. Be quick with praise and give it often.”

Parent of a child with Down syndrome

Some helpful suggestions are:

- Communication is key. Clear, open, positive, respectful communication with the person with Down syndrome is a really important part of supporting participation.
- Talk directly to the person with Down syndrome. Build rapport and trust with them. Listen to them as they explain their needs.
- Some people may not use speech to communicate, or may use little speech, but they will still understand when you speak. They may communicate in different ways such as gestures or signs, or they may use an app or device.
- Keep directions simple, brief and to the point. Use descriptive verbal cues where possible, e.g. "Move your arms like a tree in the wind."
- Consider using visual cues to help people understand the activity, such as gestures and demonstrating movements while you explain them.
- Ask questions one at a time and encourage the person to ask questions back. Be patient as it may take more time for a person with Down syndrome to respond.
- Check back with the person if they have understood what has been said, using open-ended questions. Otherwise the person may just indicate they've understood because they feel unsure or embarrassed and don't want to be negative.
- Work with the person's family and friends if the person with Down syndrome wants them involved. Families are often proactive, supportive and willing to share information and strategies to help the person.
- Talk about disability and inclusion in your organisation. Normalising disability and discussing disability with your colleagues, other students and their families, can help reduce stigma and discrimination. This could include articles in the dance group's newsletter, ebulletin or social media. However, it is important to gain permission from the person with Down syndrome if you wish to mention them or their disability specifically.

Making adaptations to the activity

Some considerations that can be used to support participation and inclusion are:

- Being aware of all the participants in your group.
- Ensure participants are correctly positioned, within visual range.
- Use appropriate physical assistance — guide a participant's body parts through a movement.
- Reduce competitive elements, focus on participation initially.

Tips to support participation are:

1. Be prepared. Have a clear structure for the class with plenty of fun activities like dance-based games and use of props (i.e. ribbons, hula hoops, pom poms) in between the more 'serious' elements like technique.
2. Be flexible. Each day is different, things that worked last week might not work this week. Have plenty of activities/routines up your sleeve as you might need to change things up.
3. Have a recurring and predictable structure so that the students know what to expect each time. For example, start with free dance, then move to the floor in a circle for the welcome and sitting stretches, then it's centre work, and finish with stickers.
4. Have high (but reasonable) expectations. People with disabilities might take longer to learn the moves, or have trouble executing them with perfection, but that doesn't mean they are only capable of dancing around freely!
5. Buddy kids up with other students to help them feel part of the class and learn/perform the moves. Inclusion benefits EVERYBODY.
6. Use volunteers to help with the class. For children under 10, you might need one or two assistants to ensure all children are engaged in the class (and safe) while the dance teacher continues teaching.
7. Take every opportunity to involve more people with disabilities in the whole process to promote inclusion at every level. You could involve adults with Down syndrome to be mentors for the group. They can help with the set-up of the room, taking rolls, music, warm up and pack up.

This tip sheet has been developed in consultation with people with Down syndrome.

Down syndrome association contact details

There is a Down syndrome association in each state and territory. You can contact these associations for support and advice. We are here to help you. Our associations are made up of a wide range of parents, professionals and people with Down syndrome who work or volunteer with us. Please visit our website at www.downsyndrome.org.au or call 1300 881 935 to be automatically connected to your closest association.

Thanks to Down Syndrome SA for their contribution to this tip sheet.