



Down Syndrome  
Australia

## Inclusion in practice in a mainstream school – Ryan’s experience

### Overview

Ryan is seven years old and has Down syndrome. He is attending a local Catholic primary school just like his older sister. He has an extensive history of medical intervention which has led to issues with anxiety and trauma that impact on his learning and participation.

Ryan was initially refusing to take part in activities and was clearly unhappy at school. One of the turning points was when the school provided a relief teacher so the classroom teacher could observe him, to better understand him and his needs. As a result, Ryan’s Individual Education Plan (IEP) was rewritten with new goals and strategies. Since then, Ryan’s teacher has implemented a range of strategies including trauma informed practice to respond to Ryan’s needs and adapt the curriculum to support him to learn material at a level appropriate to him. He now enthusiastically participates in school. Ryan has been welcomed in his school community and is a valued member of his class. He is fully included in his mainstream classroom.



The school is supporting Ryan to participate in his classroom and the school community and have made some changes that have enabled inclusion in this mainstream education setting including:

### Supporting time to observe and work as a team

- Spending time observing Ryan to better understand how he communicates and what supports he needs.
- Commitment to work as part of a team with Ryan, his family and the relevant therapy professionals to devise and develop strategies to support Ryan.

### Adapting the curriculum creatively

- Due to his past trauma Ryan responds poorly to too many expectations. To ensure Ryan feels safe and secure and is ready to learn the focus has been on building relationships and providing access to many preferred activities. Gradually as Ryan’s anxiety about school has eased, more structured tasks have been added to his program.
- Adapting classroom activities to be fun and engaging for Ryan. Counting might involve pouring cups of rice or counting steps up the ladder on the playground. Letter formation and phonics are sometimes practised in shaving cream.
- Practising reading in a practical way with a focus on fundamentals. For example, Ryan put together his own book, painting pictures of animals which were used to create a text

with the words 'I can see a...'. Ryan practised reading and signing this book and the entire class signed and read the book to the whole school assembly. This approach has been really successful in engaging Ryan in his learning. Skills are practised in context. Ryan is now engaging with the Reading Our Way program with a focus on people and words of most interest to him.

- Where a task may be too difficult for Ryan to achieve, it may be adapted for the entire class so that he is able to use the same techniques as the other students without obvious differentiation. A recent example is where the class was tasked with painting a giraffe. The task was set up so that the body of the giraffe was made from a hand and arm print and the spots painted on rather than students painting the body from scratch. This is within Ryan's current capabilities and ensured he was successful on the same basis as other students in the class.

### **Supporting communication**

- The teacher and aide are teaching all the children in the classroom some of the basic key word signs to help them communicate with Ryan more effectively.
- Ryan uses picture cards. These are placed on a board for easy access. Many of these cards show preferred activities. To encourage his use of the cards, his teacher ensures he is rewarded for communication attempts – so, if he brings a card showing an activity, he is rewarded by being able to do the activity immediately. He is now very successfully using the cards to ask for many of his needs and wants in the classroom.
- The school is looking to use LAMP (a communication app) on an iPad in the classroom with Ryan, to further enhance his ability to communicate a range of ideas to a broader audience.

### **Demonstrating equality and respect**

- Ryan is always treated as an equal and valued member of the classroom. His classmates have learned about diversity and the importance to respect differences between students.
- Ryan fully participates in school activities such as the cross-country. His achievements are rewarded in the same way as other students, such as with certificates at assembly.

### **Involvement of therapists**

- Ryan's speech therapist frequently provides therapy sessions at school with the aide in attendance. This helps to ensure a holistic and responsive approach.

- Ryan's OT makes school visits and is working with the PE teacher to adapt classes so that Ryan can be fully included while also working at a gross motor skill level significantly below his peers.
- Ryan's psychologist has visited the school to support them in implementing trauma informed practice and to understand the way in which his behaviour may be communicating distress or anxiety.
- Vision and hearing services visit the school regularly to give support and provide advice to the teachers to make appropriate adaptations to the classroom environment, given his vision and hearing impairment.
- Ryan has aides for most of his class time but his teaching is not left in the hands of the aides. The classroom teacher frequently works with Ryan in small groups and individually while the aide works with other children in the class. He also has unaided blocks where the teacher focuses on areas of learning where he is less likely to require additional support.

### **Approaching safety as a school issue rather than an individual issue**

Safety has been a big concern both because Ryan sometimes absconds and also because his vision impairment can create difficulties in navigating the school environment. The school is securely fenced and the school community has been encouraged to ensure gates are shut. The teacher has done boundary training with all the children in the class. Red lines and stop signs are used to indicate areas where children aren't allowed to pass without an adult. Teaching all the children about the boundaries has ensured that all students understand the rules and can support Ryan to adhere to these rules. Ryan is frequently supported by peers in the playground and a range of highly desirable activities have been set up in an area within the playground which he finds attractive, which tend to attract small groups of other students who sit and play beside and with him. This has reduced his motivation to wander away from the playground and is supporting his development of social skills and friendships.

### **Supporting professional development for teaching staff**

Ryan's teachers and aides have been provided with ongoing professional development to help them support all the children in the classroom. Staff at the school have accessed specialised professional development focused on teaching children with Down syndrome.