



Down Syndrome
Australia

Advice for supporting the transition to the early childhood setting

This tip sheet has been put together to help families who are transitioning a child with Down syndrome into an early childhood and education setting. Down Syndrome Australia would like to acknowledge and thank Joelle Kelly for her contribution to this work.

Approach and inform positively

Most early childhood settings are very open to having children with Down syndrome or other disabilities. Yet, some parents report that they have faced hesitance, tentativeness or even negativity when looking for an early childhood setting. If you find a setting is negative in the initial stages, then consider whether this is a good place for your child. You will know you have found the right match when staff show understanding as you tell them about your child and they ask you appropriate questions about the best way to support them.



Biggest concerns first

Once you have found where you would like to enrol your child, the next thing to consider is needs and barriers – both from your child's and your own perspective. Whether your biggest concerns are around your child's sense of belonging, developmental needs, medical conditions, or just nerves, identifying your biggest concerns first will help with planning your child's transition into the setting. It helps to write down your concerns, which will allow you to address each one from most to least important. Often when the greatest needs are dealt with first, the rest of your concerns and/or challenges are addressed as a result.

For example, your biggest concern might be your child's speech development. You are worried about how they will be able to communicate their needs to staff. Other concerns on your list further down may be establishing relationships communication with peers, interacting with peers, participating at group time, handling transitions etc. Addressing the biggest concern of speech development first, and creating a set of strategies around this, will then naturally help all the other concerns.

Funding and support

It is important to address the levels of support and funding that may be available to support your child early on in conversations with the Director of the early childhood centre. An important point to remember is that if an additional staff member is placed into your early childhood setting, it is usually to reduce the overall ratio of staff to children, not necessarily to provide one-on-one support. As a parent you want to be reassured that your child is being included, supported and involved as much as possible within the program, but a one-on-one aide is not always ideal either. Ideally, the support aide should step in when really needed, but then step back and work in the background. A person who can successfully facilitate experiences for your child, establish communication strategies with peers, and encourage independence for all self-help skills, is far more beneficial than that same person following your child around in an 'enabling' way.

Planning documents

If your child doesn't have access to a formal individual education or adjustment plan, it is worthwhile constructing a similar document that outlines your child's strengths, and identifies areas that you would like to focus on, including goals you are working towards. It is also important to provide information about your child's likes, dislikes, cultural considerations, the best ways to communicate and anything else that will help the early childhood setting understand your child as a young person. This can help everyone to be on the same page in regards to your child's development. Use this for all your child's therapists and early childhood settings.

Begin talking to your child

Regardless of your child's expressive language, their receptive language skills will be soaking in more than you can imagine. Talk positively to your child about their new setting. Use consistent words, such as 'kindy' or 'playgroup', so they have time to adjust to the vocabulary. Ask how your child's teacher prefers to be referred to and use this too. Sign the first letter of the teacher's name or sign 'teacher' as you say their name and do this every time you see their teacher, to help build that connection.

Make their setting familiar

Your child has a better chance of settling in with ease if they are familiar with their surroundings on the first day. Ask to go and take photos of learning areas a few months before starting and make them available for your child to see. These photos can also be used as part of a communication book at a later stage. Ask about their orientation program or alternatively ask to visit for play dates or walk-arounds in the weeks leading up to commencement. Many centres use visual images around the centre to support all children. Take a look around at the visuals that are in place and make suggestions to the centre about any additional images that might help your child in the centre. Let your child lead YOU through their setting, instilling confidence and independence in navigating through each learning space.

Communication

One of the best ways to develop two-way communication with your child's teacher is to use a communication book. Be mindful it doesn't just turn into a 'behaviour' book. There are many ways to use a communication book and they don't have to be time consuming. Before beginning, it is necessary to know the intent behind using one. Is it to let you know as the parent what the child engaged with? Is it a place for you to share what they are doing at home so it can be incorporated into play ideas in their setting? Is it more about what your child ate, if they toileted and slept? Once you decide on what you would like the communication book to include, then have some questions at the beginning of the book to help guide educators. For examples, who did they engage with today? How did they communicate with their peers. There are various ways a communication book can be developed and utilised without it becoming an onerous task for educators.

Establish friendships

A common concern for parents with any child is whether they will make friends, this isn't just for kids with Down syndrome! Use class mates' names at home and don't be afraid to set up play dates with many different children. Creating opportunities for real friendships to develop outside of the educational setting will benefit all children involved.

Engage others

Engage the services of professionals that you're currently working with to be a part of your child's early learning setting too. Ask your local Down syndrome association about any professional development training that might be available for staff. Ask your child's therapists to visit your child at the setting and share what they are learning in their early childhood setting with your professionals. This gives your professional team a wider understanding of your child and they may get to see a different side to them whilst in another setting.

Tune in to learning

When in your child's setting, look around for what your child may be exposed to in their learning experiences. Take a walk around their indoor and outdoor learning areas and soak in the many and varied concepts that your child is being exposed to. For example, point out interesting art works, particular play spaces, cooking in the sand pit. Refer to these and other concepts at home and make those connections between home and their setting. For example, "Look! There's a saucepan in

your sandpit, we cook with a saucepan at home." When at home, "Here is our saucepan, just like your saucepan in your sandpit at Kindy." Even if your child doesn't reciprocate this with expressive language, you will be strengthening all that they are learning by continually connecting their learning in their early childhood setting to learning at home.

Where to go for more information

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.



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