

# Starting school

By Benny Thomas

**Probably one of the most difficult and stressful times for parents is sending their child to school, but it needn't be. Here are some helpful tips and ideas that will hopefully help you, and your family enjoy this wonderfully exciting time. Whether you have chosen a government, private or special school and whether you are starting primary or secondary school, it is important that you feel it is the best place to be for your child.**

First and foremost, your child has every right to attend a government school. The Disability Standards for Education 2005 (the Standards) 'clarify the obligations of education and training providers and seek to ensure that students with disability can access and participate in education on the same basis as other students. The Standards were formulated under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and came into effect in August 2005'. You will find more on the Bill and the Standards on this website [www.education.gov.au/disability-standards-education](http://www.education.gov.au/disability-standards-education)

Once you have chosen your school and your child has been enrolled, how do we make it all work to ensure that it is a successful experience for your child, your family, the school and the school community? Down Syndrome NSW and Down Syndrome WA have given us access to really useful information which we hope will help you.



## Communication

Above anything else, we have learnt that the most valuable tool is communication. Communication between yourself and your child is hugely important and, as you know, our children take their lead from us so talk and explain what is happening to your child and involve them totally in their schooling.

The school principal will be the most valuable person at the school so take time to introduce yourself, educate her/him on your child's strengths and weaknesses and you could even invite them to your home to meet the rest of the family.

When your child has started school the class teacher and teacher's aide will be your daily point of reference so ensure that you have a good relationship with these people. Communication books are a terrific way to ensure daily contact especially if you are a working parent and can't always get to the school. Discuss with the teacher the best way to communicate with her. Remember she will have twenty or so other parents to deal with so make it easy for her.

Be open, inclusive and honest about your child – celebrate their strengths but don't be afraid to discuss their weaknesses. The teacher may have little or no experience teaching a child with Down syndrome so clear and factual information about the way your child learns best will help get them off on the right foot. Give the teacher time to understand your child and their specific needs but effective, straight-forward communication goes a long way!

Communication does not always have to be verbal. Non-verbal communication such as a smile, a nod or even friendly hand gestures will acknowledge that relationship in a different manner.

## School Orientation

It is really important to ensure that the student has been to the school and is familiar with the surrounds. And not just the classroom but also the canteen, hall, library and most importantly school drop off and pick up points. If your child has a sibling at the school it might be fun to include them and perhaps make them the guide. If not a sibling, then perhaps a neighbourhood friend that attends the school.

It would also be a useful time right now to enrol for before and after school care if you need it. Places often get taken early so be prepared.

You could always put a school story book together and refer to it often so the student is well aware of school and its surrounds.

## Getting ready for the new school

Wearing a school uniform and putting on shoes and socks each day can be a little overwhelming for little people so practise as often as you can. This will also help with your child's independence and resilience.

There will also be sports uniforms so make the child aware of what each uniform represents and again, practise the routine. If they are unsure of what is back and front, use labels to ensure your child can identify the right way. Name tags are also useful.

Recess and lunchtimes are also an important part of school life. It is a social time and also an active time. A time for chit-chat, running about, and also for eating yummy food. Having a difficult lunch box, or sticky cling wrap, or a hard to open drink bottle can frustrate a child so ensure that the child has plenty of practice with opening and closing items and also putting them away in their back pack. If they are taking juice packs get them to practise placing the straw in the opening. It's always good to teach good hygiene as well so practise washing hands and face after lunch.

Shoes can be the biggest challenge of the lot so work out early on what is best for your child. Velcro is an excellent option but not always available so do your research. There are specialist shoe suppliers that will be able to help you make this task easier and again practice. Also don't wait - get your child used to wearing these shoes as they can often hurt to start with.

There are some products that make tying shoe laces easier and appear like regular shoes. [www.locklaces.com](http://www.locklaces.com) and [www.loopeez.com](http://www.loopeez.com)

Lastly, the school bubblers! Part of school life is drinking water from a bubbler so get your child used to one if you can. Might like to mention not to squirt other kids!

## Safety and Boundaries

This is a big issue for many parents – your child's safety. If your child does have a habit of wandering, ensure your child has an identifying band on his wrist or some ID in his pocket. The school and his primary teacher needs to be aware that there may be an issue with wandering so you may need to think up some strategies to ensure your child stays within the school grounds.

There are many methods that can help. One way may be to walk around the school with your child identifying 'no go' zones. You may like to do this in the school holidays to ensure confidence in the child.

For some more helpful tips you may like to read Disability Solutions: 'Which Way Did She Go?' Wandering in Children with Down Syndrome [downsyndromenutrition.com/images/stories/dsolnsvol4/4-3.pdf](http://downsyndromenutrition.com/images/stories/dsolnsvol4/4-3.pdf)

## Playground

My biggest fear for my son when he started school was that he would not make any friends and that he would sit in the playground all on his own. I had to be stopped from checking on the playground each lunch time and, although the school assured me that they would be helpful, it still made me feel sick!

Kids have a natural way of including or excluding playmates regardless of their ability. What can help is working with the school to ensure there are some scheduled activities in the playground that will include lots of children not just yours. The buddy system is also terrific and that peer support will give your child a lot more confidence.

If your child currently attends a pre-school and some of the children are heading to the same primary school then perhaps over the holidays have some playdates with those kids so that when they get to school a relationship has been established and hopefully will continue.

If your child is particularly good at one thing e.g. football, then encourage him to take a ball to school so he/she can play with other kids. Of course check with the school first!

You may also like to supply the teacher with 'A Kids Guide to Down syndrome' which is a book explaining Down syndrome to kids.

## The Toilet Block

Ideally your child will be toilet trained but it is not a pre-requisite for school entry so if your child is in nappies then it is vitally important that the principal is aware and the necessary arrangements be made i.e. a nappy changing area.

If your child is toilet trained then ensure that they know where the toilet block is and work out the best way with the teacher to ensure that you child can communicate their toileting needs.

Teach your child the difference between girl's toilets and boy's toilets. There are so many symbols used as identifiers these days that I often find myself in the men's bathrooms!

When you are checking out the school, look at what taps they have, drying facilities, does the boy's bathroom have urinals, what toilet paper dispenser is used? All these things can come as a surprise when your child is used to something totally different.

And remember...loads of kids have accidents at school!



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## In the classroom

This is one area where you will really need to supply the teacher with as much information as possible. Some teachers will be thankful for the help and others will think they already know enough but students with Down syndrome have some special requirements which need to be discussed so do ensure that they have enough information.

Speech can be a problem so you will need to ensure that the right visual messages are available. The reason we use visual communication is that it works! Research has shown us that there is a direct link between behaviour and communication.

Low muscle tone can also be an issue, and a little adjustment to sitting positions can make the world of difference to learning. Sometimes it's the simple things that get overlooked. Information can be sought from OTs and also your local DS office.

There are many resources that you can find to help with the education of your child and there are also a number of workshops that teachers can attend. Contact your local DS office to see when they are planning their teacher's workshops.

An Individual Education Plan (IEP) is really useful and works well if you can be realistic in what is achievable. 'The purpose of an IEP is to describe a set of strategies to address the particular educational needs of the child or young person in care'. It should be a document that is wholistic in nature and should set goals that will inspire rather than defeat and ensure that all aspects of your child's school life are included. Be sure to contact your local DS office to know the funding packages available and access to teacher's aides in your state, and work with the school to ensure all eligible support is provided.

## Manners

Everyone loves a kid with good manners. Saying 'please' and 'thank you' goes a long way and will ensure that your child is well regarded by the adults in the school.

## School Community

Not only will you be dealing with the academic life at the school but also the social one. Joining the school community, as a family, is a great way to reach out to other parents and open a conversation about your child and any extra needs they may have. You can join the P & C, do some fundraising, volunteer for canteen duty (kids love this the best), coach one of the sport teams, help out with school maintenance or turn up for reading. Talk to the other parents and make friends with your school community. Perhaps consider an introductory letter to the other parents in the class inviting any questions they may have about your child.

## Advocacy

There may be times when things are not going as well as you had hoped. This is when it is important to have open communication with the school and advocate for your child. It is best to deal with an issue as soon as possible and start by going to the person who is closest to the issue. Often this will be the classroom teacher.

You need to be prepared with any written information and to know your rights, and your options. You may take someone to support you if needed.

Calmly state the issue, and then be prepared to listen, negotiate and compromise if needed. Remember that you are in this for the long haul so decide what your goals are, which battles to fight and which ones to let go. If, however, over time you realise that the school may not be the best place for your child's education there is nothing stopping you from moving schools.

## Words of Wisdom

Remember, no child will learn to read and write on their first day at school. If your child is happy to go to school, be pleased and remember that the learning process takes time. Don't overload your child after school, as they need to relax and play the same as any other child.

The success of your child's schooling depends on open communication between you, your child's teacher and any other professional involved in your child's education.

Starting school is the beginning of a new chapter in your family's life and it is also a time of enormous change and growth. You will have good days and not so good days but take one day at a time. Your DS office is there to help and support you and your family. They are a fountain of knowledge and experience so call them if you need them. We wish you well in this new exciting journey.

Down Syndrome Western Australia recently published four excellent volumes *THE REALLY USEFUL BOOKLETS*. They cover the following years

- Starting School Book 0 -6 years
- Moving to High School 10-12 years
- Leaving School 15-18 years
- Dream Big – for young people with Down Syndrome and their families

You can purchase *THE REALLY USEFUL* series from Down syndrome Western Australia. You can contact the office on Ph 08 9368 4002 or email [admin@dsawa.asn.au](mailto:admin@dsawa.asn.au). The cost of the booklet will depend on how many you would like and where you live as postage varies.

Down Syndrome NSW run an annual two day Education Conference for educators working with students with Down syndrome. The next conference will be held in Sydney on March 17 & 18. For more information on transition to school or conference details please contact [information@dsansw.org.au](mailto:information@dsansw.org.au) or [www.downsyndromensw.org.au](http://www.downsyndromensw.org.au)