

## Ten top tips for teaching your child with Down syndrome at home

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We love our kids, that's a given, but did we really want to be their teacher as well? For our child with Down syndrome, early intervention got us well into the tutoring role almost as soon as we left hospital. So, here we are again; we've done it before, we can do this! Every family is different and every home has different configurations so these tips are just suggestions for you to adapt to your own situation.

Before we start, let's think about you!

### Tips for you

- ♥ **Be kind to yourself.** This is not the time to try to be perfect at everything. There are likely to be times of stress, anxiety and pressure, not to mention times when we 'just lose it'. They are times to reset, and refresh. There will always be another time for school work, it doesn't need to be today.
- ♥ **Your work is important, too.** If you are required to work from home, you will need to prioritise your time and energy for that important role. See the example schedule below for ideas. Make sure your employer is aware of your parenting needs as well.
- ♥ **Keep your social contacts.** Many, many people will not have paid work. Keeping in touch with work colleagues and other friends is as important for you as it is for keeping your child in contact with their friends.

So, strap yourself in for teaching – it's going to be a wild ride, but it's probably going to be great fun as well.

### Getting ready

#### 1. Set up a place for school work

A place for school work helps set the routine and expectation that there is learning to be done. This might be the corner of the dinner table, a desk in the study or a table in the garage. Ensure there is good lighting. If you are using a desk lamp, it should be positioned on the opposite side to the student's dominant hand so if they are right-handed, the light should be on the left.

#### 2. Gather materials that are going to be helpful

Stationery and other equipment are great fun to gather. Here are some suggestions of things to have on hand: Marker pens, mini whiteboards, a calculator, note books, sticky notes, packet of index cards (great for writing key words on), a timer, counters, ...

Keeping the materials you've gathered close at hand (and not swiped by others in the family who also love stationery) will help learning time flow smoothly. Baskets, attractive boxes, boxes your child decorates, or a book shelf are all good. A different box/folder/basket for each subject will be helpful.

#### 3. Plan what to teach, aka, don't take on the world

Teachers will provide lesson details and will be able to guide you in approaches to take. Teachers will also continue to provide the learning adjustments for you. If you need to ask for more detail or explanation, don't be hesitant. Teachers don't expect parents to know everything. Ask your child's teacher to identify just one "big idea" for the week for each subject. Write the list on a

large piece of paper and put it somewhere prominent, possibly the fridge door. Look for the activities in the lesson materials that focus on that concept. Anything else will be a bonus.

### The day begins

#### 4. Yep, it's a school day

Some children may settle into a "school" routine if they follow their usual habits in the morning e.g. same wake up time, same breakfast routine, the usual bathroom routine with extra attention to hand washing, and the same getting dressed for school routine, including wearing their school uniform.

#### 5. We're in this together

Involve the student in planning out the day. Allow them to decide the order of their lessons. Set a time for each activity. The timer could be used here or you can find different timers on the internet to change things around a bit. If your learner is older and is doing some independent work, you can work on your own activity at the same time. Setting a timer for you both can make you both very productive. A popular strategy for writers is the [Pomodoro technique](#) – peer pressure to stay focussed is powerful even for those who write for a living!

### The day continues – but not at the desk

#### 6. A whole day?! You've got to be kidding.

You don't need to spend the full school day at the desk, and it's probably not going to be effective anyway. The 'little bit, often' rule is helpful here. Long lessons are not as effective as short, focused times with repetition. TV ads have used this approach to learning for a long time – because it is effective! I've written more about this here:

[http://www.dsrf.org/media/What\\_I\\_learned\\_about\\_maths\\_from\\_TV\\_ads\\_Sept\\_11\\_web%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.dsrf.org/media/What_I_learned_about_maths_from_TV_ads_Sept_11_web%20(2).pdf)

With thanks to the staff at West Beach Primary School in Adelaide, here is an example of a possible day's schedule.

Note the emphasis on physical activity. That's going to be very important. West Beach Primary School suggests: <https://www.gonoodle.com> (Movement and mindfulness)

Time	Schedule	Suggested Activities
9:00am- 10:00am	Exercise Session	If possible: morning walk or indoor exercise. Yoga, Star Jumps etc.
10:00am- 11:00am	Learning Session	School learning resources
11:00am-12:00pm	Creative Time	Lego, drawing, colouring, craft activities, singing, music, cooking/baking together
12:00pm-1:00pm	Lunch/Relax	
1:00pm-1:30pm	Exercise Time	
1:30 – 3:00	Learning Session	School learning resources

### 7. Learning opportunities abound

Keep your focus on the one key concept for each subject for the week. Everyone in the household can join in with focussing on these “big ideas”. Some of these are likely to come up naturally throughout the day.

### 8. There’s more to learning than the curriculum

If possible, spend some time outside. Study plants close up. Take photos of interesting ones, pull up weeds and study the roots. Look for insects or other animals. Watch water from a bucket flow downhill, build dams to move it where you want. Listen to bird calls, learn their names and the patterns of their feathers. Maybe you will have a family of birds you can get to know. Find places to climb, play hide and seek, sing songs loudly for fun. Some of these activities will spark interest you can follow up with internet searches.

(p.s. these topics are in the curriculum, too!)

### 9. Friends, friends, friends

One of the best things about school is the time spent with friends. Maintaining relationships when we are all confined to home is hard. Some families use applications such as Skype and FaceTime to stay in touch with family members overseas. This might be a way to stay in touch with friends closer by. Teachers may also involve their classes in joint conversations.

## The day ends

### 10. Tomorrow’s another day

Not every day is going to be a great learning day. Sometimes little progress may seem to have been made, sometimes our learners seem to have forgotten everything they knew a day ago. Don’t worry; learning is like that. Sometimes what has been learnt is not what we’ve noticed and yet will emerge as time goes on. Learning is lifelong and our kids have years ahead of them. Sometimes it is easy to worry that if kids don’t learn their lesson today, then that will compound problems into the future. Fortunately, that’s not the case: the curriculum spirals around so topics are never covered once only.

Keep a good record of what you have done and what you have noticed, you may be surprised in weeks to come of the progress made. Photos and videos of learning become lovely memories.

These ten tips are thoughts to help. The most important one, so let’s say 10 tips and one key message, is that learning together should be enjoyable. Challenging, yes, but still enjoyable. If it becomes a battle, retreat! Your relationship with your child is more important. Slip in surreptitious learning along the way – a key word at dinner, a story at bedtime – and enjoy making this a precious time together.

For further details, please contact Dr Rhonda Faragher.

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