



Down Syndrome
Australia

Communication and language

Simple, open, respectful communication with the person with Down syndrome is an important part of supporting participation in the community. Very often, people with Down syndrome can understand a lot more than they can express with words. Below are tips to support communication with people with Down syndrome.

Key principles

- Assume competence. Don't assume that a person with Down syndrome can't communicate (or do other things). Low expectations are one of the biggest barriers faced by people with Down syndrome. Give people a chance to show how capable they are.
- Always communicate and engage directly with the person with Down syndrome, not the person with them. Be patient and take their lead regarding whether the person with them helps them communicate.
- Know that every person with Down syndrome is unique, with their individual personality, strengths and areas where they might need support. Ask if they need support and provide it according to their individual requirements.

Spoken language

- Consider using visual aids to help people understand.
- Ask questions one at a time and encourage the person to ask questions back.
- Check back with the person if they have understood what has been said.
- Be patient and provide enough time for the person to respond.
- Communicate clearly. Don't provide multiple talking points at once.
- Explain things using balanced language. No jargon and no acronyms and no complex terminology.
- Break the information down into smaller parts which allows time to process the information.
- Consider the environment – lighting and background noise can have an impact on the person's understanding.
- Have patience and don't rush the person.
- Provide the person with written information to take away.
- Talk with the person's family and friends if the person wants them involved. Families are often proactive, supportive and willing to share information and strategies to help the person with Down syndrome.



- Some people may use key word signing as part of their communication. If this is the case it is helpful to learn some of the signs they use to be able to assist in their communication. More information about Key word signing is available.
- Some people with Down syndrome may engage in self-talk. This may appear as though the person is talking to themselves, however, self-talk is an audible version of what we all do in our heads to order our thoughts and calm our nerves. Self-talk is a valuable tool used by some people with Down syndrome so rather than attempt to stop it, a person may be asked to do it more quietly if required.

Written communication

- most, but not all, people with Down syndrome read and write, but each person will vary in their understanding of information
- we should provide as much information as possible in Plain English. This will benefit everyone, not just people with Down syndrome and other intellectual disabilities. (It's uncommon for people with good literacy skills to choose to read a Plain English document to get the main points of the information more quickly)
- where possible, provide the option of written information in Easy Read. Easy Read is a way of writing that is very simple and concise and uses a mixture of words along with images to help people understand.

What is plain english?

Plain English is about clear and concise messages, with the reader in mind and in the right tone. Use Plain English as much as possible. Most people find it much easier to read and understand, it saves time and is friendlier and more polite. When you have practised writing in Plain English, it becomes a quicker and easier way to write.

What it isn't:

- patronising
- oversimplified so that meaning is lost
- not an amateur way of communicating
- the same as Easy English or Easy Read
- quite as easy as we might think to write – there are some rules.

What is Easy Read?

Easy Read/Easy English is used when people have no literacy or have difficulty reading and understanding English. It is a way of writing that is very simple and concise. It focuses on giving people key information rather than detail, using a mix of words along with images to help people understand. Often, the person still needs help to read and understand the information.

When would I use Easy Read/ English?

You can use it wherever it is needed. Some examples would be:

- Fact sheets, policies and procedures, newsletters, invitations, meeting agendas and minutes, job descriptions, application forms and much more.

Easy Read is useful to help employees and volunteers with:

- A task list for their job, a weekly schedule or daily tasks, workplace rules, who to contact if they need help or to talk about something.

Easy Read should be produced by someone with expertise and access to a comprehensive bank of images (see the resource list for contacts).

The power of language

Language can empower individuals and their families or reinforce limiting stereotypes. Words, and the way we communicate, shape how a person is accepted in the community and impacts on their quality of life. Terminology referring to disability has changed over the years. The commonly accepted terminology for the diagnosis is:

- A person with Down syndrome; or a person who has Down syndrome.
- Avoid using out-dated and degrading terminology to refer to differences in cognitive ability – today we refer to a person with an intellectual disability.
- Remember that Down syndrome is a chromosomal condition not a disease.

By using appropriate terminology, and encouraging others to do the same, you are actively seeing the person first and as more important as the disability.

It is also worth being mindful that:

- People do not 'suffer from' Down syndrome. Avoid other terms that imply this, for example, 'a victim of' or 'afflicted by'.

- People with Down syndrome are not by definition 'special', 'poor' or 'unfortunate'. They should be referred to with the same respect we expect people to show everyone.
- Statements which reinforce stereotypes, and suggest that everyone with Down syndrome is the same (e.g. suggesting that they are always happy) is not helpful and may cause offence.

Resources

Plain English and Easy Read translation and production

Down syndrome WA's Clear Info service (operates nationally).
Ph: 08 9368 4002 or email: admin@dsawa.asn.au

Information Access Group

www.informationaccessgroup.com

Scope

scopeaust.org.au/service/accessible-information

Accessible Meetings

Valid, Vic. Graphic posters

Words and images on these A4 posters help committees to be accessible to people with intellectual disability.

www.valid.org.au/posters

Key Word Sign

www.scopeaust.org.au/key-word-sign-australia

Videos

Down Syndrome Today

www.youtube.com/watch?v=O321OFfXd9w

People with Down syndrome, their families and professionals take a candid look at what Down syndrome looks like for Australians with Down syndrome today. If you're a prospective parent or a health professional, this is essential viewing.

Video from Down Syndrome Australia. 11 mins

Things people with Down's syndrome are tired of hearing.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=AAPmGW-GDHA

UK video under 5 mins.

Help from Down syndrome association

Down Syndrome Australia and the state and territory Down syndrome organisations are the experts on Down syndrome and a wealth of information you can tap into. Some run information workshops and can provide individual sessions and provide advice for your organisation on including and supporting people with Down syndrome.

Start here by looking at the Down Syndrome Australia website, including the Easy Read section, (to see what it looks like). The resource section contains a lot of downloadable information. You can also go from the DSA website to your state organisation to see what information and supports they can help you with.

www.downsyndrome.org.au