

# Social sensitivity

by Dennis McGuire PhD



Despite whatever limitations people with Down syndrome may have in expressive language, they tend to have excellent receptive skills. We have heard time and again from families that their family member with Down syndrome seems to take in and remember everything they see in their immediate environment. One area of particular importance to people with Down syndrome is that they seem to be especially aware of and sensitive to their immediate social environment. Most are quite adept at reading social cues, especially at picking up the feelings and emotions of others in their environment. Because of this, people with Down syndrome have a reputation for having excellent social skills. Many people, but not all, are friendly and social beings who relate well to others, are often empathic and responsive to the feelings and emotions of others and especially to significant others. Related to this is that many have been described by family and caregivers as wanting to please others. This may be due in part to a wish to promote a positive emotional climate and to reduce any negative emotions, but it may also be due to a genuine sense of affection and caring for others.

Having good social skills and social sensitivity serves people with Down syndrome in many positive ways in their lives. This may help them to make and maintain positive relationships in all key areas – with family at home, with friends in social and recreation settings, with students and teachers in school and educational settings, and with bosses and fellow employees in vocational settings.

Although social skills may be a great strength in persons with Down syndrome, there can be a major downside to this social sensitivity. We have found that people with Down syndrome may be too sensitive to negative feelings and emotions. Understandably, they may be quite sensitive to criticism directed at them, if only because this goes against a wish to please others. They may also be especially aware and sensitive to feelings and emotions such as sadness, fear or anxiety experienced or expressed by others. We have found they may be more aware and sensitive to these feelings in close family and friends but they may also be profoundly affected by these emotions experienced by anyone in their environment, even a stranger. It appears then that they may have a limited ability to block the affect of these feelings on themselves, no matter what the source.

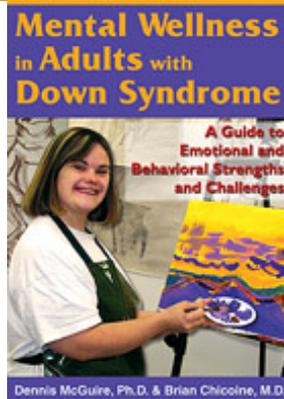
We have found, too, that people with Down syndrome may be even more sensitive to anger than to other emotions. Again, this is true whether or not this anger is directed at them or directed at or between others. Many parents have reported that their sons and daughters may be upset even when they perceive anger, such as when others talk louder to each other.

We believe the reason for this sensitivity relates to their superior intuitive and empathic ability to pick up on feelings and emotions in others. They have such good receptors that they may pick up on these feelings even when they are not openly expressed by another person. (We have heard from many caregivers who comment that their family member with Down syndrome knows what they are feeling before they do). Unfortunately, whether these feelings are openly or not openly expressed, many persons with Down syndrome seem to have an inability to effectively and adaptively manage negative feelings once detected in others. They may be overwhelmed by these feelings because they cannot block or fend off the feelings like others can. This may be due in part to expressive language limitations, which make it more difficult to get help from others to process or vent off these feelings. It is possible too that because of their reliance on concrete forms of thought, they may have some difficulty understanding that the emotions of others are separate from their own.

In my experience, this inability to fend off negative emotions in their environments is one of the most underappreciated and yet significant causes of stress for people with Down syndrome. It is interesting to note that this is a source of stress, which may not be considered by others. Over the years, we have heard many people state “people with Down syndrome do not have stress”. While it is certainly true that they may not experience the type of pressure that many of us in the general population feel with making a living, paying a mortgage or rent etc., nevertheless we find that they are at even greater risk for stress, particularly from this issue.

We have found that there is some variability so that some may be more sensitive than others, but still most people with Down syndrome have a heightened sensitivity to the emotions of others.

*“Mental Wellness in Adults with Down syndrome”*  
Woodbine house press (2006) McGuire  
and Chicoine; and the *“Guide to Good Health  
for Teens and Adults with Down syndrome”*  
Woodbine House (2010).



In many cases the stress from being overly sensitive and exposed to strong negative emotions can be quite severe and debilitating, resulting in depression, anxiety and an increase in obsessions or compulsions.

What to do about this sensitivity? First, it is important to recognize that this is part of the persons basic constitutional make up. We cannot eliminate this sensitivity and we don't want to. Again it does serve so many positive benefits in their relationships with others. Still we do need to help people to find ways to manage negative feelings because they will inevitably encounter negative emotions throughout the course of their lives and quite often these feelings can be quite intense.

We have had some success with giving people with Down syndrome a number of simple strategies to reduce the impact of the negative emotions. First, it may be possible to alert someone in the environment who can help them with this problem. For example, a staff person, supervisor, or teacher may be able to help them manage the source or at least reduce the intensity of the negative emotions. People may also be taught to leave or to distance themselves from a person or situation which is too emotionally intense or stressful for them. Sometimes this is impossible because it involves a work or school situation that the person cannot leave. In these situations it may be possible to do some activity which allows them to focus away from the source of the stress. For example, it may be possible to divert attention toward some activity that is calming for the person, such as to copy letters or words or to listen to favorite music with earphones.

Finally, for parents and significant others, the most important thing is to recognise that this occurs. Parents are quite often superb observers of their sons and daughters with Down syndrome because they have had to be. If they note a change in mood or behaviour, this may signify a number of possible causes, but we have found that emotional stress encountered in the environment is one of the most common. If you can identify this as a cause, you may be the one to help to resolve this problem for your family member. This is particularly important because many people with Down syndrome cannot easily communicate that this is occurring.

Having an awareness of this sensitivity may go a long way to reducing the effect negative feelings and emotions have on them, particularly as more and more people with Down syndrome are in the community and exposed to situations where they will inevitably encounter strong feelings and emotions in others.

Once identified, these issues can be better managed for the emotional well being of your family member with Down syndrome.

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Dennis McGuire, Ph.D. – Dr McGuire is a Down syndrome behavioural expert and has more than 30 years of experience in the fields of mental health and developmental disabilities. He is a consultant to the Global Down syndrome Foundation and the former Director of Psychosocial Services for the Adult Down syndrome Center of Lutheran General Hospital, the largest, most prestigious clinic for adults with Down syndrome in the United States. Dr. McGuire is co-author of two prominent books: *Mental Wellness of Adults with Down syndrome* and *The Guide to Good Health for Teens and Adults with Down syndrome*. Dr. McGuire received his doctorate from the University of Illinois at Chicago and his master degree from the University of Chicago.

Dr McGuire is in private practice, working with individuals, groups and families, and recently came to Australia visiting Sydney and Newcastle. His talks were well attended by families and professionals.