

EDUCATION

HELP FOR PEOPLE WITH DOWN'S SYNDROME



**DOWN'S
SYNDROME
ASSOCIATION**

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Transition from Primary School to Secondary – Information Sheet

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Introduction

Transition to secondary school can be difficult for many pupils, but particularly so for pupils with special needs. In contrast to primary school, pupils have to relate to many teachers and find their way to and from different classrooms. In addition, many pupils with Down's syndrome find adapting to new surroundings and adjusting to change difficult and will need extra preparation and help.

During the final primary year, it is vital, therefore, that plans are made to make this major transfer as positive as possible for all involved. Essential elements to a successful transition for pupil, staff and parents are: **a positive attitude** from the receiving school and a **carefully prepared transition plan**.

Choosing a school

There may be one main school which most of the pupils from the primary feed into. Socially, this is the most sensible option to go for: the child will be well supported by familiar friends from the primary. However, if the child is to attend a different school, the transition plan must take this into account.

Start early to allow proper liaison between schools and relevant professionals.

Annual Review

Ensure the child's **Annual Review** in the last year of primary is held in the autumn or early spring term, allowing plenty of time to draw up the transition plan. Ensure that **everybody** involved with the child is invited: i.e.

- From Primary - class teacher, LSA and SenCo
- From Secondary - SenCo, learning support staff, year or form tutor
- Professionals from outside agencies - e.g. speech & language therapist, educational psychologist, education officer, etc.

Other strategies

- Invite secondary SenCo and form tutor to **final termly** review in primary
- Invite secondary SenCo/form teacher/LSA to visit the child in the primary (to observe in a familiar and secure setting)
- Arrange secondary class groupings so that the child has familiar and supportive **friends** in their new form
- Set up regular **meetings** between primary and secondary staff to discuss progress of transition plan
- Discuss how home and school can keep communication channels open
- Discuss how support will be managed
- Discuss ability to access the curriculum - differentiation issues
- Discuss transfer of the child's targets and Individual Education Plan
- Personal Profile: useful information about the child can prepare to improve understanding for secondary staff. Contributions could be from: the child, the parents, class teacher, LSAs and Speech and Language therapist

Additional visits to the new secondary school are very useful:

- Can any other peers from primary accompany the child on these visits?
- Ensure visits include more informal times of the day: e.g. breaks, lunch, and assembly
- Help the child learn the routine of the day, e.g. clear, visual timetable
- Ensure the child is provided with a map of the school, colour-coded if possible
- Help the child learn layout of school: dining hall, toilets, learning support base etc.
- Practise route from home/playground into school, which door to go in etc.
- If the child is not attending the main secondary school and will therefore have few, if any, friends accompanying him/her to their new school, arrange some visits to the top primary classes of the main feeder primary schools. This gives all the children an opportunity to get to know each other, which is important, as it can be more difficult for pupils with Down's syndrome to initiate new friendships.
- Consider lunch - is canteen or packed lunch better initially?
- If there are long queues at lunchtime, explore implications for the child.

Training

Part of the transition plan must include staff training:

- Consider formal Inset: about Down's syndrome, specific learning profile, use of support, differentiation, etc.
- Include all staff - teaching & non-teaching - that are going to be involved
- Consider inviting parents to talk to staff: they are the experts!

Things will not always run smoothly. Some staff may:

- Feel anxious, inexperienced or lack confidence
- Need more time than others to understand the needs of the child
- Need help to differentiate work appropriately

Learning Support

In secondary school, pupils have different teachers for most subjects. As a result, they tend to experience a range of teaching styles and expectations. The issues for Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) are often even more complex and can be demanding for both school and pupil.

Having one LSA is generally **not** the best option:

First, having to cope with a range of different subjects at secondary level is difficult for one LSA; some will have more expertise at supporting a pupil in one subject than another.

Therefore, having **subject-based** LSAs enables each to become more expert, improving communication between pupil and teacher. Equally, encouraging pupils with Down's syndrome to develop their independence is also an important aim and a single LSA may not promote this. Thus, for a variety of reasons, at secondary level it is important to have more than one LSA supporting the child.

A range of LSAs:

- Prevents over-dependency and over-familiarity
- Provides flexibility if an LSA is absent
- Develops subject expertise and curriculum access

Partnership and communication

Creating partnership and good communication between school staff and parents enables the parents to support both their child and the school, helping children to settle into school more easily. However, the demands of secondary school are far greater than those of primary. Many pupils with special needs take longer to adjust, make sense of their new environment, learn new rules and routines and develop organisation skills. Therefore it is particularly important for parents and secondary staff to share information and advice. Good channels of communication should be established to discuss joint strategies concerning behaviour and discipline and clear guidelines set for procedures in case of any problems, such as:

- Who will be the main contact person?
- Who will register any concerns?
- What procedures will be carried out?
- Is there a safe base for the child to go to, e.g. learning resource room, SenCo's room?
- Emphasise the need for consistency from everyone: staff, pupil, parents and peers.

Particular points:

- A home-school book is essential but needs more than just a message
- Decide who will be responsible for writing in the home-school book. (May be more than one person.)
- Ensure the child learns timetable and routine of the day, and that parents have a timetable
- Ensure timetable is clear to pupil: reinforce with diagrams, Rebus signs, room number, colour coding etc.
- Lists of equipment for different days are ideal to help pupil prepare books/equipment for the day, and also encourage independence and organisation skills
- Advance notice between school and parents is helpful:
- For curriculum: to help prepare for particular areas/topics or find back-up material
- For changes in school routine or family circumstances, however minor, as these changes can cause confusion and misunderstanding in children with Down's syndrome
- The **termly review** - a legal requirement for a child with a statement - is an excellent opportunity for parents and staff to discuss progress in all areas of development. Will parents be invited?

Social Integration

The development of friendships, social relationships and independence skills are part and parcel of good inclusion, as well as preparation for participation in the community. However, many children with Down's syndrome may need additional help, especially in situations where social skills are at a premium such as lunch and break times. In these cases, helping the child establish peer support networks will greatly smooth the process.

Particular points:

- Independence and social skills should be an integral part of the child's IEP
- Are there suitable lunchtime clubs, board/quiet games sessions, homework clubs? Is background support available during these sessions?
- Can Friendship Rotas/Circle of Friends/Buddy Schemes be established to help social inclusion?
- Help peers understand the nature of Down's syndrome - strengths and capabilities as well as weaknesses - and to recognise that all pupils have similar emotional and social needs
- Raise awareness of learning disabilities in general, for example, whole class, year group or whole school assemblies discussing learning disabilities

Homework

Many pupils have problems with homework! However, difficulties with short-term memory and concentration span mean that remembering homework can be particularly difficult for children with Down's syndrome. It can also take them much longer to complete homework than their peers.

Particular points:

- All homework to be differentiated
- All homework to be written down in full
- Add short explanation, linking in to lesson to help pupil remember
- Add key words, symbols or diagrams. These will act as strong visual reminders (with the additional benefit of helping the parents understand too)
- Consider having an additional **"Homework Explanation Book"** for this type of material
- Ensure date for completion is written down

Accreditation at Key Stage 4

It is important to establish arrangements for key stage 4. Some children with Down's syndrome will be capable of achieving a GCSE grade in certain subjects. However, not all will be and few will be in all subjects. Where this is not possible, suitable and appropriate alternatives should be offered. Such schemes should have national recognition. In addition, during Key Stage 4, particular thought should be given to preparing the pupil for life beyond school and whether courses in Life Skills would be appropriate.

Particular points:

- Are suitable accredited and courses other than GCSE offered, e.g. Entry Levels, Certificate of Achievement, Unit Award schemes etc?
- Are accredited life skills courses provided, e.g? Asdan Youth Award?

See the DSA Information sheet on Alternative Accreditation at key stage 4 for further information.

Useful further reading

Smith Dorothy, *Smoothing the Transfer for Pupils with Learning Difficulties*, NASEN 2000