

A booklet for nursery staff  
about supporting a child with  
Down's Syndrome starting  
nursery

# Preparing to Welcome a Child with Down's Syndrome in your nursery



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Hi, I'm Emma Rose .....

I was born in March 2021, and I had a hole in my heart, an unsafe swallow and respiratory complications and I have Down's Syndrome.

My dad got the impression from the medical staff that I may not thrive, and he was concerned about my development and future. My dad had to learn quickly about NG feeding

tubes and oxygen along with all the other baby stuff as any first dad has to learn. He felt overwhelmed when I was born and worried, but he was open minded and loved me unconditionally. The journey has had its challenges, but my dad and I are even closer because of them.

## Emma's dad's perspective

I was apprehensive about Emma starting nursery and the team around me gave me reassurance, but I was still very unsure of how she would cope in such a busy noisy environment.

I felt better once I visited the nursery and met the staff who would be looking after her. They all needed peg training and they were getting it the day after my visit which was reassuring. The communication between nursery and myself is good and I went to see her there yesterday.

She was loving it and I was struggling to get her out the door to come home. She has grown into a fun, bubbly cheeky little girl who lights up the room and I am happy to say I can see her thriving and believe nursery will help her development come on leaps and bounds and she will exceed all our expectations.



## Here are some things that might help:

Children with Down's Syndrome have a specific learning profile and will have their own areas of strengths and challenges; however, it is important to remember every child is unique in their own way.

- In many local authorities a child's Health Visitor is often the 'key' or named person (according to GIRFEC) involved in planning for a child to start nursery. During the planning period for starting nursery the child's Health Visitor should share relevant and proportionate information about the child with the nursery. It is also good practice for a health visitor to be involved in review or multi agency meetings for the child once they start nursery.
- Encourage parent/carers to complete a **communication passport** about their child for the nursery, similar to 'All About Me' so that you will have important information about any health issues their child may have, their communication needs, their likes and dislikes, family situation - you can view examples of these at the end of this booklet.
- **Some children with Down's Syndrome may have associated health conditions** which they may need additional health support with such as an Ng tube, or they may be on oxygen etc. It is useful for you to be aware of this early on so that you can make any necessary adjustments and arrange for any specific training that staff may need to specifically support a child's health.
- To make an **enhanced transition** more worthwhile we recommended that a child visits the nursery they are joining, along with their parents, their health visitor, speech and language therapist, occupational therapist (if already involved). This is a great opportunity to get to know the child better and understand their needs as well as ask any questions you may have or if there is anything you are unsure about. Provide photos/videos of the new nursery environment and staff who will be working with the child, so the family can support the child with using these to talk about nursery over the summer holidays to help the child remember what the new setting looks like to help it to feel familiar and better prepare them for starting.

- **Communication:** Children with Down's syndrome are strong visual learners and often poor auditory learners. It is best to limit the amount of verbal instruction given and allow extra time for processing verbal information. We recommend that nursery use visual forms of communication such as, Alternative Augmentative Communication (AAC) like Makaton/Signalong, PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System), symbols i.e., Board maker, and communication apps as these can positively support a child with Down's syndrome to learn and also support their understanding and communication needs. Consider whether you will need to upskill staff to use these Alternative Augmentative forms of communication if they are not trained in these already. We recommend introducing the use of Makaton/Signalong signed communication to support the child's communication and consider introducing a Sign/Board maker symbol of the week so that all children in the class can learn together and everyone learns about different ways to communicate. Using a visual board with Now and Next to keep a child on task and motivated are also useful. If a child uses visual forms of communication and responds to Makaton/Signalong, PECS, symbols or any other forms of Alternative Augmentative Communication (AAC) you may need to upskill staff to use this. Remember we can support you with Communication Skills training. You can find more information about this [here](#).
- **60%-70% children with Down's Syndrome can have issues with their vision** i.e., depth perception, poor focus, visual acuity (low muscle tone in the eyes), and peripheral vision may also be affected. Occupational Therapy can provide equipment and training to support a child's mobility, safety, and development within your setting, with supports such as coloured treads on stairs, lower handrails, slant boards for task work or when reading, support and strategies for fine motor development and writing skills and they can also arrange for a specialist chair for seating to support posture and stability if required. A full OT assessment of the nursery environment with the child present will be useful as the OT can check the suitability of the environment such as desk height, suitability of chairs, toilet/washbasin heights etc. If a child has a diagnosed vision impairment you can also get input from the Visual Impairment (VI) team, they can provide guidance for you with regards to any additional support required for a child's vision needs.



- Children with Down's syndrome often have **hearing issues**, most commonly conductive hearing loss, commonly known as Glue Ear which is caused by a build-up of wax or fluid in the ear often associated with them having a bad cold or from being congested which causes their hearing to be reduced. It is important to find out from the child's parents/carers if there are any issues with the child's hearing.
- Ensure the child is seated in the front of the class where they can see and hear. Consider the position of the supporting adult, sitting on the floor alongside the nursery staff, facing the child is often a good position. There can also be difficulties with **auditory discrimination** and **auditory processing** and we encourage you to provide visual reinforcement for all verbal instructions given and when other children give an answer repeat this aloud to ensure that it has been heard. **Input from the Hearing Impairment (HI) team may be required for further advice.**
- You will be very aware that young children starting nursery often have a **short concentration span** and can be **easily distracted**, this can be more difficult for children with Down's syndrome. An effective way to positively support a child with Down's syndrome with this and support their development in this area is to provide a range of short, focused and clearly defined tasks with short breaks in between. The free flow structure of a nursery setting may be daunting for a child with Down's syndrome, especially if there are too many choices. It would be useful to limit the choice of activities to two activities at a time maximum -e.g. sand pit or water play. Having an activity box containing a range of things that the child enjoys such as books, card games and fine motor skill games can be useful to use when they need a change of activity or time out and encourages choice making within a structured situation. Allowing one other child to join in is a good way of encouraging friendships and cooperation. If you feel the child gets overwhelmed at times, it can be useful to create a safe and quiet space the child can go to if they need to take a break if they are feeling overwhelmed and to support them to engage in the situation better.

- To support the child's **Speech and Language** development it is vital that the child and nursery receive regular input from a Speech and Language Therapist to support with a programme of individualised activities that nursery can use to support development of the child's language, understanding, communication and speech articulation.
- Some children with Down's syndrome can have **issues with chewing, swallowing/choking and acid reflux due to low muscle tone and poor oral motor skills**. It is therefore recommended that a risk assessment of the child's eating and drinking is completed if this has been identified. The nursery can trigger a referral to a specialist Speech and Language therapist.
- Some children with **Down's syndrome may not yet be toilet trained** when they start nursery or might need prompting to go to the **toilet, need support with dressing/undressing, washing their hands or with personal care**. It is useful to be aware of these needs before the child starts to ensure you have adequate staffing to provide this support. We acknowledge that nurseries are very accustomed to teaching children these skills once they start nursery and there are some useful resources to be found at the back of this booklet. Although development with toileting can sometimes be delayed for children with Down's syndrome, the majority of children will successfully learn this skill. Not showing the signs does not mean the child cannot toilet train. Rather than waiting for the child to appear to be ready to toilet train, it is recommended that you start to teach the child the skills that they will need to use the toilet. Some useful resources can be found at the back of this booklet.
- **Executive function in children with Down's syndrome** can be delayed and in addition to difficulties with staying on task and maintaining focus the child may also have difficulty with controlling impulses. The child may have no concept of danger therefore it is recommended that nursery complete a safety risk assessment before they start. This may include recommendations such as ensuring the playground is fenced off and that doors, gates and other areas of potential danger are always closed and the child having adequate support during the day to keep them safe.
- **Structure and routine:** Children with Down's syndrome will prefer and succeed best in a structured environment with familiar routines and clearly focused activities. The free flow structure of nursery settings is often more difficult and children with Down's syndrome can be upset by sudden

changes in their routine. Simple visual timetables using photographs or signs as prompt cards will help prepare the child for each new activity in advance. Should there be any changes in the nursery routine/environment/changes to key staff it is important to let the parents know. Likewise, the parents/carers should also inform you about any changes in home routine, well in advance where possible, so that you can talk about this with the child to prepare them for the change.

- You may need to consider **differentiating some aspects of the curriculum** to effectively support the education needs of a child with Down's syndrome. Phonological awareness can vary in children with Down's syndrome and they may respond better to the whole word or sight word approach. We can provide information and support for this and our Teaching Reading module is specifically designed to help nursery staff understand how to introduce the whole word approach. You can find information about training we provide [here](#).
- Children with Down's Syndrome may find **social interactions** particularly challenging, due to communication difficulties and developmental delays and this can be evidenced more so as they move into the 3-5 room. They may still be at the parallel stage of play for a longer period than their peers and may need adults as bridge builders to help them form friendships and understand social etiquettes. It would be useful to provide some structured activities at play time to support them to have positive social opportunities to mix with their peers and support their social development. You could consider creating a Circle of Friends for the child, more information on this can be found at the back of this booklet. Social Stories are also useful to support a child's social development by teaching about social behaviours and communication such as how to ask someone to play with them or asking to join in with others at play, you can see an example at the back of this booklet.
- For children first starting nursery it can feel like a **noisy and busy environment**, and especially so for children with Down's syndrome who may have **sensory issues** and are either overly (hyper) sensitive or under (hypo) sensitive to certain things like noise, textures, lighting etc. If the child starting your nursery has sensory issues it is recommended that you seek specialist guidance from an Occupational Therapist (OT) to help you to effectively support the child's sensory needs.

- Many nurseries who have a child/children with Down's syndrome access our **Achieving Better Communication (ABC) programme** to support the child's communication development and for staff to learn the specific techniques and strategies that we use on the programme. You can find out more about our ABC programme [here](#). If the child joining your nursery currently accesses the ABC programme you could consider facilitating their session in nursery so that the child can continue receiving consistent support for their communication development.
- Identify how you will communicate with parents/carers to inform how the child has been during their nursery day. However, a two way communication diary is important as the nursery should also be aware if the child has not had a good night's sleep, or been unwell, or upset about something because it can have an impact on their nursery day and learning.



# Support For you

We are here to help nursery staff in supporting and positively including children with Down's syndrome in nursery.

We provide support to educational professionals on a variety of topics including;

- IEP Target setting and reviews
- Support strategies
- Teaching and differentiating literacy and numeracy
- Transitions planning
- Positive behaviour support
- Supporting Friendships and Relationships

We can also attend meetings to help transition planning through education as well as annual reviews, IEP, CSP reviews or Child Plan Meetings.

We work jointly with a large variety of professionals supporting children or young people with Down's syndrome, providing information, strategies, and support, although not direct support to the child or young person.

Our Family Support Service Team are here to help with any information or support you need. You can get in touch at

[familysupportservice@dsscotland.org.uk](mailto:familysupportservice@dsscotland.org.uk) or give us a call on 0300 030 2121.

## Meet the Team

Our Team are available to support and help you in supporting and positively including children with Down's syndrome at your nursery.

You can get in touch by calling us on **0300 030 2121** or by emailing us on [familysupportservice@dsscotland.org.uk](mailto:familysupportservice@dsscotland.org.uk).



Shona Robertson

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Debbie Campbell

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Laura Traynor



Lauren Lockhart

South



**0300 030 2121**



**[familysupportservice@dsscotland.org.uk](mailto:familysupportservice@dsscotland.org.uk)**

## Training and Consultation Support

We offer bespoke training and support on specific topics as well as dedicated consultation sessions and a series of four on-line interactive training modules with one of our Support Team.

Our Training modules cover:

- Meeting the Learning needs of Children with Down's syndrome
- Teaching Reading Using the Whole Word Approach
- Teaching Numbers and Everyday Maths Skills
- Understanding & Supporting Behaviour that Communicates
- Supporting Young People with Growing up, Relationships and Boundaries

Our **bespoke consultation service** can support you with specific guidance or information related to the development or learning for a child with Down's syndrome and provide practical and effective strategies to positively support their inclusion in your nursery. A dedicated, in-person consultation visit includes observation of an individual child within the nursery environment and a feedback and support session with key staff. These sessions can also include support with how to differentiate curriculum learning materials and a written feedback consultation summary report is provided.

More information about the training and support we can provide for educational professionals can be found at our website [here](#) or by contacting Varshali Swadi our Professional Engagement and Training Coordinator at [varshali@dsscotland.org.uk](mailto:varshali@dsscotland.org.uk).



## Communication Training and Support

Many nurseries and schools access our Achieving Better Communication (ABC) programme to support communication development. You can find out more about our ABC Programme [here](#).

We can also provide Makaton workshops and Communication Skills training in schools. Our ABC Lead, Katy Lironi, is a qualified Makaton Tutor and is available to support you and nursery with Makaton training, workshops, resources, and enquiries.

You can email Katy at: [katy@dsscotland.org.uk](mailto:katy@dsscotland.org.uk)



# Resources

- Examples of Communication Passports
  - [All about me](#) - Include Me Too
  - [Personal Communication Passport](#) - Call Scotland
  - [PAMIS Communication Passport](#)
- Help with Toileting
  - Eric (The Children's Bowel & Bladder Charity) have lots of resources including a social script, flashcards and videos -view these [here](#)
  - Do2Learn also have helpful visuals and cards you can use in the classroom - you can view these [here](#)
- Enquire factsheets:
  - [Nursery Support](#)
  - [Rights for early years](#)
  - [Enquire Parent Platform](#)
- [Book bug starting nursery resource](#)
- Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) is a commitment by the Scottish Government to provide all children, young people, and their families with the right support at the right time. You can find additional information on this [here](#)
- Fostering Friendships
  - Twinkl have resources on activities and practical tips for helping support friendships you can view these [here](#)
  - Teach starter a have social story that you can use prior to playtime to help develop social skills when asking friends to play - you can view this [here](#)

## Our Resources

We have a number of resources which might be useful to you;

- Developing Early Skills
- Developing Maths Skills
- Developing Language Skills
- Makaton for the School Day

You can find out more and view these resources [here](#).



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# **This booklet is designed to help you support and positively include children with Down's syndrome in your nursery.**

Down's Syndrome Scotland provides support to families, carers and professionals who support for people with Down's syndrome.



If you would like to access further support please call us on 0300 030 2121 or email us at [familysupportservice@dsscotland.org.uk](mailto:familysupportservice@dsscotland.org.uk).

For further information visit:

[www.dsscotland.org.uk](http://www.dsscotland.org.uk)



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