

---

## Transition to Secondary School

---



---

## Transition to Secondary School

---



Moving up to secondary school may be something that parents and teachers are mindful of from early on in the primary school years when it comes to including a child with Down syndrome.

In Key stage 2, everyone around a child with Down syndrome needs to be thinking not just about the process of moving to Year 7, but what needs to happen in Years 5 and 6 in terms of the student's experience and readiness. The priorities need to be agreed long before everyone starts to think about the practicalities of moving to secondary and who does what in that last year.

### **Part of the tribe**

Having a strong sense of belonging, an identity borne out of contributing every day to their own world and that of the school community, is fundamental.

Whilst it *always* necessary to think about independence and socialisation when including a child with Down syndrome of any age, by Year 5, the changing interior life and needs of this student demands we look at their world and what's happening around them.

We need to look at what their day looks like in terms of their emotional and social life. Are they looking like and feeling like they are part of the tribe? If not, how do we address this?

- **Adult Support.** At no other time is it more important to ensure a student with Down syndrome doesn't have a seated adult next to them through the vast majority of their day. Schools need to look at how support staff are working and classroom teams need to put **SOCIAL SKILLS and INDEPENDENCE** right at the front of their planning. Nothing else is more important and in fact, when close attention is not paid to this area, behavioural problems often arise as the child with Down syndrome starts to feel more than ever the difference in the rhythms of their day in comparison to their peers. Pull back proximal support more and more. Encourage and equip peers to lean in and ensure there is plenty of time for 'banter' where an adult is not present. Children and young people communicate differently when there is no adult there and the child with Down syndrome needs to be immersed in this regularly. Step up and formalise the number of jobs and responsibilities you give the student with Down syndrome. This gives regular, predictable hits of self-worth and sends a clear message to the other students that their friend with Down syndrome can do more and more for themselves and for others. It changes the narrative around the child with Down syndrome and this is CRUCIAL. Our children, like all children, need to be needed.
- **Equipping Peers.** The friends and classmates of children with Down syndrome are often incredibly supportive but they can, (like adults), find it hard to change gears from 'caring and helpful' to 'enabling and reciprocal'. Children with Down syndrome of 10 and up recognise when people are being condescending and they mind this fiercely.
- This is often what underpins behavioural problems at this stage of development. In readiness for secondary life, we need to build up the number of reciprocal moments and connections the child with Down syndrome enjoys. Creating adult space is one thing, but peers need a 'script' to help them lean in more confidently with their friend with Down syndrome.
- The following resource, a film called, "Just Like You," may be useful. This film stars three teenagers with Down Syndrome and their friends. It is a great tool to use in PSHE activities around diversity and equality  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5M--xOyGUX4>

## The Transition Process

- **Start in Year 5.** Conversations and planning need to begin early for the reasons above and to ensure families have time to meet secondary school staff and get a sense of the different provision in schools locally. Key meetings must include both SENCOs and key support staff, where they are in post, in the secondary school. The involvement of secondary pastoral staff, such as Year Heads, is also important.

It is important to establish the following from the secondary school:

- How do they use support staff?
- How do the Learning Support Team/SENCo work with subject colleagues to ensure differentiation is effective for a student with a learning disability?
- What happens at breaktimes for students with additional needs? How do they facilitate social interaction between peers and how do they use their space/bases around school to enable the development of relationships and independence?
- How do they approach RSE (Relationships and Sexuality Education) for students with learning disabilities?
- What are the channels of communication with families? Do they use a key point of contact within the Learning Support Team?
- 
- **Visits to the Secondary School.** Feeder primaries and their secondary colleagues generally understand that the more visits the primary staff and student with Down syndrome make to the receiving school the better. These need to be well planned and ensure the student experiences the school at various points during the day with lots of photos of different staff and areas of the site.
- **Staff Visits.** TAs visiting each other's workplaces can be valuable. Secondary staff get a lot from seeing the student with Down syndrome in a familiar, successful environment and can start to get a sense of their style of communication and their personality. Equally, primary staff looking at a secondary site and their classroom practice can offer valuable insights on how learning and support might be organised for the student they know well.
- **A Shared Vision.** A word of caution here. Primary support staff are often concerned and even fearful about how the student with Down syndrome will cope in a mainstream secondary school. Parents, naturally, can share

those worries. It is important in this process that SENCOs and senior colleagues drive a high expectation conversation that ensures these worries don't become barriers. In our experience, 11-year-olds with Down syndrome cope very well with the change. They learn routine very quickly and navigate their way through the larger site and student body much better than everyone anticipates they will. Planning needs to start from this position of strength and plan pragmatically for the tools needed. Worries are well intended and insights highly valued but it's important they don't unhelpfully colour the process and place unnecessary limitations on the early part of the Year 7 experience. Aim high, get busy.

- ***A prepared secondary team.*** Whether or not this is the first student with Down syndrome they have included, a secondary school team needs support and training. Ideally, they need a whole school training in the summer before the student with Down syndrome starts and then a revisit, with key members of staff, in late Autumn of Year 7 when they have more experience of the young person in their setting.
- ***A prepared and motivated student community.*** The main purpose of including a young person with Down syndrome in a mainstream secondary school is to immerse them with typically developing peers. Adults with Down syndrome are increasingly attending mainstream college, living semi-independently, enjoying long-term relationships and going to work. Learning from typically developing peers about how to communicate and behave is what is enabling them to do so. But those peers need information and support to be confident, natural friends to their classmate with Down syndrome. There are many good examples of great practice from mainstream secondary schools on how to make this happen using Circle of Friends and other approaches to enhance the social experience and skills of the young person with Down syndrome whilst nurturing important values in typical peers.
- ***The Tools for each day.*** During the planning and review meetings in Year 6, staff need to make sure there are no surprises in terms of the mechanics of the school day when the student with Down syndrome starts. Timetables, routines (e.g. movement from class to class), people and places- these all need to be understood thoroughly and captured accessibly and VISUALLY for the student and family so everyone can hit the ground running. The student needs to know who their key people are in school and who

they can talk to about particular worries, especially around personal routines such as menstruation. This needs to be written down and established, not left to the young person and secondary support staff to work out on the hoof as this is problematic and often distressing for the young person. Discussion in the summer holidays and everyone having a high expectation of what the young person can do independently is key; this will reduce their vulnerability as they learn to be competent and age appropriate in how they roll at school.

**Further support**

Our School Liaison Service can provide further advice and support. Contact us by emailing: [info@upsanddowns.net](mailto:info@upsanddowns.net)