

Down Syndrome/Trisomy 21

Teacher Training Article • Fall 2019 • Jodie Flynn



Description

Down syndrome, also called trisomy 21, is a genetic condition in which a person has an extra partial or complete copy of chromosome 21. This extra genetic material affects a child's development, resulting in physical and mental changes. Symptoms can vary from person to person, making each person unique.

Characteristics

Some physical characteristics and symptoms include: flattened facial features, short neck, protruding tongue, upward-slanted eyes, small ears, short fingers, small head, low muscle tone, extreme flexibility; difficulty with heart, intestine, and breathing functions; hearing, vision, and thyroid problems; and delayed speech and language development.

Down syndrome can cause a short attention span, low cognition, and language delays; a slower rate of learning and mastery of developmental milestones; and sensory and motor difficulties, unintelligible speech, and memory problems.

Sawyer's Story (as told by Jodie Flynn)

I am an early childhood special education teacher, and I am blessed beyond measure to have the opportunity to work with Sawyer. He is a kindergarten student and fully integrated in a classroom with typical peers where he participates in all learning center activities.

He is six years old and, despite a shortened attention span, experiences no difficulty making friends. His funny, bubbly, caring personality makes him a winner with peers and teachers alike. Upon entering the classroom in the morning, he bursts into the room, grins, and yells, "I'm here." Upon leaving at the end of the day, he mentions the names of different people involved in his life and says, "Tell them I love them." If votes were cast by his teachers and peers, he'd be the one voted class favorite! Anyone who spends time with him falls in love with him immediately.

Sawyer has problems with speech and both fine and gross motor skills. He receives support from a speech therapist, physical therapist, and occupational therapist to work on these skills. He has difficulty remembering skills taught in the classroom and grasping more difficult concepts, but his teacher encourages him daily and celebrates every accomplishment with him.

He is a breath of sunshine! Not only my teaching career but my life has improved because of this little fellow. On the last day of school this past year, my classroom door suddenly swung open, and who should it be? He said, "Close your eyes." After I had closed my eyes, he placed a gift bag on my lap. He then proceeded to reach inside the bag and hand the gift to me. When I opened my eyes, what should I see but a kindergarten graduation picture of Sawyer inside a beautiful silver frame. He and I both teared up, celebrating his accomplishments.

He is moving to first grade next year. We will have new skills to master, new concepts to learn, new mountains to climb, but with the help of the Lord, I will be like an anchor that helps him move forward, a motivator that encourages him to succeed, a godly influence who whispers in his ear, "You got this. You can do it. Keep going. Keep trying. Let's read it again. Let's go over it just one more time." What a blessing to experience these kinds of celebrations with a young man who is a gift from God!

Accommodations and Supports

Children with Down syndrome are typically visual learners. They benefit from the use of visual aids, such as picture representations of the concepts you are teaching.

Presenting the topic in numerous ways may be helpful. Repeat and rephrase directions. Use simple language. Teach in short time spans and change it up to keep the child engaged in learning. Let the child do an active learning activity (such as a craft) immediately following the instructional part of the lesson, and then return to the topic and teach it using a different hands-on method.

Be sure to plan ahead. If a lesson involves fine motor tasks such as writing or cutting with scissors, prepare crafts ahead of time or provide support as needed. Ask a church volunteer, such as a teen or a peer, to help out with your lesson if writing or cutting is involved.

Seat the student near you to minimize distractions and keep the noise level low.

Practical Things to Consider

Fully include children with Down syndrome in every learning activity, using their strengths. (For example, if she is social, let her share a finished craft with everyone before leaving Sunday school for the day and watch her beam with joy.)

Encourage children to practice, practice, practice what they are learning, such as memory verses, and give them extra time to respond.

Follow a regular classroom routine.

Verbally and physically praise appropriate behavior and accomplishments. Words of encouragement and a gentle hug go a long way with a child with Down syndrome. Once inspired and motivated, he will jump the moon for you!

Resources

Website: National Down Syndrome Society (NDSS)—<http://www.ndss.org>

Website: The Arc (for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities)—<http://www.thearc.org>

Website: National Down Syndrome Congress—<http://ndscenter.org>

Book: *Stars of Success: Understanding How Children with Down Syndrome and Other Developmental Delays Learn* by Susan J. Peoples

Connect with ABLE

If you have questions regarding special needs, contact ABLE (Accepting, Believing, Loving, Embracing). ABLE Ministry is a program of the Ladies Ministries Division of the United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI) and is dedicated to assisting the special needs and disabled populations within the church and the community. ABLE is committed to increasing awareness about disabilities in the community, the church, and the world. They strive to provide the strength, support, and assistance necessary to meet the needs of those affected by disabilities—physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

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For further information, email ladies@upci.org or call 636-229-7895



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