

# STARTING SCHOOL: WHAT TO EXPECT IN THE FIRST FEW WEEKS

## PARENTS AND CARERS



**Starting school is a momentous occasion for any child, and as parents of a child with Down syndrome, you may have unique questions and considerations. This fact sheet aims to provide guidance on what to expect in the first weeks of school.**

### >>> Behaviour

**The first step in fostering socially and developmentally appropriate choices in your child is recognising that behaviour (particularly in young children) is a form of communication. By the time your child starts school, you've spent five years together, developing communication strategies and establishing norms for acceptable and unacceptable behaviour within the family.**

Starting school can be overwhelming, particularly for a child with additional needs. The new environment introduces a multitude of things to learn and tasks to navigate, and those around your child will still be figuring out how to effectively communicate with them.

Consequently, children with Down syndrome may exhibit behaviour at school that differs *significantly* from their behaviour at home. This may present itself as slight regressions (such as hitting or hiding), or alternatively, they may make great leaps in language or social growth – each child's experience is unique.

**Schools in New South Wales have plans in place to encourage appropriate behaviour, and these should be modified accordingly for children with additional needs.**

These behavioural plans should take a *positive* approach that focuses on encouragement and teaching of specific skills, rather than punishment. Understanding and embracing these differences in behaviour can contribute to a smoother transition to school.



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## >>> Communication Essentials

**The following is a list of some needs/wants your child might choose to communicate in the first few weeks (or longer!) of school:**

### BASIC NEEDS:

- Bathroom requests
- Thirst or hunger cues
- Comfort needs (e.g. adjusting clothing or changing position)

### SOCIAL INTERACTIONS:

- Indicating preferences for activities or play
- Expressing enjoyment or displeasure in certain situations
- Requesting interaction or wanting to join in a game/activity

### EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION:

- Communicating feelings such as happiness, frustration or sadness
- Indicating comfort or discomfort in different environments

### REQUESTS FOR ASSISTANCE:

- Indicating the need for help with a task or activity
- Expressing discomfort or pain

### ESTABLISHING PREFERENCES:

- Indicating likes or dislikes regarding sensory experiences (e.g., noise levels, lighting)
- Expressing a need or preference for a specific communication tool (e.g., visual chart, assistive communication device)



## >>> Speech and Language Skills

**The staff working with your child at school will need some time to “learn the language” of your child. In the meantime, teachers and other professionals are also aware that up to 90% of communication is non-verbal. This is especially important for students with high support needs. Teachers and professionals are aware of the diverse communication needs in their classrooms and are open to exploring various strategies.**

As a parent, consider sharing essential information about your child’s communication preferences early on. If your child uses communication charts or relies on Key Word Sign, providing posters and other resources can be immensely beneficial. Visual aids, like posters with images, offer a straightforward way for children to express their needs by pointing to relevant images, such as indicating a toilet break.

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## >>> Academics

The key to a successful start to your child's formal school years is setting high expectations. However, in the early weeks, it is more important to establish good routines and positive attitudes about school.

Before children in New South Wales start school, they will almost always be asked to complete pre-school assessments (this is known as the Best Start assessment in department schools, and may have a different name in alternative systems). This is a literacy and numeracy assessment, used to gauge a child's 'starting point', discover learning goals and identify strengths.

In the months (and years) to come, your child's teacher may send home consolidation work (similar tasks to the ones your child is completing in class), however in the early weeks, as the staff supporting your child are still getting to know them, this is a time to build positive associations with learning. If possible, set aside a special time in the evenings for story reading, where your child chooses a book to read together. Children can join in the experience by reading along, or simply turning the pages.

## >>> Physical Skills

Achieving success in the classroom involves finding a balance between the student, the environment and the task at hand. When considering a person with Down syndrome, understanding their learning style, motivators, and optimal functioning conditions becomes crucial.

Often, only small adjustments to the learning environment are needed. This can include personalised seating arrangements, supportive desks/floor furniture (to support low muscle tone), a safe and accessible toileting set-up, and a plan for feeding strategies (if needed).

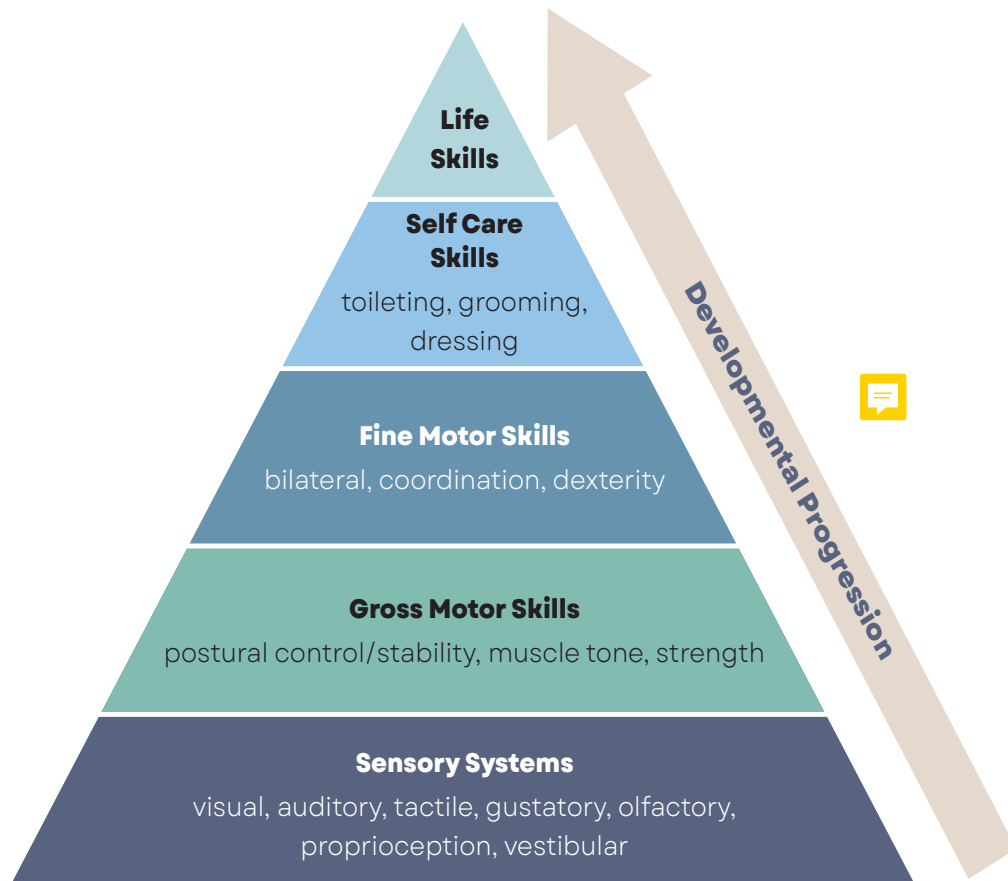
Communication between your child's occupational therapist and the classroom teacher is incredibly valuable. An occupational therapist will have many suggestions and strategies for supporting your child's specific needs in the classroom. A meeting between a teacher and a specialist in the first weeks of school can be very beneficial.

In the kindergarten setting, success depends upon the strong development of foundational skills. Students with Down syndrome initially benefit from support in establishing a **strong sensory foundation**. Given the potential for a classroom to be an overwhelming experience for students with additional needs, providing support is crucial.



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The diagram below shows the level of support needed for children with Down syndrome. Children work their way up the pyramid - once the sensory building blocks are in place, the higher skills can be taught and mastered.



## >>> Social Skills

Young children are *usually* very inclusive people, particularly when they have become familiar with their classmates. That said, young children can be very blunt when they first meet anyone who looks, sounds, or acts in a way which is new or different to what they are used to.

Teachers are well-aware of this and will use it as an opportunity to cultivate a culture of understanding and acceptance. They may explain to the class that each person is unique and differences make our community richer.

In the initial weeks, the focus will be on fostering social skills that lay the foundation for positive interactions. Teachers and support staff will engage your child in activities that promote communication, cooperation and friendship building.

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## >>> Key School Staff: Who to Know

**Principal** – the head of the school, and the ‘go-between’ for the school and the larger system (department, Catholic, independent). Most children and parents will have limited contact with the principal, especially in very large schools. Issues are usually only referred to the principal if there is an unsatisfactory resolution with all other avenues.

**Deputy/Assistant Principal** – second in charge, after the principal. Generally known as a deputy principal in departmental schools, this is usually a role which is *only* filled in very large departmental schools. In Catholic and Independent schools, this person is usually referred to as an “Assistant Principal” and this person is in charge of all the logistics and day-to-day running of the school. Behaviour and academic issues are referred to this person, rather than the principal.

**Stage Coordinators/Assistant Principals** – Stage Coordinators (known as Assistant Principals in department schools) are in charge of a particular stage:

- **Early Stage One** (Kindergarten)
- **Stage One** (Years 1-2)
- **Stage Two** (Years 3-4)
- **Stage Three** (Years 5-6)
- **Stage Four** (Years 7-8)
- **Stage Five** (Years 9-10)
- **Stage Six** (Years 11-12)

A Stage Coordinator provides academic and student support, and coordinates the learning of multiple cohorts of students in multiple classrooms.

**Classroom Teacher** – is your child’s director of learning, and the first “go-to” for all questions, ideas or concerns about your child’s time at school. There may be more than one classroom teacher, so establishing your child’s “home base teacher” can be helpful. The classroom teacher designs and delivers the learning (both academic and social) for *all students* in the space, and is responsible for assessing and feeding back this learning to parents and carers.

**Student Learning Support Officers (SLSOs)/Teacher’s Aides** – supports the classroom teacher in a multitude of ways. This might be through making classroom resources or organising the learning environment, to working with small groups or one-on-one with students. The trend in New South Wales schools is shifting away from a SLSO being “allocated” to one particular child. Instead, the role of an SLSO is broader, more flexible, and varies from school-to-school.

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## USEFUL LINKS

### For more information about the Best Start Assessment:

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/curriculum/literacy-and-numeracy/assessment-resources/best-start-kindergarten#:~:text=The%20Best%20Start%20Kindergarten%20assessment%20has%20been%20conducted%20in%20NSW,t%20answer%20all%20the%20questions.>

### For more practical ideas, and a timeline for a smooth start to school:

<https://raisingchildren.net.au/disability/school-play-work/school/starting-primary-school-disability#first-few-weeks-at-school-nav-title>

## References:

Mehrabian, A. (1972) *Nonverbal Communication*. New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction.



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