

# POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR TOOLKIT

## EDUCATORS | PROFESSIONALS

**The culture and practice of Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) has been increasingly integrated into school in New South Wales in the last few decades. Research shows that the philosophy of PBS is proven to be especially important for students with additional needs. Understanding the unique needs of students with Down syndrome is crucial for implementing positive behaviour strategies, to maximise the social and academic outcomes for these students.**

### WHAT IS POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR SUPPORT?

Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) is an evidence-based approach aimed at cultivating a constructive and inclusive environment by promoting **desirable behaviours** and **reducing challenging ones**. At its core, PBS seeks to **understand the underlying factors** contributing to a person's behaviour.

This approach encourages those interacting with the child to focus on:

- reinforcing positive actions
- teaching essential social skills
- providing individualised support based on the unique needs of each individual.

### Physiological Needs

The unique physiological needs of students with Down syndrome can influence their behaviour. Cognitive function in the areas of memory, processing speed and language skills are significantly impacted, which can make it challenging for children with Down syndrome to express their needs and navigate social interactions effectively. Additionally, sensory processing issues are common, affecting how children with Down syndrome perceive and respond to stimuli in their environment.

There are a range of commonly reported behaviours for students with Down syndrome. These include 'stopping and flopping', bolting, hands on or hitting and a lack of boundaries. For more information about each of these common behaviours, including their causes, please see our linked fact sheet.

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## Positive Behaviour Support in New South Wales Schools

PBS frameworks are so effective for encouraging appropriate student behaviour that it is mandated in departmental policy. Key points from this policy are listed below:

- 1.1** NSW Government schools embed **positive behaviour approaches**, safe practices and inclusive education. Schools implement inclusive and **positive student behaviour support** and management approaches aligned to the care continuum that establish support and maintain high expectations for student behaviour, in line with the behaviour code for students.
- 1.2** Schools develop behaviour support and management plans, including anti-bullying strategies, that prioritise continuity of learning and facilitate whole-school, prevention-focused and **positive approaches to behaviour support**, to meet the needs of all students.
- 1.3** Promoting **positive behaviour** requires schools to access support as early as possible and for system- level support to be proactive and responsive to schools' needs.

**Not only is PBS proven to be the most effective way to encourage appropriate behaviour choices in students with Down syndrome, but it is also required by law.**

## STRATEGIES

### Strategy #1 – Build Relationships

Attachment theory has taught us that, for children, attachment to their caregivers is fundamental for healthy, happy lives.

Caregivers includes not only parents and carers but extended family, classroom teachers, assistants, professionals and specialists.

#### Some Research About Relationships

- It can take longer for children with intellectual disabilities to build relationships with new people.
- Once this attachment is formed, it is very strong, and children with Down syndrome have a clear preference to spend time with people to whom they have a strong attachment. They will also show a clear reduction in challenging behaviour for caregivers with whom they have a strong connection.
- Some evidence suggests that children with an intellectual disability have a smaller scope for 'networks' of close relationships and they prefer a smaller group of strong relationships over a larger group of casual relationships.

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## An Interesting Finding

Many researchers into the area of special education find that – for the best educational and social development of children with additional needs, particularly intellectual disability – the relationship between caregivers is just as important as the relationship between these caregivers and the child.

This means that positive relationships between all stakeholders (parents and teachers, teachers and SLSOs, parents and specialists and so on) is fundamental to the optimal development of the child.

## Implications

- Children with Down syndrome will often demonstrate different behaviour (less desirable) with people they do not know very well.
- Caregivers who know the child well will be able to ‘read’ the child’s emotions and needs, and will be able to pre-empt challenging situations before they arise. This is challenging in a school environment, where staff personnel changes quite frequently.
- Caregivers in school need to have frequent and meaningful contact with the child. A primary support person for the student with Down syndrome within a school should be someone who spends a lot of time with them (rather than an external staff member who might frequently be called away).

## Strategy #2 – Use Visuals

Almost every study into the learning profile of individuals with Down syndrome indicates that they are far stronger visual learners than verbal learners.

Visuals are the key to success in the classroom.

### Some Research About Visuals

- Typically developing adults rely heavily on spoken language. When we are upset or frustrated, we rely on spoken language more.
- More words, especially when they are spoke quickly, are even less likely to be processed by the child.
- Not only does a visual schedule allow individuals with Down syndrome the opportunity to understand what is being asked of them, it naturally leads to the creation of a routine – which in itself is proven to be successful for almost all children.
- Less is more when it comes to visuals.

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## Strategy #3 – Set Up the Environment

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When setting up a classroom space for students with Down syndrome, consider the individual needs of that student. The more consistent and predictable the classroom space can be, the more settled and secure a student will feel.

### Some Research About Environments

- Environment typically refers to the space – the home, the classroom, the playground, or the office – where a child with additional needs might spend their time. It also refers to the people in these spaces.
- For children with additional needs, navigating an environment where things are constantly changing is similar to adults spending time in a foreign country where no-one communicates, acts, eats or behaves in a familiar way.
- The more consistent and ‘the same’ the environment and the people in it are, the more academic and social gains are observed.

### Implications

- Environments cannot always stay the same. The major change within a school environment happens when a student moves classrooms at the end of each year. This can mean not only a change of space, but also staff and students as well.
- Sometimes, keeping an environment as “the same” as possible is actually a detriment to the child (though this is more prevalent in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder) as the child never experiences small-scale change – meaning that when a large-scale change happens, it is incredibly traumatic. In short: some change is good!
- Setting up an environment effectively also means making the lives of other students easier as well. Consider adding a ‘calm space’ in the quietest part of your classroom with a range of sensory toys, blankets, posters with calming prompts etc.

## Strategy #4 – Create a Reward System that Works

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Consider implementing a long-term reward system, preferably one which already sits within the philosophy of your school. Not only will this be easier to integrate (as it is a system which already exists), but it will allow children with additional needs to feel part of the larger group.

Reward systems for students with additional needs should be tangible. These often take the form of “tokens” - small paper slips. Digital reward systems, such as Class Dojos, are often highly visually appealing and engaging, but are also not always accessible and visible at all times. They can also be somewhat visually busy for students with additional needs.

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A token can be as simple as a smiley face on a post-it note which goes home to mum or dad at the end of the day! The important thing for tokens is that they are the same, and they are consistent.

Ideally, a student will “cash in” their tokens for a simple positive reward. Keep the reward in the near future. Just as a consequence for a bad behaviour is meaningless if it comes too far after the event, a reward is meaningless if it is too far removed from the desirable behaviour.

Let the child set the reward. It could be kicking a ball with a friend, playing a game in the classroom or painting/craft.

## **INTEGRATING SOCIAL STORIES AND REWARDS SYSTEMS**

Think of one behaviour you would like to focus on, for example, transitioning to the playground. Create a social story for this routine, which is read to the student before they are expected to complete the behaviour or task. Every time the student achieves this milestone, acknowledge them with lots of praise and a token.

When the student achieves this a certain amount of times (ideally a small number at first, such as 3-5 times), they can “cash in” their tokens for a reward, such as an extra five minutes of play with a friend.

## **Transitions**

Transitions are hard, because new things and new environments are hard.

### **Some Tips for Smooth Transitions**

- Give the child a ‘heads-up’ when a transition is going to occur – “five minutes”, “two minutes” etc. The child may not understand the actual time frame, but they will come to learn that this cue means that a change is coming.
- When a child needs to transition from one space to another – give them the option of taking something with them. This is often a special toy but it can also just be a physical object, which for them symbolises the movement from one space to another.
- Distraction can be helpful - by turning the transition into a game, anxiety around the transition is reduced.
- Transitions in school can be easier if a child can do them with a chosen friend.
- Create good associations with transitions. For example, if a child transitions successfully, can they spend two minutes in the new space doing something they love?

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- Pair up a preferred activity with a non-preferred one. Keep the transition positive by focussing on anything the child likes about the new space – “remember we do dancing/drawing/games in this space?”
- When a permanent change is being made – such as to a new classroom – give the child plenty of opportunity to visit this new space, preferably with a couple of friends.

**Down Syndrome NSW is here to help! We offer a range of resources, aimed specifically at the educational space in New South Wales. Becoming a member is the easiest way to access these new resources as they arrive.**

We also have a range of printables, which are *specifically tailored* to students with Down syndrome. These include First/Then Boards, Social Stories, Routine Charts and more! These are all available on our website.

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## See our linked fact sheets:

What is Positive Behaviour Support?

Understanding Common Behaviours in Children with Down Syndrome

Navigating Challenges and Implementing Positive Behavioural Strategies for  
Children with Down Syndrome

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