

# READING SUPPORT TOOLKIT

## EDUCATORS - PROFESSIONALS

Students with Down syndrome are capable of developing strong reading skills when provided with the right strategies, support, and a structured approach.

This fact sheet is designed to help teachers create an inclusive and supportive learning environment that fosters reading success. By using evidence-based approaches, adapting instruction to individual needs, and building on students' strengths, teachers can help students with Down syndrome develop essential literacy skills, increase confidence, and enjoy the learning process.

### Reading...The Research

- Around 90% of students with Down syndrome in a mainstream setting learn to read.
- There are **variable** rates of attainment of literacy skills and **variable** rates of progress.
- Reading development is a highly researched area. Research has shown that children as young as 3 years old are able to begin to learn to read.
- Word recognition has been relatively more researched than reading comprehension. **Word recognition is ahead of decoding and comprehension** in most students.
- **Text comprehension** is an area of significant difficulty for many students with Down syndrome.



**Learning to read** is not linear for students with Down syndrome.

The first step is understanding that printed words have meaning.

For students with Down syndrome, literacy experiences need to be as meaningful as possible.

# TEACHER TOOLKIT: STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING READING DEVELOPMENT FOR STUDENTS WITH DOWN SYNDROME

## KEY STRENGTHS IN READING DEVELOPMENT

### Strong visual learning skills

Sight words and visual cues.

### Success with repetition and routine

Retention and reinforcement of concepts.

### Pattern and rhythm recognition

Predictable text and sentence structures.

### Sensory learning

Tactile, movement-based, gestures and hands-on activities.

## COMMON CHALLENGES IN READING DEVELOPMENT

### Phonological awareness difficulties

Recognising and manipulating sounds in words.

### Short-term memory limitations

Retaining letter-sound patterns and blending sounds.

### Speech and language delays

Pronunciation, fluency, comprehension.

### Processing speed

Decoding and understanding new words.

## CREATING A SUPPORTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

A structured and engaging classroom environment is essential for supporting the reading development of students with Down syndrome.



- Establish **consistent reading routines** to support memory and learning (e.g. daily reading time, structured activities).
- Provide **clear, step-by-step instructions** for reading tasks, using visual cues to reinforce understanding.
- Break down reading activities into **manageable steps** to reduce cognitive overload.
- Keep reading sessions **short and focused**, allowing movement breaks as needed.
- Use **engaging and interactive strategies**, such as role-playing stories or reading with a buddy.

## PHONICS AND PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS

Students with Down syndrome often experience challenges with **phonics and phonological awareness**, which are essential for decoding and reading fluency.

Difficulties in **hearing, identifying, and manipulating sounds** in words can make it harder for them to break words down into smaller parts and blend sounds together.

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### TEACHING TIPS FOR PHONICS AND PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS

Traditional phonics instruction can be challenging due to speech and memory difficulties. Some ways to support these areas include:



**A multisensory approach, incorporating visual, auditory, and tactile learning strategies.**

Letter tiles

Tracing letters

Singing and rhyming games



**Keep phonics instruction explicit and repetitive.**

Break lessons into small, structured steps with frequent repetition.



**Pair sounds with visual cues.**

Use pictures, hand signals or cue cards to represent sounds and help with recall. For example, associate 'b' with 'ball'.



**Incorporate movement and music.**

Use actions, gestures and songs to reinforce letter sounds (for example, clapping syllables in words or using body movements to represent sounds).

## SIGHT WORD RECOGNITION - WHOLE-WORD READING

Many students with Down syndrome learn to read best through sight word recognition and whole-word reading, as they often have strong visual memory skills.

### Why are sight words and whole-word reading important?

Many high-frequency words (e.g., *said*, *because*, *their*) do not follow regular phonemic patterns, making them difficult to sound out. Learning these words by sight allows students to read more smoothly and with greater understanding, as they do not need to pause and decode every word.

Whole-word recognition builds on students **visual learning strengths**, enabling them to identify words quickly based on shape, pattern and context.

Developing a reading program which relies on sight words and whole-word recognition has been proven to reduce frustration and increase motivation, leading to greater engagement with books and written materials.



**Spending *less time* on decoding words leads to *more time* comprehending the meaning of a text.**

### *Sight Words and Whole-Word Reading...What's the Difference?*

Sight word reading refers to the ability to instantly recognise high-frequency words without needing to decode them. These words are often irregular (e.g., *said*, *because*, *their*), meaning they don't always follow typical phonics rules. Sight words are usually memorised through repetition and exposure, helping students read more fluently.

Whole-word recognition is a broader concept that involves recognising entire words by their shape, pattern, and visual features, rather than by decoding letter-sound relationships.

## STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING SIGHT WORDS AND WHOLE WORD READING (1)

### START WITH A CORE SET OF SIGHT WORDS

- Select **high-frequency words** that students will encounter often in books, worksheets and daily activities (e.g., *I, me, you, said, here, look*).
- Use **high-frequency lists** (e.g., Dolsch list, Magic 100) as a starting point, but adapt the list based on individual student needs.
- **Prioritise meaningful words** from the student's environment (e.g., their name, family names, classroom labels).

### USE VISUAL SUPPORTS TO REINFORCE RECOGNITION

- Pair words with pictures.
- Use colour-coding.
- Create word walls or personalised word banks.
- Incorporate gestures and actions with words (e.g., pointing to your eyes for the word 'look').

### REPETITION AND DAILY EXPOSURE

- Introduce new words gradually, ensuring mastery before adding new ones.
- Use flashcards in short, frequent sessions (3-5 minutes).
- Display words around the classroom.
- Encourage students to use sight words in conversation and writing activities.



## STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING SIGHT WORDS AND WHOLE WORD READING (2)

### PLAN FOR YOUR READING PROGRAM

- Select **repetitive and predictable** books where students can anticipate and recognise sight words.
- Encourage **echo reading** (teacher reads, student repeats), **choral reading** (reading together), and **paired reading** (reading with a peer or SLSO).
- Provide **sentence building activities**, such as arranging words into short phrases or sentences.

### USE TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITAL TOOLS

- Leverage apps and online games (e.g., Reading Eggs, Starfall) to make sight word practice engaging.
- Use audio book with text tracking to reinforce sight word recognition.
- Create personalised digital books where students can see their own names and familiar words in sentences.

### ENCOURAGE REAL-WORLD CONNECTIONS

- Read and recognise **environmental print**.
- Provide personalised **sight word books** including the student's interests and experiences.
- Encourage students to **write and illustrate their own books** using mastered sight words.

## COMPREHENSION

Reading comprehension is essential for students with Down syndrome to **understand, enjoy and engage** with texts. While many students develop strong **word recognition skills**, they may still struggle with **understanding meaning, recalling details, and making connections**.

Difficulties with **working memory, processing speed, and expressive language** can impact comprehension, but with the right strategies, teachers can support students in building these critical skills.



### COMPREHENSION AND THE LEARNING PROFILE

Students with Down syndrome have **unique learning needs** that can impact their ability to understand and engage with texts.

Some of these are listed in the graphic on the left.

## STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT READING COMPREHENSION

### Use Visual Supports to Reinforce Understanding



- **Picture-supported text** - Pairing words with images helps students make connections.
- **Graphic organisers** - Story maps, sequencing charts, and mind maps help organise ideas.
- **Visual schedules** - Using step-by-step guides for reading activities can improve focus.

### Teach Comprehension Through Active Engagement



- **Ask predictive questions** - Encourage students to guess what happens next before turning the page.
- **Model Think-Alouds** - Read a passage and demonstrate how to think about the story ("I wonder why the character did that?").
- **Use role-playing and drama** - Acting out scenes reinforces understanding and makes reading more interactive.



## STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT READING COMPREHENSION

### Focus on Repetition and Familiar Texts



- **Re-read familiar texts** - Repetition builds confidence and allows deeper understanding with each reading.
- **Use simple, repetitive story structures** - Books with predictive text patterns support comprehension.
- **Encourage echo reading** - Have students repeat after the teacher to reinforce meaning.

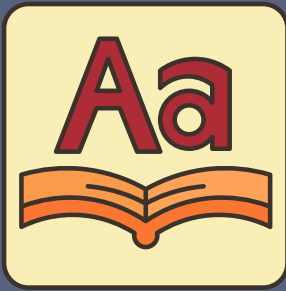
### Break Down Texts into Manageable Chunks



- **Use short, clear sentences** - Avoid long or complex text when introducing new material.
- **Summarise as you go** - Stop and review what has happened in the story before moving forward.
- **Use sentence starters** - Provide structured prompts like *"This story is about..."* or *"The main character is..."*

## STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT READING COMPREHENSION

### Build Vocabulary and Language Skills



- **Pre-teach key vocabulary** - Introduce new words before reading to improve comprehension.
- **Use real-life connections** - Relate stories to personal experiences to make meaning clearer.
- **Encourage multi-sensory learning** - Reinforce new words through sign language, pictures and objects.

### Support Comprehension with Assistive Technology



- **Use audiobooks with text tracking** - Hearing and seeing words together reinforces understanding.
- **Interactive e-books** - Digital books with clickable words and images can enhance learning.
- **Speech-to-text tools** - These can help students express their understanding in writing.

## SAMPLE DAILY READING PROGRAM - EARLY STAGE ONE

Below is a **suggested** daily reading program for students in Early Stage One.

While this program provides a structured approach to reading instruction, it is important to recognise that many students with Down syndrome have **limited cognitive stamina** and may not be able to engage for the full suggested time.

Down Syndrome NSW advocates for **flexible, individualised** teaching programs. The times and activities given are merely a suggestion. The best reading program will work with the strengths and needs of the student.

### 1. Welcome & Oral Language Warm-Up (approx. 5 mins)

**Focus: Builds vocabulary, expressive language, and listening comprehension**

- Greet the student and discuss a picture, object, or event related to the day's book.
- Use visual prompts and gestures to encourage conversation.
- Model sentence structure: "I see a...", "I think it is..."
- Introduce 1-2 new key vocabulary words from the story with images or real objects.

### 2. Phonological Awareness & Phonics (approx. 10 mins)

**Focus: Develops early sound awareness and letter recognition**

- Rhyming words game – Match words with similar sounds.
- Initial sounds practice – Identify and say the first sound in familiar words.
- Letter-sound matching – Use magnetic letters or flashcards to reinforce letters and sounds.
- Multisensory tracing – Finger-trace letters in sand, playdough, or textured surfaces.

## SAMPLE DAILY READING PROGRAM - EARLY STAGE ONE

### 3. Sight Word Recognition & Whole-Word Reading (approx 10 mins)

#### Focus: Builds word recognition and reading fluency

- Introduce 1-2 new sight words and review previously learned words.
- Use flashcards, word walls, and interactive games to reinforce recognition.
- Practice error-free learning – immediate praise for correct responses.
- Read sight words in short, repetitive sentences (e.g., "I see a cat").

### 4. Shared Reading & Comprehension (approx 10 mins)

#### Focus: Develops print awareness, fluency, and comprehension

- Select a predictable, repetitive book with clear visuals.
- Use paired reading (teacher reads, student echoes).
- Ask simple comprehension questions (e.g., "Who is in the story?" "What happened first?").
- Encourage pointing to words as they are read.
- Reinforce understanding with story sequencing pictures.

### 5. Reading Response & Wrap-Up (approx 5 mins)

#### Focus: Reinforces comprehension and builds expressive language

- Draw and talk – Have students draw a picture about the story and describe it.
- Match pictures to sentences to reinforce meaning.
- Use sentence starters: "My favourite part was..." or "I liked..."
- Praise effort and set a small goal for the next session.

#### Weekly Adjustments & Progress Monitoring

- Track sight word mastery.
- Gradually increase student-led reading as confidence grows.
- Provide consistent home-school communication with reading tips for families.

## SAMPLE DAILY READING PROGRAM - STAGE ONE

Below is a **suggested** daily reading program for students in Stage One.

While this program provides a structured approach to reading instruction, it is important to recognise that many students with Down syndrome have **limited cognitive stamina** and may not be able to engage for the full suggested time.

Down Syndrome NSW advocates for **flexible, individualised** teaching programs. The times and activities given are merely a suggestion. The best reading program will work with the strengths and needs of the student.

### 1. Oral Language & Vocabulary Building (approx 5 mins)

**Focus: Develops spoken language, expressive communication, and background knowledge**

- Start with a picture discussion or real-life object to introduce key vocabulary.
- Use sentence starters to encourage conversation (e.g., “I can see a...” or “This reminds me of...”).
- Teach 2–3 new vocabulary words from the book with images or real objects.
- Engage in a quick oral language game, such as describing a picture or a simple “I Spy” activity.

### 2. Phonics & Word Study (approx 10 mins)

**Focus: Builds decoding skills, letter-sound knowledge, and word-building**

- Review letter-sound relationships using flashcards, songs, or multisensory activities.
- Practice blending and segmenting sounds (e.g., “b-a-t” → “bat”).
- Use magnetic letters, letter tiles, or whiteboards to reinforce spelling patterns.
- Introduce word families (e.g., -at, -op, -in) to strengthen pattern recognition.





## SAMPLE DAILY READING PROGRAM - STAGE ONE

### 3. Sight Word Recognition & Fluency Practice (approx 10 mins)

#### Focus: Strengthens word recognition and fluency

- Introduce 2–3 new sight words and review previous ones.
- Engage in error-free learning games, such as bingo, word-matching, or sight word treasure hunts.
- Encourage sentence-building activities where students arrange sight words into simple phrases.
- Use paired reading, where the student tracks words as a teacher or peer reads aloud.

### 4. Guided Reading & Comprehension (approx 10 mins)

#### Focus: Develops reading fluency, comprehension, and text engagement

- Select a predictable, level-appropriate book that reinforces phonics and sight words.
- Model think-aloud strategies (“I wonder why the character did that?”).
- Ask who, what, where, and why questions to encourage comprehension.
- Use visual supports, such as sequencing pictures or story maps, to reinforce understanding.

### 5. Reading Response & Wrap-Up (approx 5 mins)

#### Focus: Reinforces comprehension and builds expressive language

- Have students draw a picture about the story and describe it in their own words.
- Use sentence starters for verbal or written responses (e.g., “My favourite part was...”).
- Reinforce new vocabulary and sight words through a quick revision activity.
- Praise effort and set a small goal for the next session.

## SAMPLE DAILY READING PROGRAM - STAGE TWO

Below is a **suggested** daily reading program for students in Stage Two.

While this program provides a structured approach to reading instruction, it is important to recognise that many students with Down syndrome have **limited cognitive stamina** and may not be able to engage for the full suggested time.

Down Syndrome NSW advocates for **flexible, individualised** teaching programs. The times and activities given are merely a suggestion. The best reading program will work with the strengths and needs of the student.

### 1. Oral Language & Vocabulary Building (approx 5-10 mins)

**Focus: Develops spoken language, expressive communication, and background knowledge**

- Begin with a picture discussion or real-life object to introduce key vocabulary.
- Use sentence starters to encourage conversation (e.g., “I can see a...” or “This reminds me of...”).
- Teach 3–5 new vocabulary words from the book using visual supports, gestures, and real objects.
- Engage in a quick oral language game, such as word association or a “describe and guess” activity.

### 2. Phonics & Word Study (approx 10 mins)

**Focus: Builds decoding skills, letter-sound knowledge, and spelling**

- Review letter-sound relationships and word families (e.g., -tion, -ing, -ed).
- Practice blending and segmenting words (e.g., “sh-ar-k” → “shark”).
- Use magnetic letters, letter tiles, or whiteboards to build and spell words.
- Teach common prefixes and suffixes (e.g., un-, re-, -ful, -less) to expand vocabulary.



## SAMPLE DAILY READING PROGRAM - STAGE TWO

### 3. Sight Word Recognition & Fluency Practice (approx 10 mins)

#### Focus: Strengthens word recognition and fluency

- Introduce 3–5 new sight words and review previous words.
- Engage in sight word games, such as bingo, matching, or “find the word” in a book.
- Encourage sentence-building activities where students arrange sight words into phrases.
- Use paired or echo reading, where the student follows along as a teacher or peer reads aloud.

### 4. Guided Reading & Comprehension (approx 15-20 mins)

#### Focus: Develops reading fluency, comprehension, and text engagement

- Choose a level-appropriate book that reinforces phonics, sight words, and comprehension skills.
- Model think-aloud strategies (“I wonder why the character did that?”).
- Ask who, what, when, where, why, and how questions to encourage comprehension.
- Use story sequencing activities (e.g., putting events in order with picture or sentence cards).
- Encourage inference-making by asking students to predict what's next.

### 5. Reading Response & Wrap-Up (approx 10 mins)

#### Focus: Reinforces comprehension and builds expressive language

- Have students draw or write a response about the story.
- Use sentence starters for verbal or written responses (e.g., “My favourite part was...” or “This story reminds me of...”).
- Reinforce new vocabulary and sight words through a quick revision activity.
- Praise effort and set a goal for the next session.

## SAMPLE DAILY READING PROGRAM - STAGE THREE

Below is a **suggested** daily reading program for students in Stage Three.

While this program provides a structured approach to reading instruction, it is important to recognise that many students with Down syndrome have **limited cognitive stamina** and may not be able to engage for the full suggested time.

Down Syndrome NSW advocates for **flexible, individualised** teaching programs. The times and activities given are merely a suggestion. The best reading program will work with the strengths and needs of the student.

### 1. Oral Language & Vocabulary Building (approx 10 mins)

**Focus: Develops spoken language, expressive communication, and background knowledge**

- Introduce 4–6 new vocabulary words from the day's text using visual supports and real-world connections.
- Discuss synonyms, antonyms, and word associations to deepen understanding.
- Use sentence starters to encourage conversation (e.g., "I think this word means..." or "This reminds me of...").
- Play a quick oral language game (e.g., describing an object using new vocabulary words).

### 2. Phonics, Word Study & Spelling (approx 10 mins)

**Focus: Develops decoding, spelling, and word-building skills**

- Review prefixes, suffixes, and root words (e.g., "un-", "-tion", "-able") to support word meaning.
- Introduce common spelling patterns and irregular words.
- Practice breaking multisyllabic words into chunks to aid reading.
- Use word-building activities (e.g., rearranging letters to form new words, spelling games).



## SAMPLE DAILY READING PROGRAM - STAGE THREE

### 3. Sight Word Reinforcement & Fluency Practice (approx 10 mins)

**Focus: Strengthens whole-word recognition, fluency, and confidence**

- Review previously learned high-frequency words in phrases and short paragraphs.
- Engage in sentence-building activities to apply sight words in context.
- Use paired, echo, or choral reading to develop fluency.
- Encourage reading aloud with expression to build prosody and understanding.

### 4. Guided Reading & Comprehension (approx 10-15 mins)

**Focus: Develops reading fluency, comprehension, and engagement with texts**

- Select a grade-appropriate, engaging text (fiction or nonfiction).
- Model think-aloud strategies to teach inference and summarisation.
- Ask higher-order comprehension questions (e.g., “Why do you think the character did that?” or “What would you have done differently?”).
- Use story sequencing, prediction activities, and cause-and-effect discussions.

### 5. Reading Response & Wrap-Up (approx 10 mins)

**Focus: Reinforces comprehension and builds expressive language**

- Have students write or draw a response about the story (e.g., summary, personal connection).
- Use sentence starters for structured responses (e.g., “The most important part of the story was...”).
- Reinforce new vocabulary and sight words through quick revision activities.
- Praise effort and engagement, setting a goal for the next session.



## REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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