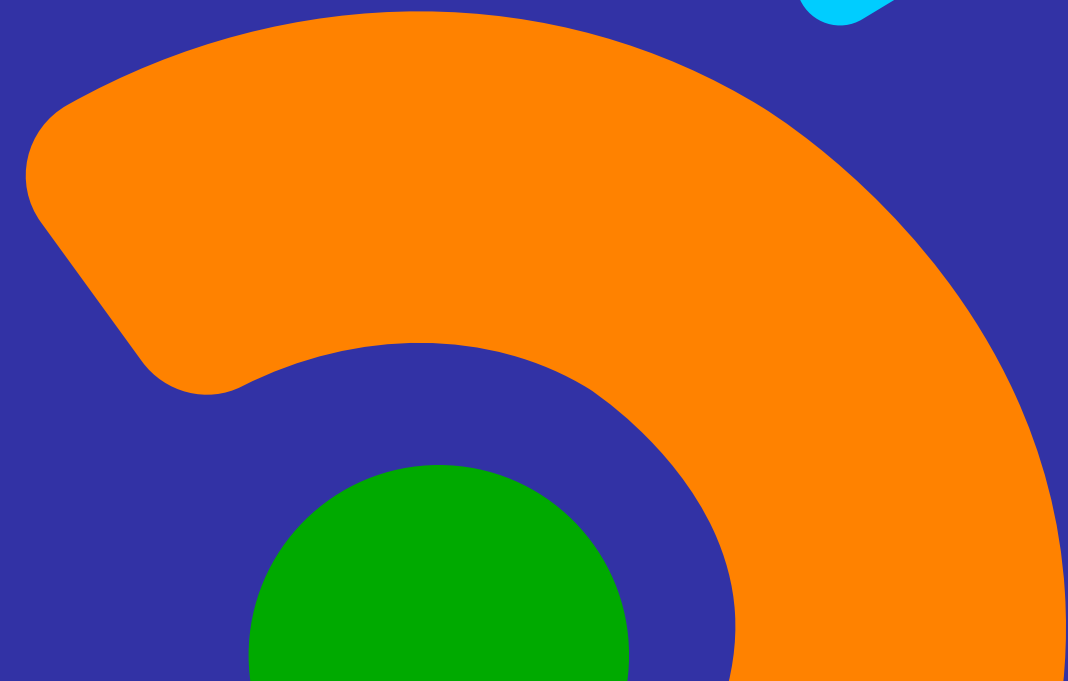


Down's Syndrome  
Manchester  
Thrive with us

# School Support Guide





# Welcome

We are an inclusive, welcoming, member-led charity for individuals with Down's syndrome, parents, caregivers and professionals, from diagnosis through to adulthood.

Our warm and friendly team is here for every stage of your journey. We are here to help you find friendships, connect with other families, and access professional support and advice. Join our supportive community for answers, information, and access to a wealth of knowledge and understanding.

Get involved at [www.dsmanchester.org.uk](http://www.dsmanchester.org.uk)



# Schools' Point of Contact

## Suzi – Family Support Worker

As a parent of a wonderful 6-year-old, Jasper, who has Down's syndrome, I know first-hand how overwhelming it can feel navigating education, healthcare, and support systems — while also trying to just be a parent. When we first joined DSM, I finally felt part of a community of parents who just “got it” — and that changed everything.

That's why I'm here — to help families like mine feel supported, empowered, and never alone.

**Email : [suzi@dsmmanchester.org.uk](mailto:suzi@dsmmanchester.org.uk)**

**Phone: 07732391134**



With my background in education and supporting children with SEND as well as my lived experiences with Jasper, I'm hoping I can make a genuine impact alongside the amazing team at DSM so that schools feel supported and can access up-to-date and evidence based resources to support our members with Down's syndrome to truly thrive in their education settings.

# A Brief Introduction to Down's syndrome

Down's syndrome is a genetic condition caused by the presence of an extra chromosome (chromosome 21). It affects a person's development in varying ways and may impact learning, physical health, communication, and motor skills. However, people with Down's syndrome have a wide range of abilities and can thrive when supported with understanding, high expectations, and inclusive practices.

You may notice some shared characteristics in children with Down's syndrome, such as:

- A slower pace of learning and development
- Differences in muscle tone and speech clarity
- A warm, sociable, and strong sense of routine
- A unique learning profile that benefits from visual support and repetition

As educators, your support is vital in ensuring children with Down's syndrome can flourish in school. We're here to help you feel confident, informed, and supported.

## Person First Language

Say "a child with Down's syndrome," not "a Down's child."

## Why?

Putting the person first recognises the child as a whole person, not defined by their condition. Language shapes attitudes, let's use it to build inclusion and respect.



# Understanding the learning profile associated with Down's syndrome

## Vision

All children with Down's syndrome have some degree of visual difficulty, even with the correct glasses. Children's vision lacks fine detail and sharp contrast.



## Hearing

Most children with Down's syndrome experience some hearing loss, generally from glue ear. Identifying and meeting early hearing needs is a high priority due to the effect on later speech and language development.



## Speech and language

Children generally have significant speech and language difficulties affecting both speech clarity/fluency and language learning. However, it's important to remember that understanding often exceeds expressive ability and shouldn't be underestimated.



## Fine & gross motor skills

Gross motor skill development is often delayed due to more flexible ligaments and low muscle tone. Support in developing fine motor skills for handwriting and drawing is often needed.



## Working memory

Children often have poor verbal short-term memory leading to difficulties in storing and processing verbal information. This means it can be hard to remember and respond to verbal instructions.



## Communication and behaviour

Most people with Down's syndrome want to be successful behaviourally and make other people happy. There are some common behaviours that can be problematic if not understood properly. Often, the behaviours we see are because the work or demand is too much.



# How can we best support people with Down's syndrome?

## Vision

- Make print and other visual materials bigger and bolder.
- Use bright, colourful games and learning materials.
- Ensure glasses are worn properly.



## Fine & gross motor skills

- Encouraging active movement is important.
- When sitting, children's feet should rest on a solid surface.
- Opportunities to strengthen grip are useful for developing fine motor skills.



## Hearing

- Speak directly to the individual using clear and simple language.
- Stress word beginnings and endings.
- Reinforce speech with facial expression, sign or gesture.



## Working memory / processing

- Learning by imitation is generally a strength – activities that allow children to copy a model are recommended.
- Tasks should be broken down into small, achievable steps.
- Limit amount of spoken instruction given at any one time.



## Speech and language

- Listen carefully.
- Ensure face to face and direct eye contact.
- Use sign, gesture and visuals to support language learning.
- Avoid closed questions to encourage the individual to engage in conversation.



## Communication and behaviour

- Individuals need sufficient time to process and respond to information.
- Opportunities to develop social skills are incredibly important – extra help with interacting and playing during break and playtimes may be needed.
- Positive behaviour should be consistently praised.



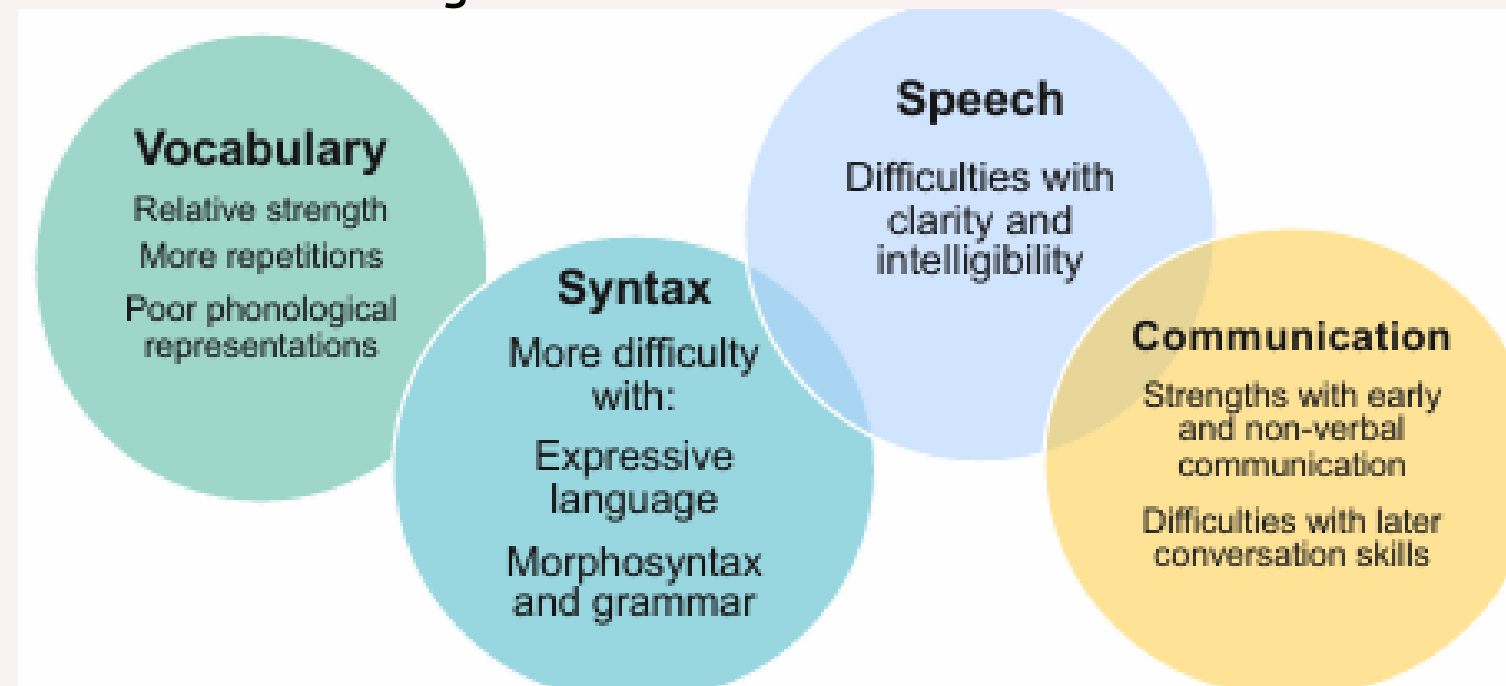
# Speech, Language and Communication

We are lucky to work with some amazing Speech and Language therapists at Down's Syndrome Manchester that offer sessions at our monthly Chatterbox events for our members. Our SALT's all have specific experience supporting children and individuals with Down's syndrome and have included some easy tips and strategies to use with our members to help promote their development of Speech, Language and Communication. **We also have a Speech and Language Therapist who will work with schools not receiving adequate support from a SALT to develop strategies and address speech and language barriers they are facing.**

# Speech, Language and Communication

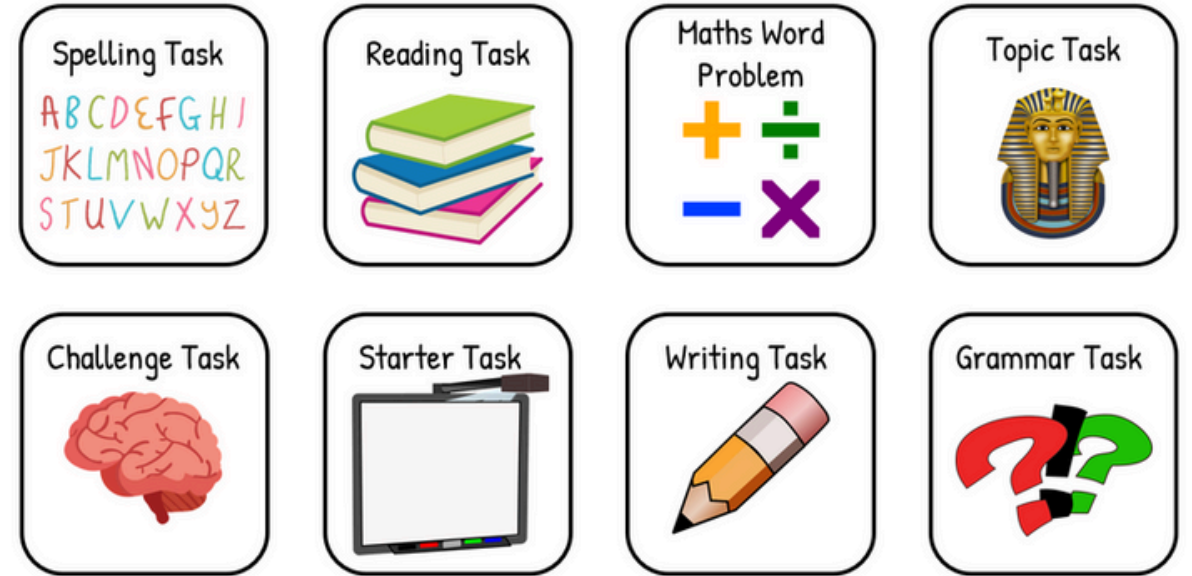
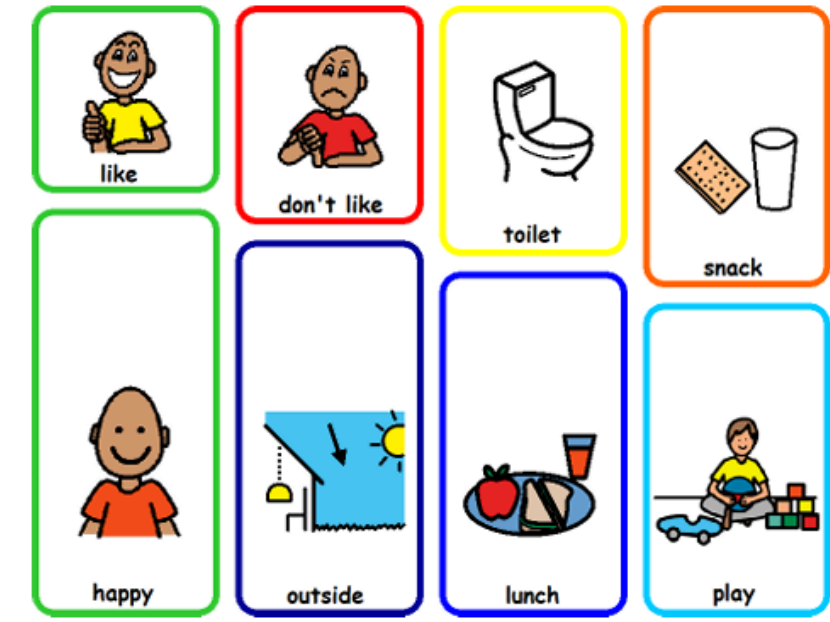
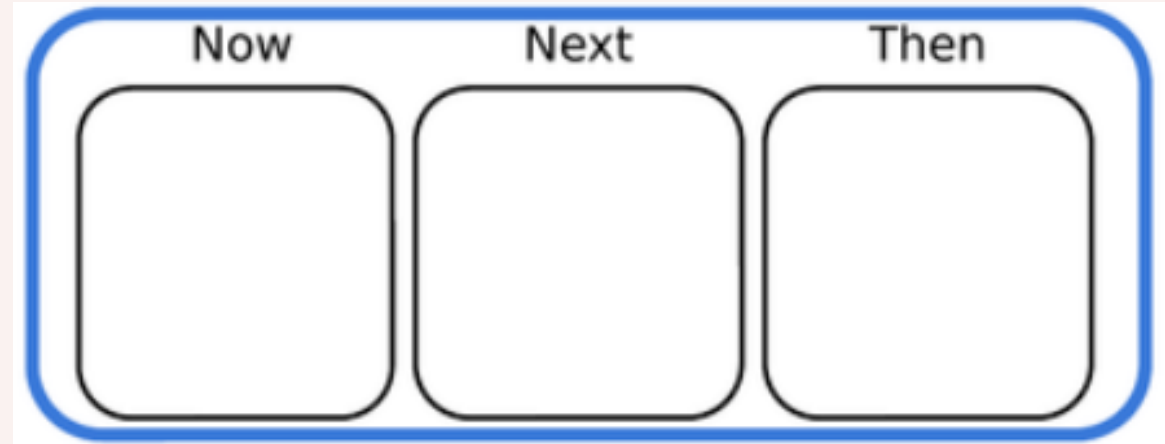
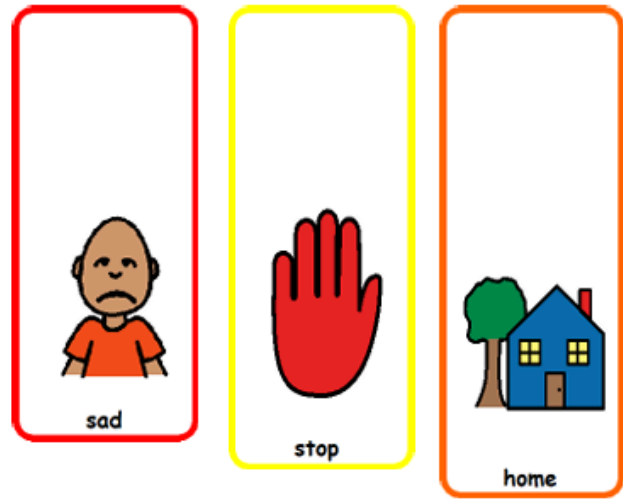
## 1. Understanding Speech and Language in Down's Syndrome:

- Children typically have stronger receptive language (understanding) than expressive language (speaking).
- Speech clarity may be impacted by low muscle tone and structural differences.
- Children may benefit from alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) like Makaton, PECS, or visual cues even as speech develops.



## 2. Core Strategies for Schools:

- Use signs and symbols alongside speech to reinforce meaning.
- Use chunked instructions: break directions into small, manageable parts.
- Create communication books or boards with visuals for routines, subjects, and choices.
- Use visual timetables to support sequencing and understanding.
- Allow additional response time – children with DS need more processing time.
- Partner with parents to create a "Communication Passport" (one-page summary of the child's communication profile) or similar contact provision



# Occupational Therapy

## Understanding common OT Needs in individuals with Down's Syndrome:

- Hypotonia (low muscle tone) impacts strength, endurance, and coordination.
- Children may struggle with fine motor skills: writing, scissor use, buttons/zips.
- Sensory processing difficulties are common – some may be hypersensitive to sound, touch, or texture; others may seek more input.
- Postural control affects sitting still and focus.

## Classroom Strategies

- Provide seating supports (e.g., wobble cushions, footrests) for posture.
- Include fine motor warm-ups before handwriting (e.g., threading, playdough).
- Offer fidget tools or quiet sensory breaks for regulation.
- Allow movement breaks during transitions or long tasks.
- Create personalised workspaces that reduce visual/auditory distractions.
- Consider using adaptive tools (e.g., pencil grips, slant boards).



# Sensory Processing and Differences

We all have sensory preferences — but for some children, processing sensory messages can be harder.

This can affect behaviour, focus, and how daily life is experienced. For many children with Down’s syndrome, sensory processing differences are part of their unique learning profile.

## Sensory Regulation: What Does It Mean?

Some children are oversensitive (e.g. loud noises feel painful, certain fabrics unbearable).

Others may be under-sensitive (e.g. not noticing hunger, needing strong tastes or movement).

Many children experience both, depending on the moment or setting.

<b>Sense</b>	<b>Under-Responsive (Needs more input)</b>	<b>Over-Responsive (Needs less input)</b>
<b>Touch</b> (Tactile)	May seek touch, chew, or not notice injury	Dislikes brushing teeth, water on face, clothing
<b>Sound</b> (Auditory)	May play TV/music loudly, slow to respond to name	Covers ears, avoids noisy spaces
<b>Sight</b> (Visual)	Poor depth perception, detail-focused	Lights too bright, overwhelmed by clutter
<b>Taste/Smell</b>	Licks objects, seeks spicy/strong food	Avoids certain smells/foods
<b>Movement</b> (Vestibular)	Rocking, spinning, loves movement	Motion sickness, struggles with sudden stops
<b>Body Awareness</b> (Proprioception)	May hit too hard, fill mouth too full	Clumsy, unsure how body moves in space
<b>Internal Signals</b> (Interoception)	May not notice hunger, pain or toilet needs	May find body signals confusing or upsetting

# Classroom Strategies to meet Sensory Needs

## Calm/Cool-Down Spaces

Purpose-built calm areas should be quiet, low-stimulus, and accessible at any time, not just at the point of crisis. Include options like soft seating, puzzles, weighted items, visual timers, or fidgets. Ensure the space is understood as a self-regulation hub, not a behavioral sanction.

## Movement & Sensory Breaks

Scheduled or cue-based breaks help prevent escalation—especially when sensory overload signs appear. These should be proactive, not reactive.

Use short, purposeful movement activities: jumping jacks, animal walks, rhythmic movement, or pushing/pulling heavy objects (e.g. books, beanbags).

## Environmental Adjustments

Lighting: Turn off harsh fluorescent lights. Opt for natural light or softer lamps to reduce sensory overload.

Visual clutter: Keep displays simplified. A tidy classroom helps reduce visual overwhelm.

Noise control: Offer noise-cancelling headphones or quiet zones for students who are over-sensitive to sound.

## **Sensory Tools That Support Focus**

Use fidget tools that are discreet and one-handed (e.g. tangles, pencil toppers, stretchy bands tied to a desk). These allow regulated students to stay engaged without distracting peers

Provide oral motor tools such as chewable necklaces or chewy tubes for students who seek oral input

## **Structured Routines & Predictability**

Keep daily routines consistent, use clear single-step instructions, and build predictable transitions with visual cueing.

For movement-based tasks, use rhythmic language or counting (“left-arm, left-arm...”) and marked floor or hoop spaces to contain movement and support body awareness

## **Sensory Diets for Individual Needs**

A sensory diet is a structured, tailored set of sensory inputs (heavy work, movement, oral tools, tactile activities) designed to meet each child’s specific regulation needs. There’s growing evidence for its effectiveness in supporting sensory processing in school environments

# Social Skills and Behaviour

- Sit pupils alongside positive role models
- Encourage independent working in lessons from the start
- Embed social interaction targets within class activities
- Use communication supports (e.g. visuals, social stories)
- Create a positive behaviour plan tailored to the child
- Ensure classroom behaviour systems are clear and meaningful



# Social Skills and Behaviour

Children with Down's syndrome benefit hugely from structure, visuals, and clear communication. When staff are on the same page and families are included the whole school becomes a more welcoming, supportive environment.

## **1. Build Predictable Routines**

Children thrive on consistency, establish clear and regular daily routines. Make sure expectations are known and constant, with simple, visual cues.

## **2. Set Clear Rules & Boundaries**

Limit the number of rules to a few key ones (e.g., share, listen, stay safe). Keep language simple and the same across staff and settings.

## **3. Use Positive Reinforcement**

Catch them doing things right and praise it!  
Offer small rewards like stickers, extra choice time, or verbal encouragement.

## **4. Provide Visual Supports**

Use picture schedules, now/next boards, timers, and cue cards. Visuals help reinforce understanding and support self-regulation.

## **5. Teach Replacement Behaviours**

Identify the need behind a behaviour (e.g., attention, sensory input). Teach and prompt the child to use a more appropriate way to meet that need.



## **6. Plan for Transitions**

Predictability matters—give advance warnings (“5 mins until tidy-up”).  
Use visual timers and prepare both mentally and visually for change.

## **7. Stay Calm & Consistent**

Respond with calmness as your tone can help de-escalate.  
Consistency across all staff ensures clarity and trust.

## **8. Understand Triggers**

Notice patterns: busy classrooms, noise, changes in routine?  
Make environmental tweaks to reduce stress (quiet zones, spaces with lower lighting).

## **9. Collaborate with Families**

Regular communication helps connect home and school strategies.  
Share successes and concerns, working together gives consistency.

## **10. Use a Whole-School Approach**

Share strategies in staff training and team meetings.  
Everyone should apply the same techniques to support the child uniformly.

# Resource Links and Examples

## Education

**DSI Education Guidelines**

**Down's Syndrome Education – Reading & Language Intervention (RLI)**

**DSUK – School and Education Resources**

**Good Practice Guidelines for Primary Schools – DSUK**

## Behaviour

**DSA On-Demand Training on Behaviour**

**Understanding Behaviour DSA Resources**

**Using Positive Behavioural Support as a model of change with people who have Down's syndrome PDF**

## Therapy Support

**The OT Toolbox**

**Sensory Toys for Children with Down's syndrome**

**Best Practice Guidelines for Professionals: Toileting – DSUK**

## Speech, Language and Communication

**Using Stories to help teach skills and understanding**

**Widgit Visuals**

**Boardmaker Communication Board Software**

**Editable Now/Next/Then Board with Symbols**

**Speech and Language Activities for the classroom – DSA**

**Visuals for Down's syndrome: Why and How (15min video)**

**Lanyard Visual for School**