

II. Acknowledge the Label ... Teach the Student

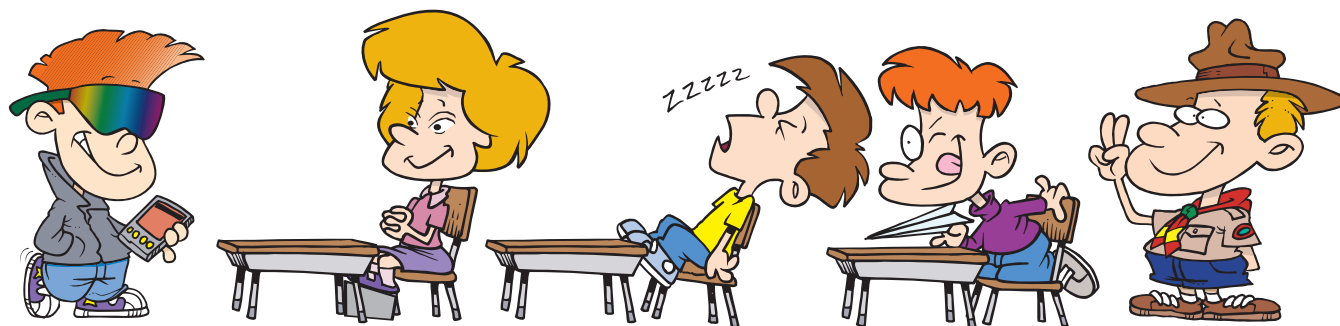
The word *syndrome* identifies characteristics that, when grouped together, diagnose a condition. Down syndrome is the description medicine has given to the traits that are typical of one genetic deviation, in this case an extra 21st chromosome.

Although the term **Down syndrome** has been around for over one hundred years, only in the past decade has the medical treatment and educational knowledge of it grown exponentially. Today, the challenge is to continue providing better health care and educational opportunities to assist individuals with Down syndrome attain their own unique potential.

Unfortunately, the very act of identifying a person as having a syndrome leaves little room for acknowledging individual qualities, which often have greater impact on human potential than the syndrome itself. A prime example is the assumption, held for many years, that a child with Down syndrome was incapable of learning. There was a time when the medical prognosis for Down syndrome was dismal and unforgiving, and parents were encouraged to place their child in an institution. These children were not perceived as individuals with unique capabilities. Fortunately, support for parents in their expectations for inclusion of their child with Down syndrome in community programs, schools and the work place is now common. Only through inclusion can individuals access opportunities for learning and personal growth.

The presence of people with special needs in our society challenges everyone to acknowledge and accept individual differences and, hopefully, teaches others to view the individual first and the disability second.

No Two People Are Alike



To identify all the physical traits of Down syndrome, one can look in a medical textbook. However, to identify a student's learning potential, one must look at a multitude of factors that affect each student differently, as each one is unique.

1. The **most significant factor** limiting achievement is the **intellectual challenge** common to all individuals with Down syndrome. Though the impact can be severe, current research indicates that most students have only a mild-to-moderate intellectual impairment and are very capable of becoming educated, self-sufficient adults. (Rynders and Horrobin, 1996)

2. The **least understood factor** impacting achievement is **personality**. To assume that all people with Down syndrome have the same nature (e.g., that they are “always happy and loving”) is a stereotype that does a great disservice to each individual. The truth is inheritance and environmental influences determine their disposition and they have the same spectrum of personalities as the general population. It’s also necessary to acknowledge that distinct personalities cope and react differently to various situations. (Sheridan, 1998)
3. The **most interesting factor** that influences learning is **family dynamics**. The support and expectations maintained in the home are the critical elements that influence a student’s achievement. As family priorities change, so does the ability to meet everyone’s needs. Number of siblings, parenting style and family economics all add to the ever-changing fabric of family life.
4. The **factor gaining prominence** in education circles is the effect of **learning style** on achievement. Up-to-date studies indicate that students with Down syndrome are visual learners. Yet, in choosing what and how to teach a student, remember that all children learn best when all the senses are incorporated into a lesson plan. There is no “prescriptive” tool or approach that is guaranteed to work for all students with Down syndrome as each one is unique and has his own learning style. (Kumin, 1996)
5. The **factor requiring long-term evaluation** is the effect of **chronic health problems** on learning potential. Some students may have already had several major or minor surgeries before the age of six. Many are prone to chronic colds and ear infections. Associated eating and sleeping difficulties can cause general health to be poor. As students mature, other associated health problems might surface. Some are dealt with quickly, like getting a prescription for glasses, but others could require long-term medication or even additional surgery. Although students may appear to be resilient, continuing health problems do take their toll.



All students share a love of learning
and a thirst for knowledge.

Yet, students with Down syndrome
start life with several disadvantages;
the most detrimental being a label
that often prevents others from setting
appropriate expectations for them.

“Ignore the label ... teach the student”

is a simplistic yet empowering summary of what we have learned.

*It allows us to be flexible and free to teach the student
to the best of his or her – and our – abilities.*