

VII. Assessment of Students with Down Syndrome

What Comes First – The IPP or an Assessment?

The Individual Program Plan (IPP) is the key to providing direction to the teaching team throughout the school year. Waiting for a prior assessment precludes the teaching team from having a plan ready to implement in the first week of school. Starting the year off using last June’s IPP gives staff an immediate appreciation of the student’s strengths and weaknesses. During this initial transition period, students benefit greatly from the security provided by consistent behavioural goals and familiar teaching techniques. For students new to the school, ask parents for written consent to obtain information from former placements.

Comparison of the student’s records with first-hand classroom observations reveals if there has been a plateau, regression or progression in skill development over the summer months. This will determine which IPP goals or objectives will remain constant and which will need to be modified accordingly. For example, if the student learned to print legibly over the summer, introduce journal writing as a new goal.

Consider the IPP as a flexible “work in progress” that is kept in the classroom for easy reference and note taking until the first reporting period. Waiting until October gives the teaching team valuable observation and assessment time to ensure that their “first” IPP reflects student and teacher learning. For the balance of the school term, regular updates of the IPP identify areas of growth in learning and are an early warning system to identify plateaus or regressions in skill development. Goals can then be modified again to better reflect the student’s learning needs at the time. When reviewing goals, it’s not necessary to reexamine the entire IPP; only the areas of concern or celebration that need to be discussed in depth.

Teaching Tip: Use the student’s previously documented ability level as a baseline from which to select new goals and objectives. Utilizing materials and techniques that the student is familiar with will facilitate skill acquisition.

Assessment: The Fact-Finding Mission

The first step in the assessment process is to become familiar with the student’s educational history. Start by reviewing the cumulative file that is generally kept in the main office. If there is no file to be found, start one! Ask the parents to share their child’s progress from their own personal file copies of recent school, therapy and medical reports. With parental consent, photocopy and share these files with other professionals working with the student.

Teaching Tip: Invite the previous year’s teacher to share her insights on teaching the student. Ongoing phone conversations or coffee breaks together will provide guidance year round.

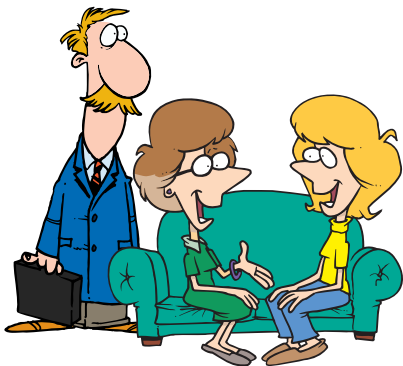
An analysis of a student's educational history for the purpose of assessment is not complete without an inquiry into his medical history as well. Chronic health concerns affect his physical and emotional well-being and can become a "wild card" that impacts his achievement in school. It's incumbent upon the teacher to discuss the student's health status with the family. Knowing how he is coping with chronic medical problems helps the teaching team appreciate the resultant impact on learning and assists them in determining the need, timing and validity of assessment measures.

Including Parents in the Assessment Process

Since parents know their child better than anyone does, they are the prime source of assessment information. As well as providing anecdotal information, ask them to complete parent assessment inventories that indicate their child's accomplishments. Although professionals may not have observed these capabilities at school, they are wise not to disregard parental reports of his achievements at home.

The goal in collaborating with parents is to generalize skills learned at home to school and vice versa. For instance, self-help skills typically begin at home, but literacy skills may develop more readily at school because of direct teaching and peer modeling. Parents and professionals can discover from each other what tips and techniques work best for that individual. For example, sometimes all it takes is using the same chair or pen that is used successfully elsewhere.

Similarly, skills learned in individual speech or occupational therapy programs can generalize to both home and school. Members of the teaching team and the parents need to take the time and opportunity to observe the therapy sessions periodically. Afterwards, they can meet to discuss assessment findings and observations and reach an agreement on common goals and expectations. The *prompt* sharing of concerns with parents and the celebration of new achievements will contribute to a more accurate assessment.



In dealings with parents, use professional discretion. However, keep in mind that to establish a trusting relationship – beneficial to both staff and students – open, honest communication must be maintained. Ongoing assessment information can be collected from parents through communication books and even during informal meetings before or after class. Teachers and parents need to meet often ... and meet face-to-face. While regular phone calls are beneficial, never discuss important issues over the phone. This may be more expedient but, if upset, people often say things on the phone that they would never say in person.

The goals of welcoming parent input are to ensure accurate assessment, suitable program planning and appropriate placements. Assimilating information between professionals and parents occurs during planning meetings. It's common for parents to attend planning meetings that include up to ten or more professionals. Although convenient for information sharing, it's an intimidating experience for them. There is too much information to process at one sitting and parents may walk away overwhelmed by the amount of advice they've been given. It is also devastating for them to hear unexpectedly from professionals that their child is doing poorly. Such news can produce an emotional response that distracts from the real purpose of the meeting.

Gathering information for assessment should be completed before any large planning meetings take place. In addition, help parents be prepared by encouraging them to collect their own information ahead of time. An agenda circulated a week in advance lets everyone involved plan accordingly.

Attach any written reports that are to be presented so parents have an opportunity to review them and reflect on assessment findings. Since no more than three to five items can be discussed effectively in a typical one-hour conference, this may naturally limit the number of professionals present and require the scheduling of additional meetings.

After recommendations are made and options are presented at a conference, parents will need time to make thoughtful decisions. This gift of time is small thanks for their input and a consideration that will bear good will for many months to come.

Teaching Tip: Client confidentiality can be easily broken in staff room encounters or informative chats with parent helpers. It is critical not to share assessment results – especially intelligence quotient (IQ) scores – with anyone other than the parents and the teaching team. Proceed on a “need to know” basis and always get permission from parents before discussing their child with anyone.

Types of Assessment

Formal Assessment

Formal assessment of students who are gifted, intellectually challenged or learning disabled is often required for class placement in special education classes or schools, and to qualify students for certain categories of special needs funding. The assessment is called ‘formal’ because it uses standardized tests to obtain age equivalency or percentile rank scores that compare the student with others. For example, a psychologist is required to do a formal assessment that typically includes IQ testing. Ideally, the test examiner would have ample opportunity to observe the student in the classroom, participate in his learning activities and collaborate with the teaching team before deciding whether formal testing is warranted.

Formal assessment has many drawbacks. Assessments or observations by outside consultants can be costly, and lengthy waiting lists for services makes the process time consuming. More significantly, very few tests are constructed using normative data on students with special needs. While test scores may be obtained, it’s easy to challenge the validity and interpretation of the scores when test protocols do not allow modifications for students with special needs. For students with intellectual challenges, tests may be more a measure of what they cannot do than what they can do. If the examiner does not feel test scores are valid, the parents need to understand the rationale for not using them.



A student’s stress is compounded when he must face an unfamiliar examiner in unfamiliar surroundings *and* when the rules of testing preclude the examiner from:

- giving the student extra time to respond;
- repeating instructions;
- offering assistance on fine motor tasks;
- giving visual cues or physical assists;
- giving the student breaks;
- giving partial credit; and
- praising effort.

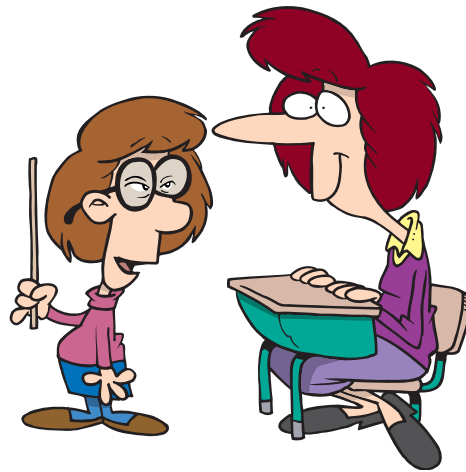
When put in this position, or when perceiving tasks as too difficult, students quickly lose their motivation to perform well. They have difficulty communicating their distress and may “act out” or “shut down” in such stressful situations. It is better to terminate an inappropriate test than to label any student “un-testable.”

Un-testable does not mean un-assessable

Formal assessment measures can be used to gather information other than age equivalency scores. For example, using an appropriate preschool test with a school age student may provide valuable diagnostic information about colour and shape recognition. With other comprehensive measures, the examiner may choose to administer selected sub tests that can gauge the student’s receptive language skills. The informal use of these evaluation tools on a regular basis helps reduce test anxiety and increase a student’s confidence in testing situations.

Since the goal of a comprehensive assessment is to obtain relevant information about the student’s skills and learning style, formal testing can only be considered one component.

Teaching Tip: Parents must provide written consent prior to any formal assessment of their child. To lessen anxiety and fears of “hidden agendas,” invite parents to meet with the examiner and discuss the recommended tests. Booking a classroom visit before the assessment will ensure that the examiner is a familiar face to the student on test day.



Informal Assessment

Informal assessment effectively identifies the student’s strengths and needs and provides a valuable information base for use in program planning and evaluation. Using this method, progress can be measured and charted in smaller steps than formal testing would permit. Collecting a portfolio of diverse assessment information provides teachers and parents with a “bigger picture” of student achievement than can be provided by a formal assessment alone.

There are many sources of informal assessment information. Consultations with school personnel and outside resource professionals (e.g., private speech-language therapists or reading tutors) provide valuable insights into student performance. Regular conversations with parents update the teaching team on behaviour and medical information. There are also a number of parent assessment inventories that parents can complete to report their child’s motor, speech or academic accomplishments. Regular classroom observation identifies what skills the student spontaneously demonstrates in different learning situations.

Classroom Tests

Regular tests and quizzes provide an ongoing record of student progress and are a valuable tool in a portfolio assessment. For the student, learning the “how to’s” of taking tests is a good exercise in attending and independence. The following adaptations make the test process and results meaningful to both the student and the teacher:

- Give the student fewer test items so that he can finish in the same time period as classmates.
- Use meaningful vocabulary and real life situations.
- Allow the student to use tools such as a dictionary or calculator.
- Use a scribe or give the test orally.
- Re-test the same knowledge with different questions and in different ways.

Teaching Tip: It is important for parents and educators to celebrate small steps. These steps may not change an age equivalency score on a formal test, but will be evident on informal assessment and may reflect a great step forward in the student’s learning. For example, a student scores a zero on a test for labeling colours, but portfolio assessment shows that he has learned to match colours and understand colour names.

When Should Resource Staff be Called In to Assess a Student?

There are times when the teaching team, in order to reach a comfort level where they are confident that the student’s needs can be met in their classroom, will decide that more information is warranted for program planning. Meeting with specialists will offer reassurance to teachers inexperienced with integration, put required resources into place and provide essential assessment information.

Ask the following questions to determine what referrals are needed:

- What information is required to proceed with the IPP?
- What questions regarding health, emotional, academic and social issues need to be addressed?
- Are there current reports on file already from professionals from outside agencies working with the student?

Referrals for assessment or consultation from other professionals (e.g., psychologist, speech-language or occupational therapist) should be made early in the school term to avoid lengthy waiting lists. When considering a referral, it’s important to discover who has played a key role in the student’s life. Looking to faces already familiar with the student and his family provides continuity of service.

Assessment services may be available at no charge through the school board, resource centres, the community hospital, other health and social service agencies or the family’s private insurance.

Remember! School staff must provide an explanation and have, on file, consent forms signed by the parents before allowing even observational visits by resource staff.

Teaching Tip: Make referrals at the end of the previous school term or the beginning of September so that the student is at the top of the waiting list for services from resource staff.

Discrepancies in Assessment Findings

What happens when the classroom teaching team disagrees with the consultant's findings? Is an assessment finding too low or too high? There has to be a reason for discrepancies between classroom observations and test results.

If the student performs better in formal testing than in the classroom, underachieving in class could be due to conflict or behavioural problems. Assess whether classroom resources (e.g., education assistant support) are too limited to ensure that adequate supervision and curriculum adaptation is available. When test scores indicate lower abilities than classroom performance, test anxiety might be the cause.

Discuss conflicting results with all of the professionals involved before meeting with the parents. Otherwise, the parent is caught in the predicament of deciding whose advice to take and begins questioning the credibility of the "experts." Determine what factors have led to the dissenting opinions and arrange for either further testing or classroom observation by the examiner.

Reporting Assessment Information

Although the portfolio assessment is updated monthly, summaries need only be presented to the parents at the typical report card periods. Using asterisks in subject areas on the report card will refer parents to the attached assessment summary. Marks for effort, attitude and performance can still be included on the report card. However, the best way for parents to see improvements in academic areas is by showing them examples of the student's work. For instance, a printing sample from September can be compared to recent work completed in November. Or a video tape can be shown of the changes in the student's reading progress since the start of the year.

Teaching Tip: An erroneous assumption is often made that students won't notice if they don't get a report card. It's surprising how much they notice, especially when it makes them different from the other kids. Getting that report card folder – just like everyone else in their class – is important for them too.



Conclusion of the School Term: Retain or Promote?

Times have changed and retention is no longer standard practice for students with Down syndrome in inclusive settings. Students now move on to the next grade without question, not because they are at grade level but because they are a year older. If students were regularly retained a year just because they were not at grade level, they would never make it out of Division I!

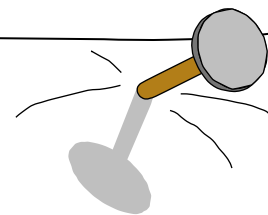
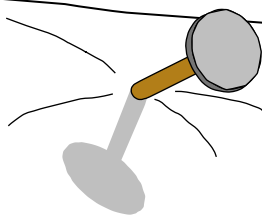
For parents, the seeds of doubt seem to be planted every spring as they ponder whether repeating another year will enhance their child's printing skills or perhaps give him more time to physically mature. The facts remain that his printing skills may always be weak and he is always going to be smaller than his classmates are. Down syndrome is a lifelong handicapping condition and the student will have exceptional needs throughout his school career and will need curriculum adaptation and education assistant support at every grade level. The reality is, he can stay in the old grade with strangers or enter a new grade with friends.

It's important for the teaching team and parents to have the expectation that the student will move on with his peers. After all, building meaningful relationships is as important a goal as academic success. If retention is used, the impact of losing relationships with his classmates is a major consideration. Old classmates do not easily remain friends or even acquaintances.

The establishment of long-term friendships is a huge indicator of successful inclusion. Peer support is also critical for this success as well as providing the means to break down the barrier of prejudice. Normally, lasting friendships are formed when the student with special needs moves from one grade to the next with a core group of classmates. The benefits of remaining with friends are self-evident. In a poll of classmates, there is usually a landslide vote for keeping the status quo. Friends stick together. As one young person so poignantly put it, "Was it something we or he did wrong?"

There is often some sense of failure or misunderstanding attached to retention. Of course, the classmates are not responsible and the student himself is not at fault. Instead, lack of support services and resources often fuels the recommendation to retain a student. It becomes a financial decision that is made in the best interest of the budget rather than the best interest of the student. In worse case scenarios, students in elementary school have been held back for two years then suddenly promoted from grade four or five to junior high just because they turned thirteen.

With adequate resources and supportive classmates, students with special needs should graduate each year to the next grade. Yes, they are likely small for their age and yes, they do need help learning. However, they are the same age as their friends and they need, want and deserve to move on to a new grade and new challenges together.



When Sam was little, my hope was for her to speak clearly and maybe read. We moved from Edmonton to Calgary to access programs that were not available in Edmonton to help her reach her goals. My oldest daughter was my gauge. If she did it, Sam was going to do it. Kelsey went to a community play school, so would Sam. Kelsey started ECS at our community school, so would Sam. Integration was new, but it never occurred to me to send her anywhere else.

Sam proved herself worthy of a position at our community school in no time. Her peers modeled and she followed. The skills she picked up far outweighed the difficulty my choice presented. She excelled because of the expectations the school and I set for her. I truly believe that all children try to rise to the standard of the classroom and classmates.

Sometimes it is discouraging for Sam as she is hard on herself, but I know she would have it no other way! I also believe her sisters respect and admire Sam because she "toes the line" by going to school every day. They also view her as a "regular sister" as she has "regular" friendships and activities in her life.