

The Learning Program

The Learning Program is an educational program intended to supplement, not replace, your child's formal education. The program focuses on developing competencies in literacy and math through direct instruction and targeted materials you will receive for use at home.

Partnering with Sue Buckley, Down Syndrome Education USA and our Learning Program Advisory Board, we hope to combine current research on best practices with effective teaching strategies to help support you and your child in the educational process. While there are many great teachers, too often public education fails children with Down syndrome due to poor educational placement, lack of trained support or low expectations. This program seeks to strengthen the educational outcome for your child.

The Value of Teaching Early Literacy and Math

Researchers now recognize the benefits of involving children with Down syndrome in reading and literacy activities at an early age. Early reading skills can improve a child's ability to participate in formal education and learning, increase employment opportunities and provide access to books and newspapers.¹

Reading instruction from an early age serves other purposes, too. Research suggests that exposure to literacy activities can improve spoken language and memory skills, even without independent reading. Interestingly, studies show that reading ability is often a strength for children with Down syndrome and that children do better than might be predicted on the basis of their language skills or general "mental age" measures. Other by-products of an early literacy program include improved speech, articulation, and grammar.²

Little research has been performed regarding the math capabilities of children with Down syndrome. The limited information available shows a wide variation in number ability, and we need further research to better understand math potential. However, the present data suggests that the early teaching of math to children with Down syndrome will influence math abilities and, notably, that children with Down syndrome learn about numbers in much the same way as typical children.³

Guiding Principles of The Learning Program

While there are as many different methods and styles of teaching as there are types of learners, there are some basic principles which we believe will help you maximize instruction time with your child.

¹ Buckley, Sue, Down Syndrome Issues and Information, *Reading and Writing for Individuals with Down Syndrome* (The Down Syndrome Educational Trust 2001).

² *Ibid.*

³ Buckley, Sue, Down Syndrome Issues and Information, *Number Skills for Individuals with Down Syndrome* (The Down Syndrome Educational Trust 2001).

A. Assume Your Child Is Able

We have no way of predicting how each individual child will respond to this or any instructional program. Each child has different strengths and passions. However, research shows that one of the most important factors for learning success is a parent or teacher who believes the child is capable of learning. It sounds so simple. Unfortunately, as our children progress in education, there will be educators who will focus only on presumed defects and limitations. Don't let them. **Your child can learn. Your child will learn.** Your job as a parent is to remember this and to keep your focus on your child's abilities.

B. Make Learning Fun

One of the most important principles of this program is that **learning should and can be fun.** Because our children experience developmental delays, learning takes longer. Unless we can make learning an enjoyable experience, we are likely to meet with resistance from our children. If learning is fun, our children will be engaged, enthusiastic and motivated to learn.

C. Success Is Key

"Success is Key" is another closely related principle.⁴ In addition to having fun, our children need to feel successful in their attempts to learn. If they feel successful, they will enjoy learning and be inspired to learn more. If they feel only failure, they will eventually feel defeated and avoid learning. Our children feel successful when we use best practices for instruction, choose materials that are appropriate, and account for individual learning strengths and challenges.

D. Teach . . . Don't Test

Another important program principle is that parents need to teach, *not* test. When we teach, we give our children information ("This word is 'run'; this is 'dog'"). When we test, we seek to elicit information from our children. ("What is this word? What is this letter?"). To use this program effectively, you will have to resist the urge to make teaching sessions into testing sessions. We will emphasize the differences between teaching and testing during the monthly sessions, and we will help you learn to teach not test as you work with your child.

E. Model . . . Don't Correct

As your child learns, he will make mistakes. Remember to use a positive approach to teaching by modeling correct responses rather than correcting your child as each mistake is made (avoid phrases like "no, that's wrong," "no, let me show you," or "that's not right").⁵ Using a positive approach, parents provide feedback based on their child's effort and not on whether the answer or response is "right" or "wrong." Ongoing modeling and encouragement are the best motivators for your child.

⁴ Oelwein, Patricia, *Teaching Reading To Children With Down Syndrome: A Guide For Parents And Teachers* (Woodbine House 1995), p. 51.

⁵ Peoples, Susan, *Understanding How Children with Down Syndrome Learn: Proven and Effective Techniques for Parents and Professionals* (Special Offspring Publishing L.L.C. 2003).

For example, if Audrey reads “I see cat” instead of “I see a cat,” you may feel the urge to stop her to point out that she missed a word. Or worse, you might say “no that’s wrong, it says ‘I see a cat.’” This type of correction is defeating for Audrey, who felt proud to have read the sentence, but now has been corrected for not reading it perfectly. A better approach would be to repeat the sentence with an affirming voice and include the missing word “I see a cat” (you may even point to each word as you read) or to wait until you read the book again and model the correct sentence. We will work on this concept more fully in the program. It is a subtle but important point. Correcting your child as she makes mistakes (and like all learners, she will make a lot of mistakes) robs her of her success and may lead to negative behavior or lack of motivation.

F. Let Child Set Pace

We need to let our children set the pace of learning to implement this program effectively. At times (perhaps too many times) it may seem that progress is slow, and we as parents may become frustrated by the lack of perceived growth. This is **our problem**, not our children’s. Do you ever hear your child complain “Darn, it is taking me so long to learn?” Of course not! Our children rarely seem discouraged by the speed of their own progress – they are proud to complete each task. Let us embrace their energy, go at their pace and suspend our own preconceptions about how long it should take to master a specific task. With our children guiding us, we can sit back, have some fun and delight in their progress, regardless of the pace.

G. Balance Learning Time And Play Time

“All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy”

This old proverb has particular importance to parents hoping to grow life-long learners. Balancing learning time and play time frees our children for “childish” fun. That is, fun without the weight of educational goals.

As parents, we are used to juggling crowded schedules and weaving learning tasks into our daily routines. Quiet times become opportunities to read or practice spelling words. Waiting in line becomes a chance to skip count or recite addition facts. We have high expectations for our children and find time to infuse their time with teachable moments. This skill is important for successful instruction.

Ample play time, however, is just as critical. Our children work hard in school, in therapy sessions and at home. They need time set aside to relax and be kids. Schedule agenda-free play time if you have to, but make sure it happens. Water fights, hide-and-go seek and trips to the ice cream store are a few of the pleasures that take the weight off the hours of work. Make balancing learning time and play time a priority.

H. Don’t Let Guilt Get In The Way

The introduction of a new program into our busy lives can be overwhelming and, consequently, guilt-producing (“I missed another day of working with my child”). Once guilt sets in, parents often quit entirely. Don’t fall into that trap. Set a reasonable goal (15 to 30 minutes three days a week) and add more time as you are able.

Don't worry about missing a day, week or month now and then. Pick up where you left off and continue working with your child. Have a good attitude, and try not to feel burdened by this opportunity. This program can be enjoyable for both you and your child if you set realistic goals and don't let guilt get in the way.

Implementation Tips

1. Determine Best Learning Environment for Your Child

When you begin this program, determine whether your child requires a structured learning area (for example, the kitchen table or a certain desk) or whether your child needs more flexibility (such as a portable TV tray or lap tray). Some children may need to work in one or two areas that they associate with learning, particularly in the beginning of the program. Others may not sit still and may do better when you teach wherever they happen to be playing. Your ultimate goal is to have your child learn in a structured learning area, because that is what is expected in school (a table or desk is best). You might want to try using program materials after a meal or snack, while your child is still seated. Alternatively, you could offer a snack and then bring out the materials while your child is "held captive" by the snack. Your first priority, however, is to get your child working. So figure out your child's learning preferences, and take cues from the success of each session.

2. Be Flexible and Creative

Whatever the setting for your learning session, be creative. Don't always bring out materials in the same order or do the same tasks. Some of the best learning occurs when children are unaware they are learning (spontaneous teachable moments). You might offer to play school with your child using program materials and let your child be the teacher. You can also involve some of your child's favorite stuffed animals or action figures in the session. Have your child read to a "friend" or have the "friend" read. Siblings also make for great props: some children love "showing off" for a sibling, and siblings benefit from being involved in the learning process. Flexibility and creativity will enhance your child's learning time. So, use your imagination and have fun.

3. Know When to Stop

There will be times when your child is not receptive to learning (i.e., tired, sick, hungry). If you meet real resistance before you start, skip that time and find time later in the day or the next day. Alternatively, there will be days when your child will work for a while and become disinterested. If this happens remain in control. Try once or twice to engage him, saying "let's do one more page" or "we will be done after this one problem." But if your child won't engage, announce "okay, I'm done for the day. You may go play." Whatever your approach, use your child's behavior as a guide and remain in control of when the session ends. You don't want to become involved in a power struggle over working on program materials . . . because you will always lose!

4. It Works if You Work It

This program is intended to supplement your child's formal education by providing you with direct instruction on use of program materials and by providing targeted materials designed to maximize your child's ability to learn. But this program will not work unless you work with your child. Whether you target twice a week or five times a week, you are a busy parent with responsibilities that

will interfere with program time on occasion. But, materials put in the corner each month and brought out only on rare occasions will not have much impact on your child. So, without letting guilt get in the way, put materials where you will “trip” over them. Integrate program time into your lifestyle (calendar program time, parking lot time (while waiting for siblings) or do program while siblings do homework). Whatever your method, find a way to integrate program time into your day, make good use of the materials, and have some structured fun with your child. Work it . . . and it will work.