Transitioning from preschool to primary school

Information and advice for parents of children with Down syndrome

Robyn Lynam from Lucan with her brother Jake, on her first day of school.

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Introduction

Children's days and lives are filled with transitions large and small. Moving from preschool to primary school is one of the most significant transitions a child will make. As human beings, we all crave predictability and routine in order to feel secure and comfortable. Adjusting to new and unusual settings can cause feelings of stress. This is why transitions are potentially stressful. The more that you can increase the predictability of the new situation, and prepare for it, the less stressful it will be. How easy or difficult children find the transition between early years services and school settings partly depends on the degree of discontinuity they have to negotiate (Margetts, 2002). Discontinuities include changes in the physical environment, new teaching styles, larger group numbers, and changes in the relationship between children and the adults involved in their care. For successful transitioning, it is important that discontinuities around learning, relationships and support systems are minimised.

Research on transitioning tells us that a positive transition experience in the early years increases the likelihood of future transitions being successful (Tizard et al. 1988). Children coming to school have to learn the new social rules and values of the organisation, and come to terms with changes in roles, relationships, and their own identity (Griebel and Niesel, 2000). Adjusting to school is easier when children are helped to gradually become familiar with the situation, when parents are well informed about the new school, and staff have information about the child, their development and previous experiences (Margetts, 1997).

Getting Started

Transition to primary school can often be a more challenging process for children with special educational needs, and their families. For this reason*, it is important to begin the planning early, at least 12-18 months or so in advance.* It's good to make contact with the chosen school early, to allow time for all the necessary supports to be put in place before the child begins. In Ireland, many schools have waiting lists, and often children have their name put down for a school from a very early age. Be aware of this, and allow yourself enough time to explore all your options. It is important that all the parties involved with the child collaborate in planning the transition to school – parents, preschool teachers, psychologist, speech and language therapist, occupational therapist, etc. Each of these people will have specific and valuable information to contribute, and this information should be drawn together.

You should meet with the preschool team, and discuss any issues relevant to your child and their move to primary school. The early intervention team involved with your child will be assessing your child to evaluate their progress, and establish his/her particular strengths and needs. They will produce reports that can be used to plan for your child. For this reason, it is important that you supply as much of this information as possible to the new school. Confidential information from professionals (e.g. test results, psychological reports, etc.) cannot be passed on to the school without the prior consent of parents. However, it is important that relevant information is passed on to the school to ensure a smooth transition, and allow the school to plan for the child. Schools must apply for resources for each child with special educational needs that comes to the school. Professional reports are required to support these resource applications, so psychological reports, speech and language therapy reports, occupational therapy reports, etc. should all be passed on. Also, information and reports from the preschool can be very helpful, such as the range of concepts and activities covered by the child, and what supports and strategies were used with them.

Deciding on a School

It is hoped that the needs of the majority of children with special educational needs can be met in their local mainstream school. Sometimes, however, a child may require the supports and resources available in a special school. There is a broad range of special educational needs, and it follows that there needs to be a wide range of options available to cater for those needs. Educational placement is a matter of choice, and parents must select the most suitable and appropriate form of education for their own child. Ideally, the school should be as close to home as possible, to minimise the effect of travel times on the family.

All options should be considered and weighed up before deciding which setting will best suit the needs of their child. This may be a mainstream school, a special class within a mainstream school, or a special school.

Steps in choosing a placement:

Step 1: what schools are in the area? – make a list of all schools in the area, and others that you would be able to travel to. From this list, cross off any schools you don't want to send your child to. For the schools that are left on the list, write their phone numbers and any relevant information beside them (address, principal's name, website, etc.).

Step 2: Find out as much as you can about each school. Make a folder for each school and put any info you find into it. Talk to other parents who have children at these schools. Speak to the staff at preschool about the schools on your list. Check out the websites and attend the schools' open days

Step 3: Contact the schools on your list. Ask to speak to the principal, and let them know that you are thinking of sending your child to their school. Tell them about your child's special educational needs, and talk about how the school can meet these needs. Ask if the school has any previous experience with children with similar needs. Make an appointment to visit the school if possible, and ask them to post you out some written information about the school, such as a prospectus. At this stage, if you have changed your mind about any schools, cross them off your list. Put your remaining schools in a list in order of preference.

Step 4: Visit the schools at the top of your list and meet the principals. Ask plenty of questions and give the school as much information as you can about your child.

Some questions to think about when considering a school for your child

1. Do you feel comfortable and welcome in the school?
2. Does the staff appear interested in you and your child?
3. How much knowledge does the staff have about special educational needs?
4. How much knowledge or experience does the staff have with Down syndrome? If little or none, do they seem willing to learn?
5. What is the atmosphere of the school like?
6. What is the admissions policy of the school? (is priority given for local pupils or siblings of existing pupils?)
7. What are the other policies of the school like? (Special needs policy, behaviour policy etc.?)
8. What provisions does the school make for pupils with special educational needs?
9. What size is the school? What is the pupil teacher ratio?
10. How many of each class level is there? Are there multi-level classes?
11. What are the transport arrangements?
12. How are parents involved in the life of the school? (is there an association or committee, or can parents volunteer to help out on occasion?)
13. How does the school communicate with parents and give them feedback about their child? (Notes, diary, newsletter, reports, meetings, etc.)
14. Will my child be included in all aspects of school life, including tours and extra-curricular activities?
15. Are there any programmes at the school to support social inclusion and development of all children (a buddy system? Friendship club? Social skills programme, etc.?)
16. Is there an active anti-bullying policy and strategy at the school?
17. What kind of facilities and resources does the school have? (hall, sports equipment, music resources, computers, play areas, etc)
18. Does the school emphasise children's strengths, and celebrate small successes, diversity and individual difference?
19. How much opportunity will your child have to work and interact with their typical peers?
20. How is learning support and resource teaching organised within the school? (Small group or individual withdrawal, or extra support within the regular classroom?)
21. If the school you are considering is a special school – where will your child meet and engage with their typically developing peers?
22. If the school you are considering is a mainstream school – where will your child meet and engage with other children with Down syndrome and other special needs?
23. If the school is a special school – exactly what '*special*' resources do they have to offer?
24. If the school is a mainstream school – how much will your child be actually and genuinely *included?*

Note: It's not a case that all schools will be able to or need to meet all of these criteria, but finding out the answers to some or all of these questions will give you a better sense of the school, and help you to make an informed decision.

Starting School: Useful Strategies and Tips!

- Provide the school with any helpful information you have about your child and their needs – perhaps supply them with some information on Down syndrome if they have not had a child with Down syndrome in the school before.
- Talk to your child about 'moving on' – mark the end of preschool with some form of celebration!
- Most schools have a special day in June for new pupils to visit the school, see their classroom and meet their new teacher. If possible take photographs of the school, classroom, entrances, hall, yard, teacher, principal, etc. – you can look over these photos with your child during the summer to familiarise them with the school and staff
- Continue talking about school over the summer – maybe make up a social story about starting school (using photos or pictures), and what happens (meeting new teacher and friends, playing games, learning new things, etc.). Revisit the little book over the summer months
- Talk about the different people they will meet at the school, and their different roles (caretaker, secretary, principal, teacher, special needs assistant, etc.)
- Ensure you are given information on school rules, PE arrangements, uniform etc. in advance, so that you can prepare with your child.
- Read stories about starting school
- On the first day of school, it can be a little daunting to have totally 'new' clothes, bag, lunchbox, pencils, beaker etc. Buy these items gradually over the summer, and allow your child to try them out and get used to them. You can practice getting dressed for school, and give your child their lunch in their lunch box a few times during the holidays. Try to pick bags and lunchboxes that the child can open themselves if possible, and practice doing so.
- In the week before, practice getting up at the time you will be getting up at when school starts.
- In the week or fortnight before school starts, give them their breakfast and lunch in or around the same time they will be having it in September.

- Find out what the school's lunch policy is – do they supply lunches, or do pupils bring their own? Are certain foods banned? Does your child have dietary requirements that the school should be aware of?
- During the initial weeks of school, many children will experience tiredness while adjusting to the longer day and new routine. This is especially true for children with special educational needs.
- When adapting to a new routine, consistency is important – try to avoid any disruptions to the daily school routine until the student is well settled.
- Transitioning with a friend can give a child added confidence and security – if you know of another pupil who will be in their class or year group with them, maybe try to arrange a play date or two over the summer.

While all the reports and documents will contain a lot if information, it can be helpful to give the class teacher a page with some brief details of:

- Your child's communication style and abilities, and any cues that work well for them
- Rewards that are favoured by your child
- Any situation that can trigger difficulties for your child (loud environments, changing activities, etc.)
- Any sensory issues your child may have
- What basic skills and concepts they have mastered in preschool and over the summer.

Note: A sample sheet for providing information about your child is available at the end of this booklet (Appendix 1)

When school starts, it may be possible to arrange to start a communication journal with the class teacher. This can be a method of sharing important information with each other. Especially if your child has language delays, it can be a helpful way to find out about what they are doing in school, and share with school what they did at the weekend etc.

<u>The big day! :</u>

- Ensure a good night's sleep the night before for you and your child!
- Make sure schoolbag is packed and lunch and clothes are organised the night before. Show them to your child in advance
- Check weather forecast and prepare appropriate clothing
- Get up in time to have a good breakfast. Maybe make it a fun occasion for the first day!
- Take some photos to remember the occasion!

- If your child is very nervous, maybe let them bring a security item in their bag, such as a favourite small toy (nothing too valuable or expensive), or photo of you. Keep it in the bag, and let the teacher know it's there in case it's needed
- Arrive in good time to avoid any panic!
- Stay for a short time and leave when the teacher indicates it is a good time to do so
- Check where and when to pick your child up after school, and tell them where you will be when they are ready
- Plan a nice activity for yourself if possible, such as coffee with a friend. It's a stressful day for parents too and it's good to have something to take your mind off worrying about your child! Reward and congratulate yourself for all your hard work and planning!
- Keep your mobile phone on in case the school needs you
- Make sure you are on time and in the right place to pick up your child
- After school, give your child time to rest and recover from all the excitement
- Talk positively about the day and praise your child
- Prepare for day two and keep the good routine going!

General information on Primary Schools:

- For information on the general primary school system, the Citizen's Information website has a good section on primary school, including information on the curriculum, and the organisation of primary schools: http://www.citizensinformation.ie/categories/education/primary-and-post-primary-education/going-to-primary-school

- The Irish National Teachers Organisation has a downloadable booklet for parents who have a child starting in Junior Infants, with a lot of practical information and advice. It can be downloaded here: http://www.into.ie/ROI/Publications/TipsForParentsEnglish2009.pdf

- A comprehensive publication called Entitlements for Children with Disabilities is now available from the Citizen's Information Bureau. It details the services and supports available to parents who have a child with a disability from birth to adulthood. Topics covered include health, education, work, and travel. The Education section gives a very good account of the legislation and services available for children with special educational needs. It can be accessed here: http://www.citizensinformationboard.ie/publications/entitlements/downloads/children_with_disabilities.pdf

Resources and Supports for Pupils with Special Needs in Mainstream Schools:

SENO (Special Educational Needs Organiser): The SENO works for the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). Each SENO has responsibility for a certain number of schools in a local area. The role of the SENO is to ensure that children with special needs receive the supports they are entitled to. They are in charge of processing applications for Special Needs Assistant and Resource Teaching hours, as well as assistive technology and transport requests. For more information on SENOs, see the NCSE website (www.ncse.ie)

SNA (Special Needs Assistant): SNAs work with children who need extra (non-teaching) support due to having physical care needs or emotional/behavioural difficulties. These needs may include assistance with toileting, a physical or sensory impairment, or where a child's behaviour causes a danger to themselves or others. The criteria for allocating SNA support are outlined in the Department of Education circular 07/02. Pupils' needs could range from needing an assistant for a short period each day (for toilet trips, etc.), to requiring a full time assistant. SNAs may work with more than one child, and can also work on a part time basis, depending on the needs of the school.

Learning Support Teacher: Learning Support Teachers cater for children who are having difficulty with their academic work, and may need supplemental teaching. These teachers work with pupils who have 'high incidence' special needs, such as dyslexia or a Mild General Learning Disability, along with other children who may not have a diagnosed special educational needs, but who present with academic difficulties. Pupils with Down syndrome who have a Mild General Learning Disability are usually seen by the Learning Support Teacher (unless they have a diagnosis of another co-existing special need, such as a Hearing Impairment). Each school is given a general allocation of learning support hours based on their size and pupil profile, and applications do not need to be made to the SENO for learning support for individual pupils. Department of Education Circular SP ED 02/05 outlines the role of the Learning Support Teacher.

Resource Teacher: Resource teachers provide support for pupils who have diagnosed 'low incidence' special educational needs (such as Autism, Visual Impairment, Moderate General Learning Disability or a Physical Disability). Pupils with Down Syndrome who have a Moderate or Severe General Learning Disability generally attend the Resource Teacher. Each school must make an application to their local SENO for resource teaching hours for individual pupils who have a diagnosis of a 'low incidence' special need. Department of Education Circular SP ED 02/05 outlines the role of the Resource Teacher.

Learning Support/Resource Teacher: In some schools, teachers are appointed as joint Learning Support/Resource teachers, and they cater for all pupils who are allocated extra teaching support, both low and high incidence.

Visiting Teacher Service: This is a support service for schools and parents of pupils who have difficulties resulting from hearing difficulties or a visual impairment. Visiting teachers for the hearing impaired provide guidance and support for schools and parents on issues relating to hearing impairments (such as sign language and spoken language acquisition). They monitor the child's language development, advice on school placements, and help schools to put appropriate supports in place. Visiting teachers for the visually impaired assess the needs of each child referred to them, and advise schools regarding methods and strategies to support students with visual impairments. To register with a visiting teacher, a child must be referred and meet the eligibility criteria. Referrals must be accompanied by an ophthalmologist's or audiologist's report.

NEPS (National Educational Psychology Service): NEPS is a psychological support service for schools which is funded by the Department of Education and Skills. NEPS psychologists are concerned with children's learning, behaviour and social emotional development. They work with primary and post-primary schools, and each NEPS psychologist has a number of assigned schools on their caseload. They work with teachers, parents and children to identify educational needs, and offer a range of services aimed at meeting these needs (assessments, consultations, and interventions). The principal and the learning support/resource teachers are usually responsible for deciding which pupils are referred to the psychologist.

The Learning Profile of Individuals with Down Syndrome:

Research has found that there is a specific learning profile associated with Down syndrome, which differentiates them from other children with a learning disability of a different origin. If teachers are aware of this profile, they can adapt their teaching to build on the student's strengths, and target their specific areas of need.

Strengths

+ Strong visual awareness and visual learning skills

+ Ability to learn and use the written word (reading)

+ Tendency to model behaviour and attitudes from peers and adults

+ Ability to learn from practical material, hands on activities and demonstrations

+ Generally keen to communicate and socialise with others. Enjoy learning through social interaction, can read emotional signals and cues.

+ Using and reading gestures to communicate: can read body language, model movements well and indicate their understanding through pointing and signing.

Needs

- Increased incidence of auditory and visual impairments among people with Down syndrome

- Speech and Language delays/difficulties. Receptive language (understanding) is usually higher than expressive language. Difficulties can vary widely in terms of severity.

- Auditory processing difficulties: short term auditory memory is impaired, and learning from listening is generally difficult.

- Motor skills delays - may affect gross motor skills (large body movements) and/or fine motor skills (smaller movements using the hands). Skill levels vary from person to person.

- Shorter concentration span

- Difficulties with consolidation and retention, generalisation and reasoning

- Sequencing difficulties

- Tendency of some children with Down syndrome to employ avoidance strategies when presented with new, difficult or disliked tasks

Communication Skills

Communication skills such as asking a question, making a choice, following directions, and expressing a clear 'yes' and 'no', are important skills for young school children. For children who have language difficulties or delays, such as children with Down syndrome, they use of visual supports (photos, pictures, signs and symbols) can assist greatly in the development of communication skills, ensure clearer communication and reduce frustration. If your child uses a signing system such as Lámh, it is helpful if the staff of the new school can learn some of the key signs. Signs can also be taught to classmates to facilitate communication.

Communication Passports

For children who have significant communication difficulties, a Communication Passport is a nice idea. It is a simple information booklet designed to enhance communication, and help staff understand the child's preferences, needs and abilities. A Communication Passport can:

- provide a place for the child's own preferences to be recorded and drawn to the attention of others
- reflect the child's unique character, sense of humour etc.
- describe the child's most effective means of communication and how others can best communicate with, and support them.
- draw together information from past and present, and from different contexts, to help staff understand the child and have successful interactions

The Passport can be as simple or complex as desired, handwritten, or produced on the computer. It is important that no confidential information is put into the booklet, as the idea is that it would be read by everyone who works with the child. Communication Passports are a way of making sense of formal assessment information and recording the important things about a child or adult, in an accessible and person-centered way, and of supporting an individual's transitions between services. For more information and advice on making a Communication Passport, please see the following website:

http://www.communicationpassports.org.uk

Visual Supports

Visual supports are very important and useful for children with Down syndrome. Using photos or pictures can help improve communication, understanding of new routines and situations reassure the child and reduce anxiety. Types of visual supports include:

- Visual timetables (a sequence of pictures that show what activities are coming up for the child) and Choice Boards (with two pictures to enable them to make a choice between activities, rewards, etc.)

- Gestures and signs, either informal, or through a signing system such as Lámh

- Illustrated rules or instructions (for example a sign for 'Wash your hands' at the sink, with a photo of someone washing their hands)

- A photo album with pictures of siblings, pets, family events etc. to show and share

Attention

Children's attention span develops gradually. Very young children have fleeting attention levels, and generally distracted by any other input (sounds or visuals). As attention levels develop, children can attend to their own choice of activities, but are still very prone to distraction. Eventually they learn to attend to activities that other people involve them in, and gradually become more able to block out distractions. The ultimate goal for children is to reach a stage where they develop the ability to sustain and control attention, switch between tasks flexibly, and can take in new directions while they continue to work.

Tips for developing attention skills

- Encouraging children to focus on and attend to one thing at a time is a good way to develop their attention skills – engage them in 'table-top' activities such as jigsaws, drawing and play dough, sitting at the table and focusing on the game or activity
- Praise good listening and attending, and reduce clutter and background noise when they are engaged in a task that you want them to attend to.
- Prime children for instructions or questions – make sure they are looking at you and listening, give them a signal or say their name first.
- Use visual supports wherever possible to prolong attention and help child to remain focused
- When giving directions or instructions, get them to repeat back what you have just said.
- Play listening games such as Simon Says, Sound Lotto
- Use songs, rhymes and action songs to gain and hold onto attention.

Early Literacy Skills

Early reading activities can improve oral language, speech, memory and concentration. Before they begin formal literacy work, children should be exposed to lots of stories and books informally, and become familiar with rhymes and sounds, and engage in talking and listening games and activities at home.

General Tips

- Read Nursery Rhymes, and encourage your child to join in. When reading poems and rhymes, emphasise the rhyming words. When your child is familiar with the rhyme, stop before the end of the line and get them to say the missing word
- As you look at a book with your child, point out the title, cover, author, etc. Have them show you where you start to read on the page. Talk about the pictures and point out details within them.
- Read predictable books and repeat them often. Your child will begin to recognise repeated words and phrases, and can have fun saying them with you
- Ask your child what they think will happen next in the story. Talk about stories you have read together, and find out what their favourite part was.
- Build a little library or book collection in the house. You can pick up inexpensive children's books in most bookstores, at jumble sales or supermarkets. Encourage friends and relatives to buy books as birthday gifts and on special occasions.
- Join the local library and bring your child down to select books regularly. Most libraries have children's events such as storytelling sessions or art workshops, so keep an eye out to see what is going on locally.

Children with Down syndrome find learning visually easier than learning through listening. Printed words can be used with children with Down syndrome from as early as two years of age, to support language learning. Many children with Down syndrome can begin to read from this early age, and are able to recognise and recall printed words. Reading activities at home and in the classroom enable the child with Down syndrome to practice complete sentences, teaching grammar and supporting correct pronunciation. Professor Sue Buckley has been quoted as saying that 'reading to children with Down syndrome, and teaching them to read, may be the most effective therapy for developing their speech and language skills from infancy, right through to school years'. Research has found that reading instruction can have a significant effect on language and working memory development for children with Down syndrome.

The Centre for Early Literacy Learning has a wide range of free to download parent guides that give parents ideas and guidelines for developing their child's early literacy skills (Signing activities, rhymes and sound awareness, talking and listening, reading and storytelling). You can access the guides here: http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org/pgparents.php .

For information and guidelines on teaching reading to young children with Down syndrome, see the following free information guides on the Downsed website:

http://www.down-syndrome.org/information/reading/early/

http://www.down-syndrome.org/information/reading/childhood/

Early Numeracy Skills

Children should experience informal early numeracy activities every day. This can happen through play, song and everyday activities. Early maths and numeracy activities include learning about the sequence of numbers, counting and understanding quantities:

- Songs and counting rhymes (5 little ducks, etc.)
- Counting things in the environment (how many trees do you see? How many cakes are on the table? Etc.)
- Developing the concept of 'more' and 'again' – when reading a story, eating or playing a game, create opportunities for your child to ask for more of something, or to have an activity repeated again.
- Making choices and comparing sizes, colours, etc. – (do you want the big one or the small one? Do you want a red or a yellow lollipop? Etc.)
- Developing the concept of 'same' and 'different' - Matching items by colour, shape or size
- Enjoying simple picture books about colours, shapes and numbers
- Setting the table or playing tea party games can teach counting and one-to-one correspondence – giving each person one cup and one spoon, putting three sweets on each plate, etc.
- Shopping activities have lots of potential numeracy activities – putting three carrots in a bag, paying for items and getting change etc.
- Using a visual schedule or timetable can help to introduce the concept of time – a simple chart with days of the week, pointing out or putting up a visual aid to show what is happening on different days (Granny visiting, swimming, etc.).
- Introduce concepts of 'now' and 'later' (or 'after'), and 'first' and 'then' ('*Now* we have dinner, *after/later* we can watch TV', '*First* playing with bricks, *then* we can go to the park')

Numicon

Numicon is a multi-sensory maths teaching programme using specially designed shapes in a series of practical teaching activities. The maths shapes give learners insight into number values and relationships in a way not provided by written numerals alone. Learners develop their own mental imagery as they combine and compare the shapes to do arithmetic in a series of practical activities.

Numicon's visual, auditory and kinaesthetic approach appeals to different learning styles. Pupils learn through both seeing and feeling how Numicon patterns connect with each other. By physically manipulating Numicon to build constructions, make arrangements and patterns and play games using the feely bag, pupils will experience with both their hands and their eyes how numbers fit together.

Research has found that Numicon can be very helpful for learners with Down syndrome, in helping them to develop an understanding of key numeracy concepts. For more information, see www.numicon.com

Developing Independence

It is important for children's self esteem that they are enabled to become as independent as possible in terms of self care and basic life skills. Progress in independence and self help skills is linked to fine and gross motor skill development, so there are individual differences for children in terms of the skills they develop and when.

Wandering and Safety

Young children with Down syndrome can have difficulties with boundary awareness and wandering off. It is important to develop awareness of boundaries and safety with young children starting school. They should be helped to develop familiarity with the layout of the new school (classes, yard, hall, office, etc.). If the child has a Special Needs Assistant, they can be very helpful in carrying out boundary training. Boundary training involves marking out all boundaries very clearly and visually (such as yard borders, doorways etc.), and walking the child around the boundaries on a daily basis over a number of weeks, pointing them out and showing where the child should stay, modelling the correct behaviour. Constant repetition will help the child to internalise the rules. In the interim period where the child is learning, safety measures and environmental adaptations (such as extra latches high up on doors, ensuring all gates are closed, etc.) may be necessary to ensure that the child remains safe, as well as ensuring that staff are vigilant in supervising the pupil. There is a nice resource on this issue available at the Down Syndrome Association of Queensland website:

http://dsaq.org.au/page/Information_About_Down_Syndrome/Strategies_for_Wandering

Skill Development

Once they have been given some training and practice, children should always be encouraged to have a go at a skill first, before seeking help. It is important to praise effort as well as outcomes, and give the child lots of opportunities for practice. Building the child's self esteem and belief in their own abilities is important, in order to avoid the development of 'learned helplessness' (where a person who has everything done for them constantly, grows to believe that they are unable to do anything for themselves).

Tips for building independence skills

- When giving lunch, provide food that can be easily eaten and managed, and avoid fiddly items that are likely to spill, or will need an adult to open them (e.g. – a regular pot of set yoghurt is easier to eat than a Frube or a Fruit Corner)
- Pre-chop fruit into pieces, or if giving whole fruit, peel in advance or put a notch in the skin to help the child peel it themselves.
- Make sure child can open their own bag, pencil case, lunchbox and drinks container – and practice using these items during the summer.
- Teach skills in small steps – this is called chaining. Think of the skill you want to teach. Write down all the mini-steps involved in the skill, and teach each part separately. Use modelling and visual supports if necessary.
- Backward chaining – this is where you start the task (such as zipping up a coat), and let the child do the final part. Gradually increase the amount that the child is doing, until they are doing the full task themselves
- Forward chaining – alternatively, you can allow the child to start the task, and then finish it for them, gradually cutting back on the amount of the task that you do.
- It is important to balance skill development and independence. For example, while it is important for children to learn to tie their lace, while they are working on this skill it is best if they wear Velcro runners, so that they can open and close their own shoes in school and be independent in this regard.

Working with Your Child's School

Children make better progress academically and socially when their families are actively and positively involved in their children's learning activities (Kreider et al, 2007). It is therefore important for schools and parents to build and maintain positive relationships during and after the transition to school.

It is important to develop a relationship with your child's new class teacher, special needs assistant, resource or learning support teacher, and local SENO, etc. Share as much information about your child with the new school as possible. Get into the habit of checking in with the school regularly, not just when a problem arises. This can be done through pre-arranged meetings, a communication book or whatever method suits everyone best or fits with school policy. Remember to celebrate your child's small successes along the way and mention them to school staff– sometimes we can focus too much on what's *not* going well, and forget about what *is* working.

In most schools there are opportunities for parents to get involved in various activities. If possible, volunteer with your child's school for fundraising, school tours, etc. and link in with the school's parents association. Attend all meetings and school events whenever possible, and respond to school communication promptly. Try to ensure that the school has the information it needs to support your child – point them in the direction of any useful resources or supports that you are aware of.

Supporters and Allies

It can be very helpful to have support when you are negotiating your way through the education system with your child; people who you can talk to if you have an issue or query. Consider joining the school parent's association. Other possible allies and supporters include:

- Family members
- Neighbours
- People who have worked with your child before
- Parents of other children with Down syndrome or other special educational needs
- Parents of slightly older children
- Friends with a background in education

Meetings

Confirm your attendance at meetings in good time by phone or in writing. Arrive a little early if possible, and bring a notebook and pen. If your spouse or partner cannot come along with you, consider bringing another family member if you feel you need to. Here are some tips for before, during and after meetings:

Before meetings:

K – jot down your key concerns or points

N – establish what your child's main needs are

O – organise any documents or reports you need to bring

W – write down any questions to ask or points to make

During meetings:

A – listen actively

C – keep the child as the focus of the meeting

T – treat everyone with respect

After meetings:

D – determine any follow up actions to be taken

O – ensure there is ongoing follow up to monitor progress

Keeping Records

It is important to keep all paperwork relevant to your child's education safely stored. Have a box, drawer or folder and keep everything in it –

- Letters or notes from teachers or school
- Relevant reports and letters etc. from other professionals (psychologists, therapists, etc.)
- Some select samples of your child's work (ones that show progress made, or illustrate a persistent difficulty)
- Notes made of any phone calls or meetings
- Test results and school reports
- IEP or learning plan (IEP = individual education plan)
- Copies of any important consent forms you were asked to sign and return
- School policy documents
- And other relevant paperwork

Letters and Phone calls

When making phone calls, plan the call beforehand, have any relevant information close by, and think about what you will say if you have to leave a message. Letters or notes can be used to make a formal request, clarify something, decline a request, express thanks, etc. It can sometimes be good to follow up a meeting or phone call with a letter or note to put things in writing. Keep a copy of any formal letters you send.

Further Reading

- **The Essential Parent's Guide to the Primary School Years** by Brian Gilsenan (Primary ABC publishers) ISBN: 978-0-954583-70-5
- **The Essential Guide to Special Education in Ireland** by Dr. David J. Carey (Primary ABC publishers) ISBN: 978-0-954583-72-9
- **The New Language of Toys** (3rd Edition): Teaching Communication Skills to Children with Special Needs by Sue Schwartz, PhD. (Woodbine House publishers) ISBN: 978-1-890627-48-5
- **Steps to Independence: Teaching Everyday Skills to Children with Special Needs** (4th Edition) by Bruce L. Baker and Alan J. Brightman (Paul Brookes publishers) ISBN: 978-1-55766-697-0
- **Teaching Reading to Children with Down Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Teachers** by Patricia Logan Oelwein (Woodbine House publishers) ISBN: 978-0-933149-55-7

Useful Websites

- Citizen's Information website www.citizensinformation.ie
- Department of Education and Skills www.education.ie
- National Council for Special Education www.ncse.ie
- National Council for Curriculum and Development www.ncca.ie
- Down Syndrome Ireland www.downsyndrome.ie
- Down Syndrome Education International www.downsed.org and also www.down-syndrome.org/information for free articles on Down syndrome and education
- Special Education Support Service www.sess.ie
- National Parents Council www.npc.ie (has a Special Education section that parents can join)
- Starfall www.starfall.com (free phonics and reading games)
- Visual Timetable Software (free programme for making visual timetables) www.supportdisc.co.uk/Visual_timetable.htm
- Visual Aids for Learning (free downloadable visual aids) www.visualaidsforlearning.com

References and Sources

- Hiller, Hoban, Johnson, Macdonald, O'Brien, Weightman (2007). Starting School Made Easy: A guide for parents of children with additional needs. La Trobe University
- Margetts, K (2002). Transition to school – complexity and diversity. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 10 (2)
- Margetts, K (1997). Factors impacting on children's adjustment to the first year of primary school. *Research Information for Teachers, Vol. 2*.
- Tizard et al. (1988). Young children at school in the inner city. Hove and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates
- Griebel, W & Niesel, R. (2000). The children's voice in the complex transition into kindergarten and school. Paper presented at the 10th *European Conference on the Quality of Early Childhood Education*, London
- INTO (2009) Your Child in Primary School: Tips for Parents
- Down Syndrome Education International www.downsed.org
- Citizen's Information Bureau www.citizensinformation.ie

Appendix 1: Information Sheet for New Teacher

My child's name: _____ Date of birth:_____ Age (starting school): _____

Address:

_____

_____

Significant people in my child's life and their relationship to my child:

_____

_____

Likes and Dislikes:

_____

_____

Hobbies and interests at home:

_____

_____

My child's special educational needs (brief summary):

_____

_____

_____

My child's strengths and talents:

_____

_____

_____

Situations that my child can find challenging:

_____

_____

How my child communicates/ any communication related information or aids that may be helpful:

_____

_____

My child's favourite rewards:

_____

_____

Effective strategies used with my child at home or in preschool that may be helpful:

_____

_____

Skills my child has mastered over the summer since finishing preschool:

_____

_____

Any important medical or health related information:

_____

_____

My child's hearing and vision:

_____

_____

Other relevant information:

_____

_____

My contact details: House phone: _____ Mobile: _____ Work: _____

Name and contact details of nominated person for urgent situations in case I am unavailable:

Name: _____ Relationship to child: _____ Phone: _____