

Language and literacy

Continuing to explore language and literacy issues

As many of our readers will know, the challenges that children with Down syndrome face when learning to talk and to read, and the links between the two activities, have been a core interest of psychologists working for The Down Syndrome Educational Trust since 1980. Therefore, articles and comment on these two topics are featured in most issues. The ability to communicate

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plays such a significant part in the everyday life of all individuals that we always stress the importance of helping children to progress as fast as they can with speech and language learning. We expanded on the importance of language for cognitive development (learning, thinking, reasoning, remembering) and social development (making friends, sharing worries, daily interactions and self-control) in an article on Speech and Language Therapy in issue 2 of this volume of *Down Syndrome News and Update*.

[1]

Teaching reading to teach talking

We have promoted the use of reading activities in order to develop both speech, language and literacy skills for many years and the first article in this section is by Honor Mangan,

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sharing her experience of using every opportunity to use print to develop the spoken language of Ynez, aged 6 years. Honor is a resource teacher in Ireland supporting the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools. In issue 2 of this volume of *Down Syndrome News and Update* we published several accounts by parents of

the positive benefits of the reading activities that they had carried out in the preschool years at home.^[2] They each stressed the way in which reading activities had helped their child's spoken language to progress. It is good to be able to add a teacher's account of the benefits of the same approach during the school years.

Many parents and teachers are daunted by the idea of creating reading activities for their children that are right for their level of language development and that will begin to move their vocabulary and sentences forward. However, we hope the case examples that we are publishing will encourage everyone to try this approach as we know it really does help.

It is not too late to apply the same principles at junior or secondary school. Helping children to write down, in simple sentences, what they have been learning or what they have been doing or what they would like to tell others – will help at every age. Some children with Down syndrome will become competent readers and writers, with only a little support needed, but most children will need support to write down their sentences and to read them. The benefits for spoken language will be there even when children need full support to read and write. There is guidance to help parents and teachers in all the DSii books on reading and writing and we hope to be developing a pack of materials to support this language through reading approach for preschool and primary children later this year if we can obtain the funding.

Learning more than one language

In the last issue, we published a review of the information available on bilingualism and the effect of being exposed to more than one language on the language progress of children with Down syndrome.^[3] This has led to some correspondence

and contributions from readers, one parent and one practitioner, which we are pleased to publish in this section. It is clear that there is still much to learn about the way in which children experience more than one language. Lorraine Sanda indicates that her daughter Vanessa has demonstrated the same progress in understanding Spanish spoken by her father as her two brothers, supporting the research that we published in the last issue. Etta Wilken suggests that we need to take account of the different patterns of language experience that children might receive, based on her survey of parents in Germany. She also makes the important point that there will be wide variation in progress in one or in two languages in relation to children's abilities as well as their language experience. The case examples that Etta provides, and her conclusions, indicate the need for more research. Such research is difficult to organise and therefore the sharing of family experiences is an important way to increase our knowledge at the present time.

Please do contribute your own experiences on any aspect of speech, language and literacy teaching or any observations of the progress made by individual children.

Editor

References

1. Buckley, S. & LeProvost, P. (2002). Speech and language therapy for children with Down syndrome. *Down Syndrome News and Update*, 2 (2), 70-76.
2. The significance of early reading for children with Down syndrome. (2002). *Down Syndrome News and Update*, 2 (1) Five articles on reading, four case studies and a research summary. pp 1-10.
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