

Social Inclusion Tips for Teachers
By Jawanda B. Mast
www.thesassysoutherngal.com
913.940.4199 jmast3@earthlink.net

*Teachers should look at the life/social skills gained in the academic setting,
not just the academic material. – Ms. Reed, Rachel's 3rd Grade Teacher*

1. Communication

One sentence: **If you do not tell us what happens at school, WE DO NOT KNOW!** Teachers need to communicate what is going on in the classroom, on the playground, at lunch, anywhere at school to parents. Example: Earlier this year a family had the list of spirit days. It was crazy hair day. Mom helped her seven year-old get her crazy hair. At drop off, she noticed no one else had crazy hair. She went home and contacted the teacher. "Oh we had to switch that. We told the kids. Did Susie not tell you?" "Uh. No." Devastating to the child. The point is ***you need*** to communicate with parents. Our children do not make it home with these kinds of details.

2. **Be a good role model.** If you are accepting and expecting that all students learn, then they will and peers will follow. Show respect to all students at all times. Teachers are the role models. If a teacher treats a student with a disability differently, so will the students. *I sent out a request to Rachel's former teachers/paras and asked for ideas on how they as teachers promote social inclusion. This was mentioned on every one.*

- a. Use people first, preferred and respectful language with all students and parents.
- b. Do not baby talk students with disabilities.
- c. Do not do special things like take a child with Down syndrome down the hall to show how cute she is to another teacher or allow them to go into the kitchen or the cafeteria to talk – unless you do this will other students.

3. **Peer Buddies-Not just any buddy will do!** Be selective in choosing students to serve as a peer buddy. A teacher needs to find students who provide support, but someone who is not just doing things for the student they are supporting. Know students who are firm, friendly and willing to work with students who may need support, but who won't do the work for them.

- a. This cannot be in the classroom setting **only**. This needs to cross into other activities like the playground, assemblies, specials such as music and P.E. and library. This is especially critical for lunch time, unstructured times and any time there are schedule changes or extra pieces.
- b. Cooperative Learning Groups not only provide academic opportunities, but social opportunities for all students. Assign appropriate roles and tasks. Think win-win. How can every student in your class participate appropriately?
- c. Have all students participate in all lessons don't allow them to sit, if they look like they're doing what is asked then the students think they are. Again hold everyone accountable and they will see everyone as the same.
- d. Peers do not have to be same age. Sometimes older students are a better fit. I have seen this in church, community and school. When Rachel moved into middle school at church and in school, it was the older girls who had already figured thing out best supported Rachel. Now, they have matured though, and her peers the ones who just seem to know and understand what Rachel needs.

- e. Back to that communication thing: Communicate with parents about appropriate peers for out-of-school activities. I know some of you will bring up confidentiality issues. I cannot address that for each individual school district so I will just say, FIND A WAY! Children with communication challenges cannot communicate with their parents with any accuracy who is kind, who is a good peer, etc. Encourage students to invite their friend with Down syndrome to attend the football game or school dance with them or their group.
4. **Peer presentations.** If students are having trouble letting others in or understanding their quirks (and we all have quirks!) allow a parent or counselor to present a lesson on the topic. Sometimes that is all other students need is to understand some of the differences peers may present. For Down syndrome one of the best videos is *Just Like You –Down Syndrome*. There are others and your local group can help you find those. One of my favorite books is *“We’ll Paint the Octopus Red”* and I’ve used it up to 3rd grade. I also like to use my peer presentations to recruit for Down Syndrome Awareness activities like the Buddy Walk®. In the early years, Rachel didn’t attend the presentations but as she has grown she is a part and helps by using a PowerPoint to tell about herself and invite friends to be on her team. Your local Down syndrome group can probably help you with peer presentations.
5. **Social groups, lunch bunch, girls group, boys group facilitated by social worker, counselor, speech therapist or other professional.** Rachel was in 3rd grade when we moved to Olathe. We knew it was important for Rachel to build a peer group. The school actually recommended a lunch bunch. They recommended a lunch bunch facilitated by the social worker. They picked three girls each week to do lunch bunch with Rachel. It only took a few weeks to get through all the girls in her class. By then, we had time to meet some families too. Between the observations and our input, they put together a small group (5 including Rachel) and they had lunch bunch every week the remainder of the year. She is still friends with many of these girls. We continued it for the remainder of elementary.
 - a. Middle School. When we went to Middle School they continued lunch bunch but they added a girls group. They had Cougar Time (30 minutes at the end of each day used for clubs, assemblies, team building, homework, etc.) at the end of the day. The girls group was at the end of the day one day a week. Ideally these were facilitated by the social worker and Speech Language Pathologist. We dropped speech when we went to Middle School. We initiated this because we thought Rachel was tired of it and we didn’t want her missing core curriculum classes. Social speech is the big issue so this assisted with that. There were two girls with communication challenges (Rachel and another young lady who didn’t have Down syndrome.) They brought in 5 – 6 typical girls. It had variety from working on how to initiate discussions in a group to playing games or making a craft. In 8th grade (last year of MS) it became a true social group and a few boys were added to the mix. They are doing some version of this in high school but it is every other week.
 - b. Rachel looks forward to these groups. In fact, in Middle School because she was so responsible, they gave her the responsibility of passing on the passes to attend the group. This made her beam with pride.
 - c. General education teachers can recommend a few students they think are great peer buddies. They can have a "mini training" on what is ok for them to do and what the

students can do for themselves. We also chose more than one buddy so the student would work well with several peers, not just one.

- d. *LinkedIn* is the name of the social group at Rachel's high school. It is a mix of students considered typical and those who may have more challenges. The students look forward to it and I get reports that Rachel has become a leader and has been modeling self-advocate skills to the other students. She looks forward to the bi-weekly group.
6. **Be consistent in the classroom, playground, assemblies, etc.** All students want to know they matter, so being consistent with all students helps them feel like they are being treated the same.
 - a. If everyone has homework then all students have homework and are expected to do it. Of course someone's work might be modified, but no one need to know, all they know is everyone has homework.
 - b. Keep expectations the same; if students are called out for doing something wrong, then all students should be called out for it. Hence they're all the same. Students know when they are being treated differently.
 - c. Do not group students with disabilities together in a section or bring them in as a group. They should be part of their general education class group. Also – if you have noise sensitivity issues, fear of heights, etc. find peers to help students with that.
 - d. Call on students when they know the answer because students want to participate. Likewise if you call on students without hands up make sure to do the same with those who have special needs. Just gently guide them to the answer. The sense of pride students feel when they answer a question off guard is amazing!
 - e. When planning activities, outings, parties, etc. be mindful of the child with Down syndrome and health issues, sensory issues, etc. Consider ahead of time who they can be partnered with for a successful experience and that should not be an adult.
 7. **Basic "Good Teaching" Strategies:** Get to know your students. Learn about Down syndrome. Focus on abilities, not disabilities. Be involved in IEP meetings. Share strengths. What is the student doing really well? Where has the student shown growth? Be willing to share thoughts, ideas, and strategies. This is your student and you are a member of the team. :)
 8. **Listen** to their stories and encourage them to share them with others. If a teacher has time to encourage social time, students will foster and embrace it. Remember to give a child with Down syndrome at least 10 seconds to process what you are saying. It may take their brains a little longer to pull the information.
 9. **Conflict and Adults Being Adults:** When there is a conflict with a child with Down syndrome, it is often difficult to get an accurate accounting of what happened. I caution you -
 - a. Do not call in those involved in one big group. Bring them in separately. Many if not most children with Down syndrome are pleasers. By nature of their disability, they have working memory issues. So when you bring them in with the person who hurt them (physically or emotionally), they become confused and they may say nothing happened. Often they confuse what happened weeks, month or years ago with what happened today. They may also confuse reality with their imaginary life. Some researchers say they see life as one movie, each frame building upon another.

- b. Try to find out anonymously from someone who wasn't involved in the issue.
- c. If a person with Down syndrome does something wrong, they should be disciplined appropriately but you must know they understand. You must also learn what the antecedent was. Example: My daughter got in trouble for putting her hands on someone in elementary. She physically tried to move them because they broke in line. That's not the story the other child told though. Another child went to the teacher and told her that someone broke in line and that's why Rachel put her hands on them. Rachel should not have done this, but she is a rules follower and sometimes feels it is her job to enforce them!
- d. As adults pay attention to body language and listen to conversation and intervene if needed. Contact parents if needed.

10. Outside/extra-curricular activities. If possible, be a part of the child's life outside of school. For example, if they have a Down syndrome walk or other awareness event, try to participate. If you can or can't participate, encourage students to participate.

- a. **Encourage students with Down syndrome to find activities that are not disability specific.** There is nothing wrong with Special Olympics, Field of Dreams and Adaptive Sports. But is there a church that sponsors Upward programs that are well-suited for students with disabilities to be included with non-disabled peers? What about the local dance program? Some of these may just work.
- b. **Look for ways to include students with DS.** One of the special education teachers who was at Rachel's transition meeting noticed that she liked sports. She called and wanted to know if I thought Rachel would want to be the Freshman Volleyball Manager. She coached and she thought it would be fun and give Rachel a peer group. Rachel has loved it! She gives them pep talks and goes to the games and has in the teacher/coach a mentor.
- c. **Consider hosting** Dress Down for Down Syndrome Day, Take the Pledge to End the R-Word event, etc.

Many of the things I've mentioned could be good for any students and they aren't new discoveries. Persistence and willingness to take risks are keys. As educators, you get to see how students interact and are able to give guidance that a family/child needs. Often our friendship woes are the same whether we have a disability, communication disorder or not. However, it is much harder for students with communication disorders to maneuver systems and communicate among so many people in understandable ways.

Even though this book is for adults, I highly recommend at least pieces of it for almost all people who will work with someone with Down syndrome.

[Mental Wellness in Adults with Down Syndrome: A Guide to Emotional and Behavioral Strengths and Challenges](#) by Dr. Dennis McGuire and Dr. Brian Chicoine