

Better communication with children and adults with Down syndrome

Learning language and talking are among the most difficult skills to learn for children and adults with Down syndrome. This may lead to significant misunderstanding and frustration when communicating with others. While persons with Down syndrome are usually friendly and eager to communicate, they may easily feel intimidated in an unfamiliar situation.

Communicating with strangers

There may be various reasons why a child or adult with Down syndrome does not respond when addressed by a stranger:

- They may be aware of their limited understanding and may not have the confidence to talk to a stranger.
- They may have a hearing loss and therefore cannot hear clearly what another person is saying, especially when there is background noise.
- They may not understand the questions addressed to them, especially when they are spoken to in a language that is not the same as their home language.
- They may have specific speech difficulties. Talking clearly and fluently may be very difficult. The person may use gestures or sign language.

Five helpful strategies

When meeting a child or adult with Down syndrome, taking the following steps can improve your communication and will help them to feel more at ease.

1. Make sure your face is clearly visible for friendly eye contact. Consider removing your mask.
2. Where possible, reduce or remove any background noise.
3. Build trust by talking with respect and kindness.
4. Speak clearly and slowly, but keep your speech natural.
5. Ask their friend or family member to help with the communication, if necessary.

Receiving speech-language therapy and education early in life can help children and adults with Down syndrome to communicate more effectively. Managing hearing loss and learning sign language are proven ways for better communication in persons with Down syndrome. Audiologists can conduct hearing tests and manage hearing loss. In collaboration with families, speech-language therapists can develop strategies to improve communication. Contact your local clinic or hospital to find an audiologist or speech-language therapist.

Compiled by Alta Kritzinger, Professor Emeritus and Research Associate,
Department of Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology, University of Pretoria. September 2020.