

Which type of school is best for children and young people with Down syndrome?

Barnet Leading Edge Group for Children and Young People with Down Syndrome

What is the purpose of this Information?

This document gives information about school placements for children and young people with Down syndrome. We have summarised the available research to help inform parents and professionals.

We believe every family has the right to decide what type of school is right for their child. It can be hard for parents to weigh up the challenges and opportunities experienced, and to decide between mainstream and special needs schools. Parents may, or may not, find our information about research useful. They need to think about their own child and what an educational setting may offer.

It is important that professionals in schools and the Local Authority are aware of research about school type so that they can provide advice and make informed choices. We want our families, and our schools of all types, to have information so that they can best support their children and young people with Down syndrome.

Which type of school is best for children and young people with Down syndrome?

There is a lot of research about the best school type for children and young people with Down syndrome; some is of good quality and some is no better than offering an opinion. In 2012, de Graaf, van Hove and Haveman set out to look at studies published over a 40-year period and written in many languages. They looked very carefully at the quality of the research and found 133 relevant studies. The results of

their systematic review was that mainstream classroom placement resulted in the better development of language and other academic skills. This happened even after they took account of the effects of selective placement. Children and young people in special needs schools did not have better self-help skills. There were no significant differences for behaviour and self-competence.

In the UK, Buckley, Bird and Archer (2006) looked at children and young people aged from five years old through secondary school. Their research compared the same group of children over their school life. The children and young people had been matched for cognitive ability, behaviour, development and socio-economic factors, so the comparison of progress between the children and young people in mainstream and special settings was a fair one. The language and other academic benefits of mainstream placement were greater than expected. The gains for the included teenagers were in expressive language, literacy and, to a smaller extent, numeracy and general academic attainments. The average progress gain for expressive language was 2 years and 6 months; and for literacy, 3 years and 4 months. These age-related scores are based on norms for typically developing children who are expected to progress 12 months in the measures during a school year. This means that the teenagers in mainstream school gained the equivalent of 5-6 years more progress than expected in spoken language and in literacy when compared with the teenagers educated in special classrooms.

The published research is plentiful and clearly concludes that, as a group, our children's academic, language and social progress is enhanced in a mainstream environment. This is not a criticism of the special school offer; it seems the benefit is due to our children's response to the children they are learning alongside.

There are some helpful resources for families. For example Contact <https://www.contact.org.uk/advice-and-support/education-learning/admissions-and-school-choice/finding-the-right-school/> , the Down's Syndrome Association <https://www.downs-syndrome.org.uk/for-families-and-carers/education/> and Down Syndrome Education International <https://library.down-syndrome.org/en->

Is the research quality good?

The methods and participant size of published educational research contrasts with medical trials and research. Randomised research control trials are much less frequent for education studies and use of effect sizes are limited to systematic review and meta-analyses. The research is clear and coherent, and there is very little conflicting research.

Children and young people with Down syndrome are not all the same, however research shows that most children with Down syndrome are likely to benefit from going to school with their typically developing peers.

We recommend schools that educate our children alongside typically developing children, this is more likely to happen in a mainstream environment. We are not criticising special-needs schools, or parents who choose a special needs school for their child. We really value our special needs schools in Barnet. We are grateful for the support they provide to our community and the Leading-Edge group. The advantage that mainstream schools have is that they can offer a learning environment that includes typically developing peers, this has been found to be particularly supportive for children and young people with Down syndrome. It supports the development of academic skills including reading, language and socially appropriate behaviour. The research shows that being educated with typically developing children is important for our children's progress.

Are there any cautions about mainstream?

De Graaf, van Hove, and Haveman (2012) found that many studies reported that placement in a mainstream setting was not enough, there needs to be support and modelling for interactions between children. This is because many children with

Down syndrome respond more to social initiation than to initiating social contact themselves. It was found that children with Down syndrome were generally well accepted by their peers. Not all mainstream schools offer most of our children's education to be spent alongside their typically developing peers.

The Buckley research showed that children and young people need friends who are typically developing and also friends with similar needs to themselves. In the same way, Special schools need to have ways for their children to interact with typically developing children. In both types of setting opportunities for the development of intimate best friendships needs to be organised in and outside school.

When first approached some mainstream schools may be preoccupied by the syndrome rather than the child and may be daunted by their own lack of experience or support. Most schools begin to see past that, to the child and their needs. The breakdown of a placement in one mainstream setting does not mean that another mainstream school won't be able to meet the child's needs.

Parents of secondary age pupils will want to know how secondary schools support their pupils in year 9 and onwards. Inclusion in GCSEs, entry-level qualifications, vocational options, and work-experience is important. Secondary schools also vary in what they offer their pupils from age 16+. Some schools offer only A levels while others offer other certificates. Choice of courses has led to the growth of 16+ departments in our local special school and nationally.

Is mainstream school only better for abler children and young people with Down syndrome?

In 2007, Buckley, Bird and Sacks described how education could change the developmental profile of our children and young people with Down syndrome. Cognitive ability can influence the outcome of a school placement, and de Graaf, van Hove, and Haveman (2013) carefully analysed this in their review of placement and progress in the Netherlands. De Graaf found that children and young people with

severe learning difficulties (IQs assessed as 35-50) in mainstream schools made more academic progress than those in special schools who had more moderate difficulties (IQs assessed as 50+). When change was measured they found that a child's cognitive ability was influenced by school experience.

What about the other children and young people in mainstream classes?

Research shows that the whole school often benefits from including students with disabilities. Some pupils in every classroom will benefit from strategies developed to meet the learning needs of a pupil with Down syndrome. Best outcomes are achieved when appropriate support is provided to teachers to fully include the pupil in the class.

A whole cohort of children will grow up knowing at least one person with a disability. Research, such as a meta-analysis of research studies by Armstrong in 2017, shows that that direct and extended positive contact is one of the key factors in reducing disability hate crime. Leigers (2015) found that pupils needed practical information to support non-disabled peers' communication and work with peers with disabilities and that presenting only factual information could have negative results.

What about the gap between the learning of children and young people with Down syndrome and typically developing children?

The gap in skills and learning between children with Down syndrome and their typically developing peers will grow with age. Children with Down syndrome usually progress about 4-5 months in a year; they make progress but at a slower rate than typically developing children. By secondary school, the gap may be quite significant. But this gap is because of developmental differences, and it is not a reason, in itself, to choose a special school placement. The gap is always there and it makes considerable demands on planning for the school. People with Down syndrome do not plateau or stop learning new skills in their teenage or adult years. They will

continue to make steady progress and continue learning throughout their lives if given the opportunity to do so.

Many students with Down syndrome reach the end of Year 11 and go on to post-school training or college. Work experience is very important in helping young people with Down syndrome to make choices about their life after school. Young people with Down syndrome face greater challenges in leaving school and making the transition to adult life than their peers, and more planning is likely to be needed than for other young people.

What happens if I want my child to go to a special school?

Choosing between mainstream and special school can feel like one of the biggest decisions a parent may face. They may make this decision because of the quality of the special needs school offer, because they feel their child's needs cannot be met in the mainstream environment, or because they have had difficult experiences in a mainstream setting. Many parents experience difficulties and heartache about their children's school placement, we are not telling parents what to choose or criticizing choices made.

The research summarised within this document can be used to help parents and professionals to support their child, irrespective of the educational setting.

Summary

Children are not defined by their Down syndrome, and a school that focuses on their strengths, needs and development will help them progress.

Our children have complex needs and schools need support and training to know how best to support them. The Barnet Leading Edge Group for children and young people with Down syndrome has written a **Levels of Expertise** guidance document

summarises the key ways for schools of all types to support our children and young people it is available on the Barnet Local Offer.

Our recommendation is that a child or young person should be given every opportunity to be educated alongside their typically developing peers unless there are clear reasons why this is not in the child's best interests.

Research References

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