

Ten Tips for Classroom Aides

Professionals helping out in the classroom are very important people as they spend a lot of time with the student with Down syndrome. Here are a few tips to help you and your student:

1. **Enable students to make choices on a daily basis.** Each of us makes choices every day from what clothes we want to wear to who we want to sit with in the cafeteria. When we feel deprived of these choices we are more likely to rebel. Let your student make many choices during the day no matter how insignificant they may seem.
2. **Avoid the 'magnifying glass effect'.** When a child has an assistant assigned to them it is common for the assistant to keep a 'close eye' on the pupil and catch every little misdemeanor. Remember that all students do things like sharpen their pencil a little too long while daydreaming and hop a few steps down the hall while standing in line with their class. Try and only correct the BIG problems and let the little things go.
3. **Promote independence at all times.** 'Learned helplessness' is a well-documented problem for people with Down syndrome and the more your student is unnecessarily assisted, the more you teach him that he needs to depend on others. Most parents will tell you that what they want more than anything for their child is independence. This is a skill that needs on-going support from adults from infancy. When ensuring the homework assignments are clear and the school backpack is packed with the appropriate books, think more about how you can teach the student to do it for himself rather than just ensuring it gets done. It takes more time in the beginning but in the long run it saves you time and makes your student as independent as possible. You can also help by pulling back on prompts as soon as possible and physically assist only when absolutely necessary.
4. **Help all students in the class.** Another way to promote independence is to make sure that when the student with Down syndrome is independently engaged that you help others in the class. This helps to ensure that peers do not see the student with Down syndrome as the only one in the class who needs help. It gives positive messages to all students.
5. **Communicate well with home and the class teacher.** The class teacher is responsible for the teaching program and can be a great resource for other issues like behavior and social inclusion. The parents, of course, know their child best and regular communication helps tremendously. Make sure you also link with the local and national Down syndrome associations as they often have seminars, staff and publications that can help.
6. **Maintain the student's dignity.** If your student needs help with toileting, feeding, etc, make sure that you are discreet about it. Also be careful about talking about your student in her presence unless the comments are positive. Discussions with other staff members and parents about the student should be done in private.
7. **Allow your student to create and display her own work.** It can appear to be kind to help a child to make her Mother's Day card look more like the model, but more than likely she will value more a card that was obviously made by her child. If you alter or assist with art and academic work more than is actually necessary, it can deflate the value of that work for that child and others.
8. **Be aware that children with Down syndrome can be 'emotional barometers'.** Many children with Down syndrome will react to the tone and emotional atmosphere around them. If you expect them to not do well then it often comes across even if you believe you are 'hiding it' with the result that it can affect adversely your student's behavior and willingness to try new tasks. Also be aware that when you correct your student you might get an over-reaction such as tears. Do not let this put you off using needed discipline! On the positive side, adults who adopt a positive attitude towards their student will often have far more success.

9. **Facilitate friendships and relationships with peers.** The older a student with Down syndrome gets the more difficult it can be to make and maintain friendships, mainly due to language delays. You can help in lots of little ways such as ensuring they are sitting with peers at lunch and know how to play the games the others play at recess. Look for children who will be good playmates and support the friendships.
10. **Allow your student to make mistakes and take risks.** We all learn more from our mistakes so we should not deprive the student with Down syndrome these opportunities. When he does make a mistake, don't be too quick to put things right. Give your student the chance to problem solve.

Remember, you have a huge role in supporting your student's development. You are a very important person!