



Down Syndrome

Down syndrome is an inherited condition in which extra genetic material causes delays in the way a child develops and often leads to mental retardation. It affects 1 in every 800 babies born. The symptoms of Down syndrome can vary widely from child to child. While some kids with Down syndrome need a lot of medical attention, others lead very healthy and independent lives.

Children with Down syndrome tend to share certain physical features such as a flat facial profile, an upward slant to the eyes, small ears, a single crease across the center of the palms, and an enlarged tongue. A doctor can usually tell if a newborn has the condition through a physical exam. Low muscle tone and loose joints are also characteristic of children with Down syndrome, and babies in particular may seem especially "floppy." Though this can and often does improve over time, most children with Down syndrome typically reach developmental milestones - like sitting up, crawling, and walking - later than other children. At birth, children with Down syndrome are usually of average size, but they tend to grow at a slower rate and remain smaller than their peers. For infants, low muscle tone may contribute to sucking and feeding problems, as well as constipation and other digestive issues. In toddlers and older children, there may be delays in speech and self-care skills like feeding, dressing, and toilet teaching.

Down syndrome affects kids' cognitive abilities in different ways, but most have mild to moderate mental retardation. Children with Down syndrome can and do learn, and are capable of developing skills throughout their lives. They simply reach goals at a different pace. Individuals with Down syndrome have a wide range of abilities, and there is no way to tell at birth what they will be capable of as they grow up.

While some children with Down syndrome have no other health problems, others may experience a host of medical issues that require extra care. For example, half of all children born with Down syndrome also have congenital heart defects and are prone to developing pulmonary hypertension (high blood pressure in the lungs). Approximately half of all children with Down syndrome also have problems with hearing and vision. Other medical conditions that may occur more frequently in children with Down syndrome include thyroid problems, intestinal abnormalities, seizure disorders, respiratory problems, obesity, an increased susceptibility to infection, and a higher risk of childhood leukemia. Fortunately, many of these conditions are treatable.

Today, many children with Down syndrome grow up going to school and enjoying most of the same activities as their peers. A few go on to college and many transition into semi-independent living. Still others continue to live at home but are able to hold jobs, thus finding their own success in the community.

The following is a list of things that you can do to help a child with Down Syndrome:

- Encourage the child to be physically active as their low muscle tone can make it difficult for them to get moving
- Try to do some arts and craft projects which can help build strength in their arms and hands, making other activities easier
- Allow the child to complete tasks that he/she is capable of without assistance
- Motivate the child by telling them what a good job they are doing
- Be a real friend and have a great time together