

Down's syndrome - Support card

No two people with Down's syndrome are the same, the ways in which the condition affects a person's development and learning varies widely. Get to know the person to understand their motivations, how the condition affects them and what support they might need.

What is Down's syndrome?

Down's syndrome is a genetic condition caused by the presence of an extra chromosome in a person's cells. Down's syndrome is the most common genetic cause of learning disability.

Football pathways

Players with Down's syndrome can choose to play mainstream, pan-disability and/or Down's syndrome-specific formats of football.

General characteristics

- Down's syndrome is the most common genetic cause of learning disability. A learning disability affects a person's ability to learn, it does not mean they cannot learn.
- Some people with Down's syndrome have challenges with their communication. Often people with Down's syndrome have difficulties with speech production (their speech can be difficult to understand) and it can take them longer to process what is seen/heard and then communicate about it.
- Some people with Down's syndrome may use a signing system to support speech as they may be unable to communicate effectively with speech alone. These individuals may or may not also have problems with their hearing.
- It is very important that communication challenges are not mistaken for reluctance, or that the person is not ignored or rushed – this can create frustrations.
- Many people with Down's syndrome have a hearing impairment. The hearing loss may be temporary but for many is permanent. It may require the use of a hearing aid to maximise hearing.
- Many people with Down's syndrome have a visual impairment. Around 50 - 60% of people who have Down's syndrome need to wear glasses. 100% of people who have Down's syndrome have poor visual acuity, even when wearing their glasses. In practice, this means their world lacks fine details and sharp contrast.
- Information provided verbally can be challenging, but visual processing can be a strength for people who have Down's syndrome. Information retention and understanding can be helped if supported visually, e.g. through the use of images, text, or demonstration.
- Be aware that the impact of hypotonia (low muscle tone) and hypermobility can lead to increased energy expenditure and therefore fatigue.
- Underlying neck instability is more common in people who have Down's syndrome than in the general population. Concerns about a person's neck control or any emerging signs of neck instability must be highlighted to the individual and their parent/carer so that the person can be medically assessed. Players with Down's syndrome shouldn't head the football.

Coaching considerations

- Get to know the player. Find out how best to best support them and to establish the extent to which instructions are understood. Be aware of any additional communication methods used such as Makaton, BSL or pictures.
- Try to make your communication clear and concise by speaking slowly and using simple sentences, avoiding complex words and sport jargon.
- Face the person you are speaking to, reduce background noise, make visuals big and bold, and write things down simply and clearly.
- Allow 10 seconds for instructions to be processed and try to accompany verbal instructions with demonstrations, visuals aids, whiteboards or flashcards.
- Focus players' attention before you speak. A good way to do this could be by saying their name first when speaking to them.
- Don't assume understanding – check by getting players to either repeat key points or perform a demonstration.
- Use a visual timetable – structure boards, now and next, traffic light system.
- Ensure the venue is well-lit – players will have difficulty focusing clearly.
- Break down complex skills into simple steps but ensure you link them together and avoid practices that rely heavily on numeracy and literacy skills.
- Players may tire quickly and so need shorter work intervals with rests.
- Watch carefully and pause when interacting – this provides the person with the extra time needed to make their valuable contribution.
- A change of coach, venue, or timings can be challenging for some players, so give enough notice and use visual aids to help manage change.
- Praise all achievements as even those that appear small can be significant for the individual.



Don't forget the golden nugget – Make sure your environment is always a safe and welcoming place to be!

How do I use STEP to adapt my session to include Down's syndrome players?



Space – Consider the size of area used. A big pitch may cause fatigue due to the impact of hypotonia and hypermobility on increased energy expenditure.



Task – Prevent heading of the ball. Include positive and interactive tasks.



Equipment – Accompany verbal instructions with demonstrations, visual aids, whiteboards or flashcards. Ensure there is a strong contrast between the colour of the ball, the pitch surface, and any surrounding walls (if indoors).



Players – Small sided games such as 2v2, 3v3, 4v4 are a great way to keep players moving and engaged.

Step top tip:

Remember: STEP is a tool to help you coach, NOT a list of things you have to do. In order to use STEP effectively, it's essential you get to know your players so you can use the right modification at the right time to aid their development.

Additional resources

- [England Football Website: Disability Section](#)
- [Disability Football Introduction Course](#)
- [DSA website](#)
- [Neck instability in people who have Down's syndrome](#)