

Special Education Support Service: Down Syndrome

Learning to Read: Teaching Sight Vocabulary and Meaningful Words

Note: The Special Education Support Service wishes to acknowledge and thank Fidelma Brady, former Education Officer with Down Syndrome Ireland, for permission to use this information.

Many high frequency words will have little meaning for the pupil with Down syndrome, particularly if they are used in isolation. The first sight words learnt should therefore be words that are familiar and important to the pupil

1. Choose a small number of words, which are familiar and important to the pupil, e.g. family names.
2. Make two sets of flash cards using these words.
3. Initially, provide photographs or pictures of these words to ensure pupil understands their meaning.
4. Pupil matches flash cards together, initially with the picture.
5. Withdraw picture prompt and pupil matches words only.
6. Use the Match, Select, Name process:
7. Pupil matches words together.
8. Pupil then selects words on request.
9. Pupil is asked to name the words.

Add new words gradually, pupil continuing to match, select and name. If necessary, reinforce meaning with picture initially.

- Build phrases and sentences as soon as possible. Choose words with this in mind. e.g. and, with.
- Use sentences, which are based upon use in everyday conversation.
- Make individual books based on pupil's experience.
- Provide lots of reading books, which contain meaningful vocabulary in simple, short phrases and have good, clear illustrations.
- Make a "conversation" diary between the pupil and an adult. Sentences are written by each, telling about an activity that has happened during the day. The language used is thus relevant to every day speech. This could be as simple as "I had toast for my breakfast". This activity can be built into the Literacy Hour and is a useful activity for the pupil to see the link between reading and writing.
- Develop phonic awareness for reading and spelling by using the pupil's reading strengths – i.e. teach whole words first, then letter sounds by using the initial sounds from the words in the pupil's sight vocabulary.
- Continue phonics by teaching word families (simple vowel / consonant combinations) such as in or en. Show the pupil how the addition of different initial letters makes different words.
- Practice writing alongside the development of the pupil's reading skills.
- Make it enjoyable!