

EDUCATION

Families and schools influence academic achievements

Most people probably assume that the quality and type of education that children receive in school influences academic progress but may be less clear about the ways in which parents can also influence outcomes. When a child has a developmental disability then the most people will be less confident about predicting the effects of schools or parents on that child's progress. However, these are issues of considerable importance to parents and education professionals.

In a recent paper, Stephen Turner and his colleagues report findings which identify both school and parental factors that influence the academic progress of children with Down syndrome through to their adult lives. This research team has been collecting longitudinal data on a group of children with Down syndrome born between 1973 and 1980 in Manchester, UK, since they were born. This paper analyses data collected from children, teachers and parents at 3 time points: when the mean ages of the children were 9 years 2 months, 13 years 8 months and 21 years. The group of 71 young people for whom data is available for this study vary in cognitive abilities and represent the whole range of abilities typical of a group of people with Down syndrome. Similarly, their families are diverse in educational backgrounds and occupations. The analyses conducted investigate factors that have influenced progress at each of the 3 time points.

Their findings demonstrate that, as with all children, cognitive abilities do predict progress – more able children at the start of schooling tended to make more academic progress – but school placement also had a significant effect even when starting abilities are taken into account. Children with Down syndrome who were educated in mainstream school classrooms had higher academic achievements in reading, writing and number which continued into their adult lives. As the authors of the paper point out, this finding confirms the similar findings of several earlier studies [1,2,3].

In many countries there continue to be debates on the benefits of inclusive com-



pared to special education for children with Down syndrome, yet all the published research to date shows that children with Down syndrome have better spoken language and better academic achievements when educated in mainstream classrooms – and no studies report benefits for special education [2,3,4]. Of course, we should assume these benefits are the result of successful and well-supported inclusion, in schools where the child is wanted, is a full member of the community and where staff are able to adapt teaching and learning to the child's needs [4,5]. In most countries, there is still a considerable need for school development and staff training to enable inclusion to be successful.

In addition, progress was influenced by family factors. When parents are able to adopt a practical approach to coping with problems, look for sources of help and actively problem solve, this style of functioning helps their children to achieve their potential. In addition, if parents feel that they, themselves, are 'in control' of their lives and make their own decisions – this also has a positive effect on their children's progress.

These findings have implications for everyone involved in family support or early intervention programmes as this information can be shared with parents, enabling them to be aware that positive coping styles do have positive benefits and encouraging them to make full use of local support networks and resources.

It may also be worth noting that the children in this study were born at a time when early intervention was only just

developing and when inclusion in schools was also in its infancy. Given that, in many countries, early intervention services today should be in a much better position to support families so that they do feel able to be in control and they can access solutions to their problems – more families should be better able to maximise their children's potential. Similarly, inclusion in mainstream classes was only just starting in the UK at the time these children went to school – the knowledge that has accumulated in the past 20 years means that inclusion should also be more effective for more children now and in the future.

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Original research paper

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Further research

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