

TOGETHER AGAINST LONELINESS:

What Educational Psychologists Must Do Differently

WORLD DOWN SYNDROME DAY - 21 MARCH 2026

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Placing a child with Down syndrome in a mainstream classroom does not guarantee inclusion. True inclusion means belonging, feeling known, valued, and genuinely connected to peers. This World Down Syndrome Day, we ask: are our schools producing presence, or producing belonging?

World Down Syndrome Day is observed on 21 March each year. This date is deliberately chosen to represent the triplication (trisomy) of chromosome 21, the genetic hallmark of Down syndrome. The 2026 theme, "**Together Against Loneliness**," is not merely a compassionate slogan. It is a research-backed call to action.

Studies consistently show that children and young people with Down syndrome are at heightened risk of social isolation and loneliness, not because of their chromosomes, but because of how our environments, schools, and social systems are designed. As educational psychologists, school psychologists, and educators, we have both the tools and the obligation to change this.

01 Understanding Down Syndrome: A Cognitive and Educational Profile

Down syndrome (Trisomy 21) is the most common chromosomal condition associated with intellectual disability, occurring in approximately 1 in every 700–1 000 live births globally. In South Africa, where data on prevalence remains limited, the figure is estimated to be broadly comparable to international rates, though under-identification and under-reporting remain challenges, particularly in rural and under-resourced communities.

From an educational psychology standpoint, it is critical to move away from a deficit-focused view. Children with Down syndrome present with a distinctive cognitive and learning profile that includes both areas of relative strength and relative challenge:

Relative Strengths

- Visual-spatial processing
- Social awareness and empathy
- Long-term visual memory
- Receptive language (understanding)
- Imitation and observational learning
- Sincere motivation to connect with others

Areas Requiring Support

- Working memory and sequential processing
- Expressive language (speaking and writing)
- Auditory processing and phonological awareness
- Abstract reasoning
- Executive function regulation
- Generalisation of skills across contexts

This profile has direct implications for instruction. Teaching that is visually rich, repetition-friendly, socially embedded, and broken into manageable steps is not merely "good practice for children with Down syndrome", but an evidence-based inclusive pedagogy that benefits all learners.

02 The Loneliness Problem: Why "Being There" Is Not Enough

The 2026 theme names something that many of us working in schools have long observed: physical presence in a classroom does not equal social belonging. A child with Down syndrome can sit in a mainstream classroom every day and still experience profound loneliness.

Loneliness in this context is not simply about having fewer friends. Research on social exclusion in children with intellectual disabilities highlights several key mechanisms:

1 **Passive Inclusion**

The child is physically present but not meaningfully engaged in group activities, projects, or conversations. They are "included" on the register, not in the community.

2 **Proximity Without Connection**

Children with Down syndrome are often placed near peers but without structured or facilitated opportunities for genuine relationship building. Proximity does not produce friendship.

3 **Communication Gaps**

Expressive language challenges can make reciprocal conversation difficult. Without peer training or supported communication, social exchanges become one-sided and fade.

4 **Stigma and Othering**

Despite good intentions, children pick up on adult attitudes. Schools that treat inclusion as a charity narrative inadvertently communicate that the child with Down syndrome is a guest in the class, not a member of it.

5 **Transition Vulnerabilities**

Social isolation intensifies at educational transitions, from preschool to primary, primary to secondary. Without deliberate continuity planning, friendships that were carefully built are lost.

"The goal of inclusive education is not to normalise the child with a disability, but to normalise diversity itself, so that every child feels that their presence enriches the classroom."

03 What Educational Psychologists Can Do: Evidence-Based Strategies

Assessment That Serves the Child, Not Just the System

Psychoeducational assessment for children with Down syndrome must be approached with careful attention to test validity and cultural fairness. Many standardised cognitive assessments were not normed on populations that include children with intellectual disabilities, and many were not normed in South African contexts. Results must be interpreted within this limitation.

A strengths-based assessment framework asks not just "what is this child's IQ score?" but "what are this child's strongest learning channels, social capacities, and motivational drivers, and how can we build an education plan around these?"

Designing for Belonging in the ISP Process

In South Africa, the [Individualised Support Plan](#) (ISP) or Learner Support Profile should explicitly include social participation goals, not just academic or functional skills targets. The educational psychologist's role is to advocate that "increasing meaningful peer interactions" is as legitimate and measurable a goal as "improving reading fluency."

Specific strategies to embed in support planning include: peer buddy systems with structured facilitation, cooperative learning groups with explicit role assignments, circle of friends interventions, and regular review of the social climate the child is experiencing, not just academic progress.

Working With the Whole System: Teachers, Parents, and Peers

The most effective educational psychologists working in inclusive settings operate as system consultants, not just child assessors. This means:

A Teacher Consultation and Coaching

Many teachers want to support inclusion but lack training and confidence. Educational psychologists can model differentiated instruction, help teachers understand the cognitive profile of Down syndrome, and co-design lessons that scaffold participation for all learners.

B Peer Awareness Interventions

Age-appropriate classroom conversations about diversity, difference, and what it means to be a good friend are powerful. These are not "special" lessons about disability, but rather lessons about human diversity that benefit everyone in the class.

C Family Partnership

Families of children with Down syndrome are expert partners, not passive recipients of reports. Co-designing support plans, honouring family knowledge, and connecting families to peer support networks and organisations like [Down Syndrome South Africa](#) (DSSA) is part of our professional mandate.

D School-Level Policy Advocacy

Educational psychologists should participate in school development teams and advocate for inclusive policies: anti-bullying frameworks that address disability-based exclusion, accessible extracurricular activities, and physical environments that support participation.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

For many children with Down syndrome, expressive communication challenges are the single greatest barrier to social connection. AAC (including low-tech tools like picture exchange systems and high-tech tools like speech-generating devices or communication apps) can transform social participation.

South Africa's [Education White Paper 6](#) (2001) commits the country to an inclusive education system grounded in the principles of equity and human rights. Yet the gap between policy intent and lived reality remains significant. Many children with Down syndrome are enrolled in special schools — institutions that, when appropriately resourced, provide valuable specialist support, but which can also deepen social segregation. The full-service school model envisioned by White Paper 6 has been inconsistently implemented, with resource shortfalls, large class sizes, and inadequate teacher training cited as persistent barriers.

Educational psychologists working in the South African context must navigate these realities while holding fast to the values of inclusion and belonging. Key responsibilities include:

- Advocating within DBE structures for proper implementation of inclusive education guidelines
- Connecting families to the [SIAS \(Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support\)](#) process and ensuring it serves each child's best interest
- Liaising with District-Based Support Teams (DBSTs) to coordinate multi-disciplinary support
- Supporting Down Syndrome South Africa (DSSA) and similar organisations as key community partners

04 What Families and Communities Can Do

Educational psychology is most powerful when it extends beyond the school gate. The loneliness experienced by children with Down syndrome does not switch off when school ends. Community inclusion — clubs, sport, faith communities, arts programmes — is as important to development as classroom inclusion.

For Families

- Connect with Down Syndrome SA (DSSA) for peer support and resources
- Communicate regularly with the school's ed psych and support team
- Speak up when social inclusion goals are absent from support plans
- Celebrate your child's friendships — they matter as much as academic milestones

For Communities

- Normalise the presence of individuals with Down syndrome in everyday community life
- Train community youth workers and sport coaches in inclusive practice
- Challenge casual language that diminishes the dignity of individuals with intellectual disabilities

This World Down Syndrome Day: Take One Action

Whether you are a psychologist, educator, parent, or community member, there is one thing you can do today that will matter. Look at the children and young people with Down syndrome in your life and ask honestly: Are they lonely? And if the answer is yes, or even "I don't know" ... start there.

Together against loneliness is not a theme. It is a commitment.