Virtual Teaching of kids with intellectual disabilities: Strategies & Techniques for Teachers (and Parents)

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Very special thanks to the Matthew Foundation for inviting me to present this webinar.
I have a daughter with Down syndrome who is now 24. I realise I have been teaching her all her life under guidance and support from teachers and therapists and many others in the community, not to mention other in our family! Here she is as a little one learning what it feels like to sit up and play. Physio in the basket.
Where we’re headed

• Who are you teaching?
• Deciding what to teach
• Deciding how to teach
• Finding ideas
• Your questions
Who are you teaching?

- The child
- Parents/ folks at home
- Yourself!

For teachers, it is clear we are teaching the child. We might hope that they are being diligent with their lessons, but probably more likely than not, they are being cheeky monkeys and not particularly interested in sitting down to work.
We are also teaching parents or the folks at home. I will talk more about that shortly.
And we are also teaching ourselves.
It’s new for everyone

- Be gentle on yourself
- Learning is lifelong
  - ✓ We have time!
  - ✓ Academic work is not the only learning that matters
  - ✓ Learning is not hierarchical
  - ✓ Don’t stress about ‘getting behind’

Be gentle on yourself.
You are doing the best you can.
(And it’s probably as good as it needs to be!)

It is easy to feel not good enough. Stop those thoughts!
It’s still a great time for learning!

Having said that, learning does matter and we need to remember to find ways to keep the learning happening.
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Making learning adjustments doesn’t involve special tricks. Effective teachers are very creative and thinking carefully about ways they can reduce the barriers to learning faced by their students.

What you’ll need...

- Imagination
- Creativity
- A sense of humour
- To be ready to have a crack
Strategy 1 – Focus on the big ideas

1. Focus on the ‘big ideas’ – key concepts
e.g. Number
   • Count word sequence
   • Building a mental number line
   • Using a calculator
2. How do we know what these are?
   It’s in the syllabus or curriculum standards
   • [https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au](https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au)

**Strategy 1** is about making sure we don’t overload the child nor leave their parents trying to fit everything in. Learning is slower and needs more practice so we need to cut out the ‘extras’ and focus on the really important ideas.

The example is about number. The curriculum has lots to cover but some really key ideas are about knowing the count word sequence; building a mental number line – as adults we need to know where numbers are in relation to each other; and using a calculator.

For any topic area, curriculum documents tell us what bits are important and what are additional. Families need to know what are the most important things to emphasise.
When learners are many years behind their classmates, often there is a feeling that a teacher needs to plan separate lessons for them. This is time-consuming and rarely effective. A much more productive approach is to adjust the lessons being taught to the rest of the class. We will talk about how to do that next.

**Strategy 2 - Year level appropriate curriculum**

Year level appropriate curriculum is about allowing kids to move past holes and *perhaps* fill them as they go.

It’s not about making kids go back to work from years ago.
Step 1 is to start with the plan you have made for the rest of the class.
Now, as you know this learner well, you are likely to be able to predict where they might have barriers to their learning.
This is where the creativity and imagination come in. The image is of the “Talking Calculator” app. A teacher I know found out her learner was having trouble with the standard calculator and was getting very frustrated. The teacher went looking for an alternative where the student could hear what she had entered.
Parents can help by letting teachers know what challenges their child is facing. They can also advise if they have found ‘work arounds’.
Some schools employ support staff to assist teachers. If these staff are available, they can assist in the development of materials.
Parents will appreciate having guidance around the content, how it is taught and what is expected of the learner. Encourage them to ask questions and reassure them that they aren’t expected to know.
Assessment need not be through formal tests. More about this later.

How to do this

1. Start with the lesson you have planned for the rest of the class.
2. Identify where possible blocks might be for your student with ID.
3. Explicitly plan adjustments. Only provide these if they are needed.
4. Give direction to teacher aides if they are available to assist.
5. Give explicit directions to parents/carers.
6. Invite questions from parents (provide information as early as possible).
7. Assess learners throughout the learning process (not just at the end)
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Strategy 3 – Plan the day

- It’s not all school work
- Families will be grateful for a suggested timetable
- Include physical activities
- Include outdoor activities, if permitted

Credit – West Beach Primary School, Adelaide, Australia.

Kids don’t spend all the time they are at school sitting at their desks so it is good to reassure families that school work won’t take the whole day at home, either. The suggested timetable show was sent to families of children attending West Beach Primary School in Adelaide. The mum who shared this with me (and I have permission from the school to show it here) found it very reassuring and liked that exercise and creative time were featured.

For our learners with ID, they will not do a solid hour block. This slot needs to be broken up and can be as little bits throughout the day. Outdoor time is great, only if it is permitted, of course.
Learning online can be very frustrating for any learner. It is particularly so for young learners with IDD. Teachers will often find themselves trying to keep the student engaged and at the computer – and parents will be trying to do this too!

A more practical/realistic approach is to support parents to work through the materials you provide at home. If your planned activities are sent home with at least a day to ask you questions before the learning starts, the parents can then structure their time to work with the child.

Parents are likely to appreciate a phone call or an online meeting session to talk through how the learning is going.

The photo is from a farm in western Queensland where the school is sending materials on USBs home to students using drones. The kids do not have to rely on internet connections to keep on with their work.
Strategy 5 – assessment the easy way

1. Catch them in the act
2. Keep samples of their work
3. Take photos
4. Make videos

Formal testing is painful – and not just for the learner. It is very hard to gather all they really know and can do as a result of the teaching. Rather than testing at the end, gather work samples, and take photos and videos while they are working. Encourage kids to make short video clips to share with family members or their teachers. FaceTime with grandma to show off the day’s learning.
A whole hour at a time for learning is daunting for the child and their families. Know what the ‘big ideas’ are – what is really important to work on. Anything else is a bonus. The ‘little bit often’ rule is a favourite of advertisers who teach us about their products in short bursts and repeatedly. Without even trying, we know about their wares. Five minute bursts of learnings regularly offered are better than hour long sessions. Snack, don’t binge.

To be ready when the moment strikes, have the gear on hand. I used to keep a basket of maths things on the end of the dining table.

A final key point – don’t let learning become a battle. It is easy to get frustrated. Sometimes our learners appear to have forgotten everything they learnt just yesterday. If you feel the frustration rising, take a break. Come back to it another time, perhaps with a different approach. Check in with your child’s teacher to find other approaches.
Many families are telling me that the hardest thing at the moment for their kids is missing their friends. That is a really important part of school. Friends from school can become lifelong friends – the bottom photo shows my daughter with her friend at their graduation evening from high school. They’ve been mates since and Ruth has learnt a lot about moving into adulthood through the company of a good friend.

Our learners with IDD are also likely to find the ways recommended for other kids – phone calls, video calls – are not as easy to do. Communication over those mediums can be really hard.

For teachers hosting class online meetings, encourage participants to keep their video cameras on. Privacy concerns might be alleviated by using fake backgrounds or by working with parents to set up the webcam facing a blank wall. If bandwidth is an issue, invite students to turn on their cameras just as they are speaking so that learners with IDD can still see their friends and know who is contributing.

If online sessions are available, consider hosting ones that are just for fun. You might have a session where kids tell jokes or talk about their day or show pictures of their pets.
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There are lots of ways to tackle any topic and lots of material is available online, particularly now. Games are a great way to reinforce concepts. Some you can make yourself, like HotDots (email me if you want the instructions) and board games like Monopoly. Learners with IDD can watch other more expert players each time they have a turn. National broadcasters e.g. PBS BBC and Australia’s ABC are providing excellent learning materials, often aligned with national curriculum standards.
Educating Learners with Down Syndrome – some resources

• A research book

• Down Syndrome International Education Guidelines

Some other resources that might be helpful. The DSi Guidelines will be available soon.
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Your questions

Think and share
Thank you to ...

- The Matthew Foundation
- Kids with IDD and their parents and teachers

Contact me...

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