

Bringing Up Children With Down Syndrome

At nine years of age, Mary is a happy, outgoing child who loves school, enjoys swimming and gymnastics - and has a family which is very proud of her.

But in some countries of the world, life for children like Mary is very different. Because they have Down Syndrome, a birth defect which causes intellectual disability, they are often considered impossible to educate and may spend very bleak lives, isolated in institutions away from their families.

But because of a special education program called Early Intervention, children born with Down Syndrome in Australia have the potential to lead full, happy lives. Most of them can go to school and take part in the sort of activities that other children enjoy, such as sport, dancing and drama - and thanks to improving community attitudes, many employers now offer jobs to people with Down Syndrome.

Doctors now recommend that babies born with the disability begin an Early Intervention program as soon as possible. Mary was only three weeks old when, with the help of her parents and a Special Education Teacher, she began the program of physiotherapy and early education which eventually gave her the skills she needed for pre-school and school. She now goes to the same school as her brother, where she has extra help from a specially trained teacher.

"We love both our children very much - we just couldn't

imagine life without either of them," says Mary's mother, adding that attitudes toward children with Down Syndrome are improving all the time. "People are beginning to realise that someone with Down Syndrome is a valued member of society just like anyone else."

Down Syndrome is a problem which occurs in all ethnic groups, and the chances of having a baby with the disability increase as a woman gets older. By the age of 40, for instance, a woman has a one in a hundred chance of having a baby with Down Syndrome. Besides intellectual disability, the condition can also cause a number of health problems including difficulties with sight, speech and hearing.

A parent's reaction to being told that a new baby has Down Syndrome can include shock, grief, pain, anger and disappointment. As one parent puts it, "I kept looking at my baby thinking, 'Why me? Why my baby? I didn't see how I could cope.'"

But most parents do cope, according to the Down Syndrome Association, an organisation offering support and information to parents of children with this disability (interpreters can be arranged, if necessary). It often helps to talk to other parents who have faced the same challenges and problems. If possible, the Association puts parents in touch with other parents of children with Down Syndrome who speak the same language.

But it's not just up to parents to help these children grow into happy, confident adults. It's also up to the rest of us to change old attitudes and remember that children and adults