

**Down Syndrome
Advocates in
*Action***



Understanding and Responding to the “Drop Response” in Children with Down Syndrome

A guidance document for
educators and parents of children
with Down syndrome



dsaane.org
info@dsaane.org



Guidance for Schools and Families: Understanding and Responding to the “Drop Response” in Children with Down Syndrome

Purpose

This guidance is intended to help schools and families better understand the behavior commonly referred to as the “**drop response**”—when a child suddenly drops to the floor, refuses to move, or disengages physically. This behavior is often misinterpreted as defiance or refusal. In reality, for many students with Down syndrome, it is a **form of communication**.

When we shift our mindset from “*refusal*” to “*communication*,” we can respond in ways that are supportive, respectful, and far more effective.

Reframing the Behavior

The drop response is rarely about being oppositional. More often, it is a signal that **something is not right** and the student does not yet have the language, processing time, or emotional regulation skills to express it another way.

This behavior may be communicating:

- “I don’t understand what you want me to do.”
- “I feel overwhelmed or unsafe.”
- “Something feels different than expected.”
- “I need help, but I don’t know how to ask.”
- “I’m sensing frustration, pressure, or negativity around me.”

While attention-seeking can occasionally be a factor, it is **far less common** than unmet needs related to communication, predictability, emotional safety, or sensory regulation.

Common Contributing Factors

Students with Down syndrome may use drop response behavior when:

1. Communication Breakdowns

- They want to say something but do not have the words or signs available.

- Their receptive language does not match the verbal demands being placed on them.
- Too many verbal instructions are given at once.

2. Unclear Expectations

- They do not have a clear picture of what success looks like.
- Instructions change without warning.
- The task feels open-ended or ambiguous.

A frequent default response in these situations is “**no**”, not because the student is refusing, but because they are unsure.

3. Emotional or Environmental Safety

- They do not feel welcome, included, or emotionally safe in the space.
- They are picking up on adult frustration, impatience, or negative energy.
- They sense that they are disappointing someone but don’t know how to fix it.

4. Sensory or Regulation Needs

- The environment is too loud, busy, bright, or unpredictable.
- Transitions are rushed or unsupported.
- The student is already dysregulated and cannot access coping strategies independently.

Guiding Principles for Response

1. Treat the Behavior as Communication

The first question should never be “*How do we stop this?*” but rather:

“What is this student trying to tell us?”

Assume competence and assume a need.

2. Stay Neutral and Regulated

- Keep your voice calm and your body language relaxed.
- Avoid power struggles or ultimatums.
- Remember: the student is already communicating distress.

Adult regulation is often the fastest path to student regulation.

3. Reduce Language, Increase Clarity

- Use short, concrete phrases.
- Pair verbal language with visuals, gestures, or modeling.
- Show what to do instead of repeating what *not* to do.

Example:

- Instead of: “You need to get up and go line up right now.”
- Try: “First stand. Then walk to the blue line.” (with visual support)

4. Validate Before Redirecting

Acknowledging the student’s experience does **not** reinforce the behavior.

Examples:

- “Something doesn’t feel right.”
- “You look unsure.”
- “I can help.”

Validation builds trust and reduces escalation.

Supportive Strategies

Proactive Supports

- Use visual schedules and clear transition warnings.
- Preview expectations before activities begin.
- Build in choice whenever possible.
- Ensure communication supports (AAC, signs, visuals) are consistently available.

In-the-Moment Supports

- Pause and give processing time.
- Offer two clear, supported choices.
- Reduce demands temporarily if the student is overwhelmed.
- Check the environment for sensory overload.

After the Moment

- Reflect on what may have triggered the behavior.
 - Adjust expectations, supports, or pacing.
 - Teach replacement communication skills when the student is calm.
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What Not to Do

- Do not label the behavior as defiance or noncompliance.
- Do not physically force compliance unless there is an immediate safety concern.
- Do not escalate consequences for a behavior rooted in unmet needs.

Punitive responses often increase the frequency and intensity of drop response behaviors.

Alignment with Educational Rights

Under IDEA, students are entitled to **FAPE (Free Appropriate Public Education)**, which includes appropriate behavioral and communication supports. When drop response behaviors are present, teams should consider:

- Whether the IEP adequately addresses communication needs.
- Whether staff are properly trained and supported.
- Whether the environment and expectations are appropriate for the student.

Behavior is data—and that data should inform support, not punishment.

Closing Thought

When a child drops to the floor, they are not giving up—they are reaching out.

If we listen to the message instead of reacting to the behavior, we create environments where students with Down syndrome feel understood, safe, and empowered to communicate in more effective ways over time.