

**Down Syndrome
Advocates in
*Action***



Reframing the Label of “Stubbornness” in Students with Down Syndrome

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



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Down Syndrome Advocates in *Action*



Guidance for Schools and Families: Reframing the Label of “Stubbornness” in Students with Down Syndrome

Purpose

Students with Down syndrome are frequently described as “**stubborn,**” “**rigid,**” or “**unwilling.**” While these labels may feel descriptive on the surface, they are often inaccurate and can obscure the real reasons a student is struggling.

This guidance is intended to help schools and families move away from the concept of *stubbornness* and toward a more accurate, compassionate, and effective understanding of student behavior.

When we replace labels with curiosity, we uncover unmet needs.

Why the Label “Stubborn” Misses the Mark

Stubbornness implies a *choice* to resist.

In reality, many students with Down syndrome are responding to:

- Unclear expectations
- Incomplete or inconsistent supports
- Anxiety around change or uncertainty
- Communication and processing differences
- Neurodivergent traits that may not yet be identified

What appears as refusal is often **self-protection, confusion, or a need for predictability.**

Common Factors Often Mistaken for Stubbornness

1. Preference for the Known

Many individuals with Down syndrome rely heavily on routine and familiarity to feel safe and regulated.

- Changes—even small ones—can feel overwhelming.
- A strong preference for sameness is not defiance; it is a coping strategy.
- Resistance often decreases when changes are previewed and supported.

2. Incomplete or Missing Supports

Students are sometimes expected to perform independently before the necessary supports are fully in place.

Examples include:

- Reduced visual supports
- Limited access to AAC or signing
- Inconsistent adult support
- Expectations that outpace receptive language abilities

When supports disappear, behavior often fills the gap.

3. Lack of Clear Understanding

A student cannot comply with expectations they do not fully understand.

- Multi-step verbal directions may exceed processing capacity.
- Abstract language can be misinterpreted or missed entirely.
- A student may say “no” or disengage simply because the task is unclear.

This is not stubbornness—it is uncertainty.

4. Undiagnosed or Co-Occurring Autism

A significant number of individuals with Down syndrome also meet criteria for Autism Spectrum Disorder, though it may go undiagnosed.

Traits may include:

- Increased rigidity or inflexibility
- Heightened sensory sensitivities
- Difficulty with transitions
- Strong need for predictability

When autism is not considered, behaviors are more likely to be mislabeled as intentional resistance.

5. Emotional Safety and Trust

Students are more likely to engage when they feel:

- Welcomed
- Respected
- Understood

Perceived pressure, frustration, or repeated failure can lead to shutdown or resistance that looks like stubbornness but is actually **avoidance of distress**.

Reframing the Behavior

Instead of asking:

“Why is this student being stubborn?”

Ask:

- “What feels uncertain or unsafe right now?”
- “Are the supports matching the expectation?”
- “Have we clearly shown what success looks like?”
- “Is change happening faster than the student can process?”

Reframing shifts the focus from compliance to support.

Balancing Predictability With Flexibility

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Predictability is a powerful support for students with Down syndrome—but predictability alone is not the goal.

If students are never supported in moving beyond familiar routines, they may become more rigid over time. This can increase anxiety and make future transitions even harder.

The goal is **not to avoid flexibility**, but to **teach it gently, intentionally, and with support**.

Why Flexibility Still Matters

While students with Down syndrome often thrive when they are “in a groove,” long periods without supported change can lead to:

- Increased distress when routines are disrupted unexpectedly
- Stronger resistance to new people, settings, or expectations
- Reduced ability to generalize skills across environments

Flexibility is a skill—and like all skills, it must be **taught**, not demanded.

Teaching Flexibility With Support

Flexibility should be introduced:

- **Gradually** (small changes before big ones)
- **Predictably** (previewing what will change and what will stay the same)
- **With reassurance** (the student is not being abandoned or rushed)

Examples include:

- Changing one small part of a familiar routine while keeping the rest the same
- Practicing short, planned deviations (“Today we’ll do this first, then back to normal”)
- Using visuals or social narratives to explain changes ahead of time

Supported exposure builds tolerance over time.

Adult Role: Guiding, Not Forcing

Adults play a critical role in helping students stretch without breaking trust.

Effective support looks like:

- Staying emotionally regulated
- Offering encouragement and co-regulation
- Acknowledging discomfort while still moving forward
- Avoiding sudden or unsupported changes

Pushing too hard can increase rigidity. Avoiding flexibility altogether can do the same.

Progress happens in the **middle space**—where students feel safe enough to try.

Guiding Principles for Response

1. Assume the Student Is Doing Their Best

Behavior reflects capacity, not character.

Assume the student wants to succeed—and adjust the environment to make success possible.

2. Make Expectations Visible

- Use visual schedules and task breakdowns.
- Model the expected action.
- Reduce verbal load.

Clarity reduces resistance.

3. Support Transitions Proactively

- Provide advance notice of changes.
- Use countdowns or transition cues.
- Allow extra processing time.

Predictability builds cooperation.

4. Evaluate Supports Regularly

When behavior changes, teams should review:

- Communication access
- Sensory needs
- Adult support levels
- Instructional pacing

Increased expectations must be paired with increased support.

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What Not to Do

- Do not label the student as stubborn or unmotivated.
- Do not escalate consequences for behaviors rooted in confusion or anxiety.
- Do not remove supports as a way to “build independence.”

True independence comes from **supported success**, not pressure.

Educational Rights Considerations

Under IDEA, students are entitled to **FAPE**, which includes instruction and supports tailored to their unique needs.

When a student is repeatedly labeled as stubborn, teams should ask:

- Are we meeting the student’s communication needs?
- Have we considered co-occurring disabilities?
- Is the IEP aligned with how the student actually learns and processes information?

Behavior is meaningful data and should guide services—not judgments.

Closing Thought

When we stop calling students stubborn, we start seeing them clearly.

Behind most resistance is a student asking for clarity, consistency, and support.

Listening to that message changes outcomes—for the student and for the team supporting them.