

Middle School Teacher Guide

Grades 6–8 • Ages 11–14



THE BIG IDEA FOR THIS AGE

“Belonging is built by what we say, who we include, and how we treat each other.”

Middle schoolers think hard about fairness, identity, and fitting in. That’s exactly why this age is powerful for inclusion. This guide connects the genetics of Down syndrome to its history and to the everyday social choices students make.

1 Teacher background & key facts

3 Lesson plan (45–50 min)

5 Whole-class activities

7 Family note

2 Words that work

4 More messages to teach

6 Individual & take-home activities

8 Reproducible student page

Before you teach

Five minutes of background so you can teach this with confidence. You don't need to be an expert. Curiosity and kindness go a long way.

KEY FACTS

3.21

World Down Syndrome Day is March 21. The date stands for **three** copies of chromosome **21**.

46 → 47

Most people have 46 chromosomes (23 pairs). People with Down syndrome have 47, with an extra copy of chromosome 21.

#1

Down syndrome is the most common chromosomal condition in the U.S. About 5,700 babies are born with it each year (CDC).

~60

Average life expectancy today, up from 25 in 1983 (NDSS). Better health care and inclusion changed lives.

Not contagious

Down syndrome isn't an illness and can't be caught. It happens naturally, in every race and kind of family.

2012

The first official World Down Syndrome Day. The United Nations declared it a global observance in 2011.

WORDS THAT WORK

SAY	INSTEAD OF
a person with Down syndrome	a-Down's-kid, a-Down syndrome-person
has Down syndrome	suffers from, is afflicted by, is a-victim-of
Down syndrome	Down's-syndrome (U.S.-usage drops the "s")
typically developing / peers	normal-kids, regular-kids
intellectual disability	the r-word, or "slow"
their name!	a-label, or "the student with Down-syndrome"

TALKING ABOUT IT WITH 11- TO 14-YEAR-OLDS

- Connect to their world: lunch tables, group chats, teams, and clubs. That's where belonging happens.
- Address language directly, including the r-word, calmly and without shaming.
- Avoid "helper" framing. Focus on friendship and shared activities, not charity.
- Remind students to ask before posting photos or stories about anyone online.

IF A STUDENT IN YOUR CLASS HAS DOWN SYNDROME

- Talk with the family first. Ask how they'd like WDSD handled and whether their child wants a role.
- Let the student lead, or not. Some love to share, and others would rather just celebrate with everyone.
- Don't make one child the lesson. Keep the focus on the whole class belonging together.
- Keep health and IEP details private. Share only what the family and student have okayed.

Lesson: Beyond the Socks: Genetics, History & Belonging

45-50 MIN

Students learn how trisomy 21 happens, trace how life for people with Down syndrome has changed, examine language, and commit to a belonging action.

STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO...

- Explain trisomy 21 and the three types of Down syndrome.
- Trace how opportunities and life expectancy for people with Down syndrome changed over time.
- Analyze how language and stereotypes affect belonging.
- Commit to one specific inclusion action.

MATERIALS

Slides or board

Timeline event cards (cut from the student page bank)

Timeline of Change student page

Sticky notes

VOCABULARY

Karyotype: a picture of a person's chromosomes arranged in pairs

Nondisjunction: when chromosomes don't separate evenly as cells divide

Trisomy 21: three copies of chromosome 21

Self-advocate: someone who speaks up for their own needs and rights

1

5 min

Do now: left out

Students quick-write: "Describe a time you felt left out. What (or who) changed it?" Invite a few volunteers to share. Don't require it.

SAY

Almost everyone has felt left out at some point. Today we'll talk about how communities can make sure people with Down syndrome, and everyone, feel like they belong.

2

10 min

Genetics mini-lesson

Show a karyotype. Explain that chromosomes come in 23 pairs and that sometimes, as cells divide, chromosome 21 doesn't separate evenly (nondisjunction). Share the three types.

SAY

About 95% of people with Down syndrome have **trisomy 21**, an extra copy in every cell. About 3% have **translocation**, where extra 21 material is attached to another chromosome. About 2% have **mosaicism**, where only some cells have the extra copy (NDSS). No one causes it, and it isn't an illness.

LESSON, CONTINUED
3
12 min
Timeline sort

Groups sort the eight event cards into order, then check against the answer key. Discuss what changed between 1983 and today.

SAY

Life expectancy went from about 25 to about 60. Better medical care, especially heart care, made a big difference. So did families raising children at home and in their communities, and schools and workplaces opening their doors.

4
10 min
Words & stereotypes

Show pairs of phrases (“suffers from” vs. “has”; the r-word vs. “intellectual disability”). Ask: how does each version make someone feel? Discuss stereotypes like “always happy” or “can’t.”

SAY

Words shape how we see people. We’re not trying to be perfect. We’re trying to be respectful and accurate.

5
5–8 min
Commit & exit ticket

Students complete “My belonging commitment.” Post anonymous sticky-note versions on a class “Show Up for 3.21” wall.

SAY

Be specific: where, when, and who. “Be nice” doesn’t count. “Invite ____ to sit with us Tuesday” does.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think life expectancy more than doubled in about 40 years?
2. What’s the difference between being kind to someone and being friends with them?
3. Why can even “positive” stereotypes be harmful?
4. Where in our school is it easiest to be left out? What would change that?
5. How should we think before posting about someone online?

CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

Students explain trisomy 21 in their own words and complete the timeline. **Answer key:** 1866-D · 1959-E · 1968-B · 1975-C · 1983-G · 1990-F · 2011-A · Today-H.

DIFFERENTIATE

- Provide a partially completed timeline and a labeled karyotype for support.
- Allow drawing or voice memos for the quick-write.
- Extension: research how IDEA (1975) and the ADA (1990) changed schools and workplaces.

GO FURTHER


Invite a self-advocate or a family from a local Down syndrome organization to speak or answer student questions. Arrange it early, and let the guest set the topics.

More messages to teach

Short advisory or homeroom conversations. Each one works as a 10-minute discussion.

Friendship, not charity

Including someone isn't a good deed you get credit for. It's just friendship. Real friends share interests, jokes, and time.

Try: Ask: what makes someone a real friend?

Ask before you post

Everyone deserves control over their image and story, whether or not they have a disability.

Try: Create a class "before you post" checklist.

Self-advocacy

Many people with Down syndrome speak up for themselves at school, at work, and in government. Let people speak for themselves.

Try: Ask: why is it important to hear from people directly?

Inclusion in clubs & sports

Unified sports and inclusive clubs bring students with and without disabilities together as teammates.

Try: Audit your school's clubs. Who's missing?

Words used as insults

Using disability words as insults ("that's so r-word") hurts real people, even as a joke.

Try: Brainstorm what to say when you hear it.

Everyone has a story

People with Down syndrome are actors, athletes, artists, employees, and business owners.

Try: Students find one real example and share it.

SAY IT ALL WEEK: POST THESE IN YOUR ROOM

Be specific: where, when, who.

Friendship, not charity.

Ask before you post.

Words shape how we see people.

Show Up for 3.21.

Whole-class activities

Mix these into your 3.21 week, or run them as an advisory series.

Timeline Gallery Walk

25 MIN
POSTER PAPER · MARKERS

Groups each take one timeline event, research it briefly, and make a poster: what happened, why it mattered, and one question. The class does a gallery walk and leaves sticky-note responses.

School Belonging Audit

2 CLASS PERIODS
AUDIT CHECKLIST · CLIPBOARDS

Students look at lunch, clubs, sports, events, and signs: where might someone feel left out? Groups present one realistic proposal to a principal or student council.

3.21 Social Campaign

30 MIN
SCHOOL-APPROVED DEVICES

Students create posts or short videos explaining why we Rock Your Socks, for school-approved channels only, using #Celebrate321. Review for accuracy and respectful language.

Student Announcement Team

PREP 20 MIN
SCRIPT · PA SYSTEM

Students write and deliver a week of 30-second morning facts leading up to 3.21, ending with “Show up for 3.21. Rock your socks on Friday!”

Unified Activity

1 PERIOD
VARIES

Co-plan with your intervention specialist or special education team: a game, art project, or lunch where students with and without disabilities work as equal partners.

Rock Your Socks Day

3.21
FUN SOCKS

Grade-level sock challenge. Take a group feet photo (follow your school’s photo policy) and share it with #Celebrate321.

SAMPLE 3.21 WEEK

Mon

Lesson: Beyond the Socks

Tue

Timeline Gallery Walk

Wed

School Belonging Audit

Thu

3.21 Social Campaign

Fri

Rock Your Socks Day + student announcements

Heads up: March 21, 2027 falls on a **Sunday**, so most schools will celebrate on **Friday, March 19**.

Individual & take-home activities

For quiet work time, early finishers, or sending home so families can celebrate too.

Timeline of Change page

INDIVIDUAL

The reproducible student page (last page) includes the timeline sort, a reflection on what changed, a language rewrite, and a belonging commitment.

Real-life profile

INDIVIDUAL

Students research a person with Down syndrome who is an actor, athlete, artist, entrepreneur, or advocate, and write a one-page profile focused on their accomplishments and in their own words.

Family interview

TAKE-HOME

Students ask a parent or grandparent: “When you were my age, were students with disabilities in your classes? What’s different now?”

Learn One Thing

TAKE-HOME

Students teach the Celebrate 3.21 fact sheet to a younger sibling, cousin, or neighbor. Teaching it is the best way to own it.

✂ CUT & SEND HOME

Dear Families,

This week our class is celebrating **World Down Syndrome Day** (March 21) with Celebrate 3.21. We studied the genetics of Down syndrome (trisomy 21), how opportunities have changed over time, and how our words and actions help everyone belong. Each student made a specific belonging commitment.

Ask your child: “What was your belonging commitment, and how did it go?” On our **Rock Your Socks day** (_____), send your child in fun, mismatched socks! Share a family sock photo with [#Celebrate321](#). Free family activities are at [Celebrate321.org](#).

— _____

✂ OPTIONAL RETURN SLIP

Our family celebrated 3.21 by...

Student: _____ Grown-up: _____

A Timeline of Change

Write the letter of each event in the box under its year.

Name: _____

1866	1959	1968	1975	1983	1990	2011	Today
							

EVENT BANK

- | | |
|---|--|
| A The United Nations declares World Down Syndrome Day | B Special Olympics is founded |
| C A federal law guarantees public education for students with disabilities | D Dr. John Langdon Down publishes a description of the condition |
| E Scientists discover the extra copy of chromosome 21 | F The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) becomes law |
| G Average life expectancy for people with Down syndrome: about 25 | H Average life expectancy for people with Down syndrome: about 60 |

Think about it

Life expectancy more than doubled in about 40 years. What do you think changed?

Words matter

Rewrite using person-first, respectful language: "The Down's kid suffers from a disease."

My belonging commitment

One specific thing I will do this week to help someone feel like they belong (where, when, and who):
