

Understanding and nurturing children with Down syndrome

The Sun (Malaysia) · 10 Feb 2026 · 11 · By Dr Siti Farhana Md Pauzi Dr Siti Farhana Md Pauzi is an obstetrician and gynaecologist at Ampang Puteri Specialist Hospital. Comments: letters@thesundaily.com

DOWN syndrome is one of the most common genetic conditions worldwide, including in Malaysia.



As an obstetrician and gynaecologist, my role is not only to care for women during pregnancy but also to guide families with accurate information, realistic expectations and compassionate support when facing a prenatal diagnosis.

Down syndrome occurs when a baby is born with an extra copy of chromosome 21, resulting in 47 chromosomes instead of the usual 46. This additional genetic material affects physical development, learning ability and overall health.

There are three recognised types: Trisomy 21 (about 95% of cases) Translocation Down syndrome Mosaic Down syndrome

Each child with Down syndrome is unique, with varying abilities and health needs.

Local scenario

In Malaysia, Down syndrome remains one of the most frequently identified chromosomal conditions. According to local advocacy groups and paediatric services, early diagnosis, timely intervention and family support can significantly improve outcomes for children with Down syndrome.

Malaysia has seen encouraging progress in: prenatal screening availability, including NIPT in public and private sectors; paediatric cardiology services, essential as some babies are born with congenital heart conditions; and early intervention programmes offered through hospitals, NGOs and community centres.

However, awareness gaps and social stigma still exist, making education and open discussion critically important.

Why does it occur?

Down syndrome occurs randomly during cell division. It is not caused by lifestyle, diet, stress or actions during pregnancy.

Advanced maternal age is a recognised risk factor but it is important to note that most babies with Down syndrome in Malaysia are born to younger mothers, simply because they represent the majority of pregnancies.

Screening tests estimate risk while diagnostic tests provide confirmation. These options should always be discussed with a qualified healthcare provider to ensure informed decision-making.

Advice for parents: Give yourself time

A diagnosis – prenatal or postnatal – can be emotionally challenging. Take time to process the information and seek clarification from your doctor. Emotional reactions are normal and valid.

Get early intervention services

In Malaysia, early intervention services may include:

- hospital-based therapy programmes
- community rehabilitation centres
- NGO-supported developmental services
- early therapy improves motor skills, communication and confidence.

Monitor health regularly

Children with Down syndrome may have associated conditions such as:

- congenital heart disease
 - thyroid disorders
 - hearing or vision problems
- Regular follow-ups will allow early detection and timely treatment

Inclusive education

Many children with Down syndrome in Malaysia attend mainstream or special education programmes. With appropriate support, they can learn effectively and build social skills.

Seek community and family support

Connecting with other parents and support organisations can be empowering. Shared experiences can often reduce anxiety and help families feel less alone.

Myths vs facts

Myth 1: Down syndrome is very rare in Malaysia

Fact: Down syndrome is one of the most common chromosomal conditions seen in Malaysian maternity and paediatric services. Myth 2: Parents caused the condition Fact: Down syndrome is a genetic condition that occurs randomly. Nothing done during pregnancy causes it.

Myth 3: All individuals with Down syndrome have severe intellectual disability

Fact: Intellectual ability varies. Many individuals have mild to moderate learning challenges and can attend school, work and live fulfilling lives.

Myth 4: People with Down syndrome cannot contribute to society

Fact: With support and inclusion, individuals with Down syndrome can work, form relationships and actively participate in their communities

Myth 5: A diagnosis means a poor quality of life

Fact: Quality of life is influenced by healthcare access, education, family support and social acceptance; not the diagnosis itself.

With improved healthcare services, stronger advocacy and growing awareness in Malaysia, outcomes for individuals with Down syndrome continue to improve. Inclusion, early support and understanding are key to helping them reach their full potential.

A Down syndrome diagnosis does not define your child's future. Your child is first and foremost a child – with personality, emotions and potential. With love, medical care and community support, children with Down syndrome can lead meaningful and joyful lives.

As healthcare professionals, we are here to support families every step of the way.