

# More Alike Than Different

*March 21 is World Down Syndrome Day, and the mother of a child with Down syndrome hopes society gains a greater respect for people with the genetic disorder.*



Cooper Wagoner is a 4-year-old with Down syndrome who loves swimming, trains, books and music. Photo courtesy of Bill Yost of Yost Photography

by Jill Wagoner  
Community contributor

We will observe World Down Syndrome Day on March 21. This date is symbolic of the triplication (trisomy) of the 21st chromosome that causes Down syndrome. The aim of World Down Syndrome Day is to promote understanding, seek support and achieve dignity and equal rights for people with Down syndrome.

This year marks the ninth anniversary of World Down Syndrome Day, and each year the number of people who celebrate worldwide increases, observing the event in different ways. Our family has traditionally participated in a Genes Day campaign, in which we wear jeans to show recognition of and respect for those who have this genetic disorder.

This day celebrates people with Down syndrome as unique individuals and creates awareness about the condition. As the mother of a 4-year-old boy with Down syndrome, I want people to understand several things:

- People with Down syndrome are not happy all the time. The notion that they are is not only false, but worse, it strips them of their individuality. People with Down syndrome are individuals with thoughts and feelings, issues and concerns. Though I have a generally pleasant child, that part of his personality owes much more to him being like his father, Price, than the diagnosis. And I'm here to tell you he can be as stubborn and cranky as the next kid. Our days are sometime filled with giggles and grins, and other days filled with a tossed fork, tantrum and tears. After all,

he's just a boy like any other.

- Down syndrome is a spectrum. You often hear autism described as a spectrum disorder. This is also true of Down syndrome. The span of abilities and delays for people with Down syndrome is vast. Though some delays, characteristic and health issues are common, challenges and abilities vary so very much.

- Individuals with Down syndrome learn and achieve in academic environments. According to the National Down Syndrome Society, most people with Down syndrome have mild to moderate cognitive delays. Children with Down syndrome are included in regular classrooms in schools across the U.S. Increasingly, individuals with Down syndrome graduate from high school with regular diplomas, participate in postsecondary academic experiences and, in some cases, receive college degrees. My husband and I have watched, first hand, the benefits of our son attending inclusive child-care/preschool program at Partners

In Learning since he was 8 weeks old.

- Children with Down syndrome strengthen the classroom environment. I attended a dinner party where a parent discussed how students of different abilities slow down her children whom she considered exceptional. This type of thinking is unfortunate. Experience with inclusion has taught us that the practice helps children with disabilities forge social networks, adopt peer models and increase achievement. However, the practice also benefits the entire class by increasing acceptance for all people, allowing for opportunities to help and teach and fostering an environment of compassion and respect for all students.

- Fewer words do not mean less understanding. Many children with Down syndrome understand much more than they can articulate. Just give someone with a speech delay more time to respond to your question.

- Words do mean something. It is not politically correct to expect people-first language. Instead of a Down syndrome child, you should say a child with Down syndrome. It is a condition or syndrome, not a disease. As the parent of a child with Down syndrome, I ask you to use the terms "intellectual disability" or "cognitive disability." Never use the word "retarded" in any context.

At the end of the day, my child is just a boy, who likes trains, music, swimming and playing with his iPad, and we are two parents with the same hopes and dreams as the next set. We hope for a happy life and future for our child and a accepting world is a part of that.

For more information, contact the Down Syndrome Association of Greater Charlotte, [dsa-gc.org](http://dsa-gc.org).



Jill and Price Wagoner live in Salisbury with their son, Cooper, who has Down syndrome. Cooper, 4, attends preschool at Partners In Learning. For Charlotte-area resources, contact Down Syndrome Association of Greater Charlotte, [dsa-gc.org](http://dsa-gc.org). Photo courtesy of Bill Yost of Yost Photography

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This number and the date March 21 are symbolic of triplication (trisomy) of the 21st chromosome that causes Down syndrome.

Jill Wagoner is the mother of a child with Down syndrome. She serves as an advocate, writer, speaker, fund raiser and grant writer for organizations that support children with special needs. A former journalist and current marketer and public relations specialist, Jill lives in Salisbury with her husband, Price, and son, Cooper. Follow their journey at Jill's online blog at [coopieinc.blogspot.com](http://coopieinc.blogspot.com). More information: [dsa-gc.org](http://dsa-gc.org) and [worlddownsyndromeday.org/](http://worlddownsyndromeday.org/).

## SUCCEEDING IN CLASSROOMS

Children with Down syndrome also excel in areas before their peers who are developing typically. Research by Down Syndrome Education International shows children with Down syndrome, from infancy, demonstrate better social understanding and social behavior than other children. Sue Buckley, Gillian Bird and Ben Sacks write that this trait helps them succeed in community activities and regular classrooms. My child speaks less than any child in his pre-school class, but I guarantee he has the interpersonal skills and smile to manipulate adults better than any child in that class. Details: [worlddownsyndromeday.org](http://worlddownsyndromeday.org).—Jill Wagoner

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Scott and Lee Ingold (left) and Jill and Cooper and Jill Wagoner ran the final leg of the 321 Dash for Down Syndrome in Charlotte in 2013. Photo Down Syndrome Association