

Sharing the dream

An Auckland mother watches her 4-year-old grow up and prepare for life — with a special vision. **Martha McKenzie-Minifie reports**

Paris Parker's crooked pigtails bob in the air as she pops her 4-year-old hands on the table and determinedly turns over a card. The paper's flipside reveals the letter "r" so, after casting a quick, reassuring glance at mum, Paris says the letter out loud and makes the signal for "r" in sign language. She goes through the rest of the alphabet, then on to numbers in an exercise which clearly captures the imagination of the Auckland toddler who has Down syndrome. The congenital disorder, which slows mental and physical development, is the most common chromosomal disability, present in about one in 1000 live births. Paris' mum, Mel Watson, is determined to equip her youngest daughter with the best skills she can to lead a complete and fulfilling life. She believes early intervention is key, and started Paris in fortnightly specialist education sessions with tutor Sarah Goodall more than three years ago. Sarah is thought to be the only person in Auckland teaching the Johansson programme, specially designed for children with Down syndrome, and has a waiting list until next year.

She works with more than 30 families, many helped financially by the Auckland Down Syndrome Education Trust which Mel chairs. Sarah's work with Paris focuses on developing her communication and language skills. "Children with Down syndrome often understand a lot more than they can tell you." As Paris prepares to start at Renner's Victoria Ave School next year, she does her exercises five times a week, either with Mel or her dad Tony Parker. "Paris, even though she can't speak that well, knows more cognitively than our other daughter did at the same age. That's only come from persistence," says Mel, also mum to 7-year-old Claudia. Mel dreams of the time when headstrong Paris will be ready to get

a job and live independently. She says Paris will have all the usual stresses associated with growing up — plus a whole lot more. "Of course I know the future's going to be bright," says Mel. "She will have a happy life. She will have hurdles too — school will be a big hurdle." Mel says other children at Parnell Kindergarten are very accepting but she expects times will get tougher, particularly when Paris reaches her teenage years. "People tend to put the disability before the human. They see the Down syndrome before they see the person," says Mel. "I was probably guilty of that myself before I had Paris." The last four years have been a huge learning curve for the mother-of-two, who had no idea Paris had Down syndrome until she was born on Mel's 35th birthday. "That's when the bottom falls out of your stomach," says Mel. "It's hard — no one gives you a book on how to cope."

But, she says, Paris is a wonderful person. "When you have children, you realise what love is all about."

Mel enjoys her work with the trust, which grew four times in size following a story in *The Aucklander* last year.

Its objective is to help fund specialist educational programmes, vital in improving learning and enabling Down syndrome children to integrate fully into the community.

Members are preparing for the trust's second annual charity cocktail evening and auction, *Share The Dream*, for which Paris will wear a stunning, new green dress in



Mel Watson helps her daughter Paris Parker, 4, learn to write



Dad Tony Parker, Paris and mum Mel Watson

the same shade as her mother's. ■ **Share The Dream** cocktail evening and auction, MCed by John Hawkesby, Novotel Greenlane, October 28. Details www.sharethedream.co.nz



Hannah Blow and her 4-year-old daughter Laura

Laura and her buddies

Karen Kotze

Hannah Blow watches her four children as they play. At first glance, this is no different to any other family — except that Hannah's third child, Laura, has Down syndrome.

"Anyone with children knows that each of them is different to the others and has different needs," Hannah says.

"Laura may have this syndrome, but she's still her own person, with a very definite character of her own, so it follows that just like any other child she has her own things to teach us."

Older brother Samuel and sister Emily grin and call Laura a "pain when she wants to be".

Clearly Laura is adored, but no special fuss is made of her.

"We never had any tests done, so Laura being diagnosed with Down syndrome was a surprise to us. It did take some adjusting to the idea," Hannah says, "but we had the support of family and friends and other parents in the same situation."

She's going to public kindergarten and the aim is for her to attend a mainstream school. "Latest research from the UK now confirms what we've always felt, and that is that they are like any other child," says Hannah.

■ **Awareness of Down syndrome** is promoted by the Auckland Down Syndrome Association's first Buddy Walk on Sunday, October 9, Tahaki Reserve, Mt Eden. Registration 11am for the fun walk, followed by a carnival. Ph 292 7223.

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