



Meet Maya

This Wisconsin girl loves life and doesn't let her disability get in her way.

I bet you and I have a lot in common. I like reading and having friends and playing the violin. I really-really love trying new foods and going on vacation. I might want to be a pop star, or a librarian, or a teacher when I grow up. My favorite color is hot pink. And I have a little sister who I get along with—most of the time.

Here's one other thing to know about me

that's not as important as the other things: I was born with Down syndrome.

What that means for me is that in some ways I'm a little different. My face has some qualities that are similar to other people who have Down syndrome. I needed some extra help learning how to do things when I was younger. And sometimes I have to deal with people not treating me fairly because I have a disability. But mostly, my life is pretty typical.

Photos: Travis Mancj, Jeff Rockwell

What is Down syndrome?

Down syndrome is a condition that causes people to grow and change differently than others. People who have it are born with it. They might crawl, talk, or walk later than other children. They might not grow as much and also can have heart problems or trouble learning. Scientists aren't sure why it happens, so there is no way right now to prevent it.

How does Down syndrome happen? It comes down to **chromosomes**. (Say it:

KRO-mo-sohms.) They are structures in our cells that are made up of genes, which contain all the instructions for how we develop—from our height to our eye color. Cells typically have 23 pairs of chromosomes, or 46 in all.

A person born with Down syndrome has an extra chromosome, or 47 total. Those extra instructions are what cause people to develop differently.

School has almost always been fun for me. My grades have been good. I liked my elementary school and was really excited to start middle school this fall. (I turned 12 over the summer!) Having responsibility makes me happy, and you get a lot more of it in middle school.

I just don't let my disability get in my way.

I was nervous to meet all my new teachers, but making friends has never been a problem for me. I like to talk to people, and I try to learn everyone's names so that I can greet them by their names when I say hi—I just think that's nicer.

Most of the kids in school have been nice back to me. My friends and I have friendship troubles sometimes, but we figure it out. There's one thing that really bothers me. Because I have a disability, sometimes other kids talk to me as if I were younger than they

are. They'll nag me as if they were my babysitter or my teacher. They'll say, "No, Maya, no! You're not supposed to do that!" Or "Maya, stop that!" OK, I don't always think before I do things. But that happens with a lot of kids. When people talk to me that way, it really bums me out. I want what everyone wants—to fit in and for people to treat me as they would treat anyone else.

But I've got some good friends. If someone is teasing me or bothering me, a friend will say, "Don't be mean to her—she's my friend." Or "I'm not going to hang out with you if you keep being mean to my friend Maya." That makes me feel great. And most people don't have a problem with my disability. To them, I'm just Maya.

I feel that way about myself. I'm just me. So I have a disability—I just don't let it get in my way. I take dance classes—ballet and hip-hop, but jazz is my favorite—and I liked violin so much that I'm learning to play the piano, too. I've been in the same Girl Scout troop since I was little, and in the summer you'll find me performing onstage in musicals. Soccer seems really fun, and I'd love to join a team, but my mom says I'm already too busy.

You know, just like any other girl.

My little sister and I have fun together.



Be a Friend

It can be confusing or startling to meet someone who seems really different from you. But the truth is, if you ignore the way someone **seems** different—whether she uses a wheelchair, has trouble hearing, or has Down syndrome—you'll probably find that she's actually a lot like you.

Maya says that's the thing she wishes everyone understood. "I'm different. It's OK to be different," Maya says. "There's nothing I can do about it—it's just me. I want people to know me."

If you meet a person who has a disability, you can try a few things:

Try being kind.

Instead of assuming someone needs help or to be told what to do,

Try asking if someone needs your help.

Try being accepting.

Instead of assuming things about a person because she has a disability,

Try finding out how life works for her.

Try being a friend.

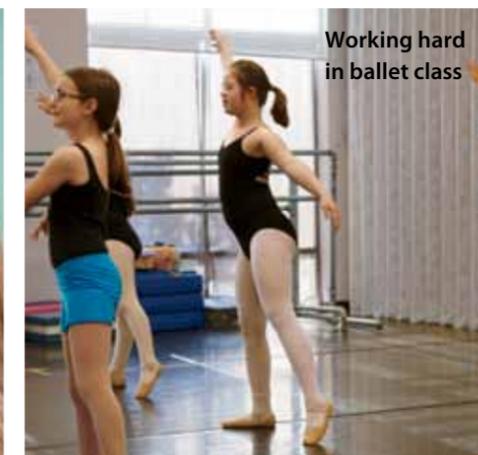
Instead of assuming that a person with a disability couldn't be your friend,

Try smiling and saying hi. ★

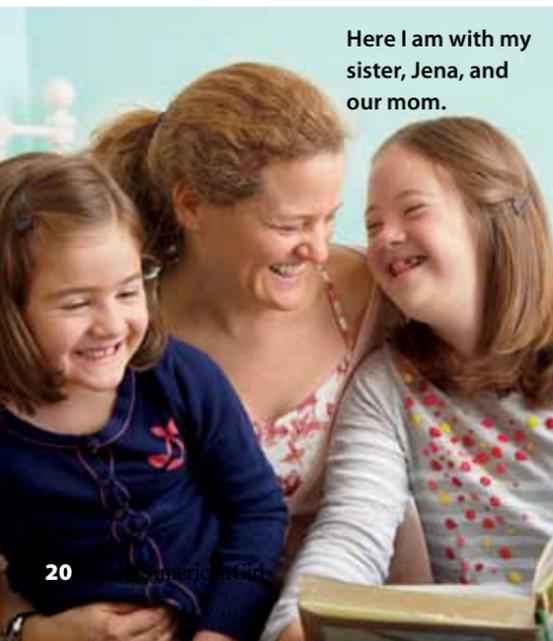
Practice, practice



Working hard in ballet class



Here I am with my sister, Jena, and our mom.



Focusing at the barre



Doing crafts with my Girl Scout troop

