



# health

By Sarah Stacey

## 'I WANT TO GET EVERYONE DANCING'

Like lots of little girls, Jen Blackwell adored dancing. Her mother Sue remembers her 'dancing while she put the shopping away, cooking or cleaning; she even danced to the bathroom in the morning'. Unlike most dance-crazy children, however, Jen, now 35, was born with Down's syndrome (DS).

Sue and Jen's father Malcolm were determined that she should live a mainstream life. They contacted the Down's Syndrome Association ([downs-syndrome.org.uk](http://downs-syndrome.org.uk)) when Jen was born to find out more about the condition. A turning point came when they were put in touch with a family who had a toddler with DS. 'They helped us face the future in a positive frame of mind,' says Sue.

Jen went to dance classes from the time she could toddle. As well as providing joy and socialisation, dance can improve circulation, pulse rate, fitness and muscle tone, which is important for people with DS, who are prone to weak muscles. 'Jen went to swimming, gymnastics and ballet classes with everyone else,' remembers Sue. 'She sometimes struggled to keep up, but still loved it.'

Throughout her teenage years, Jen kept dancing. 'I can't help dancing when the music comes on - I feel like I am flying,' she says. Jen's family looked for opportunities for her to train and work in dance, but in vain. 'We spent ten years knocking on doors and being rejected,' says



Jen, above, aged seven, and, below, performing at an event in February



### DS: THE FACTS

- Around 775 babies are born with DS each year in England and Wales.
- It is caused by an extra copy of chromosome 21 in a baby's cells, usually the result of a one-off genetic change in the sperm or egg, ie, not inherited.
- DS typically causes some level of learning disability, characteristic physical features and a greater risk of serious health conditions including respiratory and lung problems, obesity, diabetes and heart disease. [nhs.uk](http://nhs.uk)

Sue. Eventually, Jen, with friend and advocate Sarah Kennedy, resolved to launch a community dance project in 2009, supported by her parents and initial funding from UnLtd, the foundation for social entrepreneurs. Now an award-winning charity, DanceSyndrome ([dancesyndrome.co.uk](http://dancesyndrome.co.uk)) currently offers six weekly workshops in Lancashire and Greater Manchester, led by a dance leader with learning disabilities and supported by a professionally trained dancer.

In a survey of 500 DanceSyndrome participants, all identified low confidence and limited life skills as key barriers to living as they would choose. Equally, all found the workshops made them feel happy and healthier in mind and

body, with improved confidence and communication skills.

Jen, who won Inspirational Woman of the Year at the 2015 Enterprise Vision Awards, is thinking big for the future: 'I want to get everyone everywhere dancing so they can share the passion, fun and friendship that is DanceSyndrome.'

Chocolate-loving vegans, rejoice! For Easter this year, Hotel Chocolat is offering three vegan eggs in its Hard-Boiled Egg collection. Cocoa purists will revel in the 100 per cent dark chocolate egg with raisins, almonds and hazelnuts - an acquired taste that has become a bestseller. The less hard-boiled could opt for the 70 per cent dark chocolate egg with a pinch of sea salt, hazelnut praline and puffed quinoa for a hint of health, or - our favourite - the ginger egg, which is 70 per cent dark chocolate with ginger oil and hazelnut and ginger crunches. Remember, though, that the other 30 per cent is sugar, so regard these as a treat. £15 each, [hotelchocolat.com](http://hotelchocolat.com).



## TWO OF THE BEST BABY-LED WEANING HELPERS

**NIBBLING SILICONE PLACEMAT** Nibbling's dishwasher-friendly, food-grade Silicone Placemat (from £24, available in pink, blue, lime green or orange, [nibbling.co.uk](http://nibbling.co.uk)) impressed our reviewer: 'It saved my table and wooden floor, which previously "ate" most of my daughter's food. The mat sticks to the table, so any mess stays on the clever food tray - and she's stopped throwing it round when she has eaten enough. I really recommend it.'

### TUM TUM BABY WEANING RANGE

One-year-old Theo enjoys exploring food and his mother reports that 'he tries feeding himself with the Tum Tum Swapsie Spoons [£4.50] - and the Non Slip Peepo Bowls [£7], with secure lids, are great on the move. He also likes to pick and choose food from different sections of the Stay Put Dippy Face Plate [£9], although the suction pad was not secure enough to stop him lifting it. He loves drinking through a straw [£2.50 for a set of two, with a cleaning brush] from the two-handed Tippy Up Cup [£7, all [tumtumtots.com](http://tumtumtots.com)].'



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