

Self-Determination and the Education of Students with Disabilities

Promoting self-determination has been recognized as best practice in the education of adolescents with disabilities since the early 1990s, when the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandated increased student involvement in transition planning. Promoting self-determination involves addressing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes students will need to take more control over and responsibility for their lives.

Students with disabilities who are self-determined are more likely to succeed as adults, and efforts to build self-determination skills are integrated into the practices of schools that provide high-quality transition programs. However, promoting self-determination should not begin in high school. Students in elementary and middle school need to receive such instruction as well.

What is Self-Determination?

Although the self-determination construct has been used in various disciplines for centuries, its application in special education has been relatively recent. Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, and Wehmeyer (1998) defined self-determination as

a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one's strengths and limitations, together with a belief of oneself as capable and effective are essential to self-determination. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals have greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults in our society.

Instruction promoting components of self-determination should be infused throughout the curriculum. Doll, Sands, Wehmeyer, and Palmer (1996) identified age-appropriate activities addressing many of these components:

Early Elementary

- Provide opportunities for students to make choices, teaching them that they can exert control and that most choices have limited options from which to select.
- Promote early problem-solving skills by encouraging students to think aloud as they address simple problems. Teachers should model their own problem-solving processes.
- Provide feedback regarding the outcomes of their choices to begin to teach students to link choices and consequences.
- Teach students to evaluate their work in comparison to a standard ("Does your paper look like this?") to lay the foundation for later self-management skills.

Late Elementary and Middle School

- Teach students to systematically analyze potential options with related benefits and disadvantages in order to participate in simple decisions, and to examine past decisions to determine if the consequences were anticipated or desired.
- Coach them in setting and committing to personal and academic goals, including identifying steps to achieve goals and obtaining support to monitor progress.
- Encourage them to evaluate task performance and reflect on ways to improve and enhance performance.

Junior High and High School

- Encourage students to make decisions that affect their day-to-day activities, including academic goals, post-school outcomes, schedules, and others.
- Emphasize the link between goals that students set and the daily decisions and choices they make, and teach them to break long-term goals into short-term objectives.

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