

Growing Up Happy & Independent

Every parent and caregiver wants their children to lead a happy life. When we dream about the future, parents have hopes that their children will be part of a community, have friends, live independently, and enjoy health and well-being. We already know that the skills and behaviors children develop early in life lay a strong foundation for their adolescence and adulthood. For this reason, we need to think about how we can begin early to promote lifelong independence for our children.

How Parents Can Promote Self-Determination in the Home and Community

It is important to remember that some families may feel more comfortable than others when it comes to independence and their young child. Each family has unique views about independence that are shaped by their own cultural beliefs and personal values. For some families, the value of interdependence may be more important than independence, especially in young children. Therefore, families might find it helpful to explore some of their values and beliefs to get a clearer understanding of how important self-determination may be in their lives. Here are some questions to get you started:

- What are our family's ideas about becoming a successful adult?
- How does our family make decisions? Do children have a say?
- How might my child participate in decision making? In what ways does our family support choice making for young children?

Additional questions may help parents to see what opportunities are needed during daily routines and activities to promote self-determination.

- What is a typical day like for my child?
- What would an ideal day be for my child?
- How does my child play with toys and how does he/she get those toys?
- How does my child move about in our home?
- Where does my child like to play?
- Does my child have any favorite places to be alone?

Creative Strategies for Fostering Opportunities for Self-Determination

The following strategies are designed to offer suggestions for promoting early self-determination at home as well as in the community. You can choose the ones that work for you or adapt some of the suggestions so they match the preferences of your child and the rest of the family.

- Make play spaces available for your child in common living areas. For example, fill a kitchen cupboard with art supplies or place a basket of your child's favorite books in the living room.
- Provide accessible play spaces with access to toys. For example, place toys on a low shelf or in a drawer that your child can get to on his own.
- Provide your child ways to be independent or interdependent in dressing and personal care. For example, make some closets or drawers accessible to your child or make her toothbrush or hair brush easy to reach.
- Offer choices and solicit your child's preferences for objects and activities. For example, ask your child which book of two books she wants or ask if he wants to sit up or lie down to hear the story.

- Encourage your child's movement and expression at home. For example, encourage him to express anger, protest in a positive way, or to move around and explore stimulating sights and sounds freely.
- Make a personal space for your child's privacy and comfort. For example, create spaces at home where she can go safely to be alone or encourage her to adjust lighting or to turn on the television by herself.
- Provide spaces where your child can see himself. For example, place a full length mirror in his room or use the mirror when washing hands or dressing.
- Create opportunities for your child to see her work or art displayed. For example, proudly show "found treasures", artwork or other creations at her eye level.

These are just some suggestions to help you start thinking about ways to promote self-determination at home. The key is to create opportunities where your child can feel happy, safe, and free within the world around him.

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***Special Note: This article is based on the following original research and publications:**

Brotherson, M. J. & Cook, C. (2006). How children with disabilities develop self-determination in the home: A grounded theory. Paper presented at the Second International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, Urbana-Champaign, IL.

Brotherson, M. J., Cook, C., Erwin, E., & Weigel, C. (2008). Understanding self-determination and families of young children with disabilities in home environments. Journal of Early Intervention, 31, 22-43.

Cook, C. Brotherson, M.J. & Weigel, C. (2004). Home as the primary place: Self-determination for young children with disabilities – A family checklist. (Available from Iowa State University, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, 2313 Palmer, Ames, IA, 50010).

Cook, C. C., Brotherson, M. J., Weigel, C. & Erwin, E. (2007). Children with disabilities: Opportunities in the home environment. Implications, 5(12), 1-6.

Erwin, E. J. Brotherson, M. J., Palmer, S., Cook, C. C., Weigel, C. & Summers, J. A. (2009). Promoting self-determination for young children with disabilities: Evidence-based strategies for practitioners and families. Young Exceptional Children, 12(2), 27-37.