

NCSET: Creating opportunities for youth with Disabilities to Achieve Successful Futures

Self-Determination for Middle and High School Students

Frequently Asked Questions

Why is self-determination important?

Life has more meaning for all of us if we can have control over our daily activities, be respected for our choices about how we think and feel, and be considered a contributing and valuable member of our community. What may initially be perceived as a negative behavior related to disability, can many times be the result of the frustration and anger of students with disabilities who feel they are not being heard. Without self-determination as a primary goal and focus of the transition planning process, youth with disabilities have a higher risk of falling victim to abuse, neglect, and discrimination.

IDEA acknowledges the importance of self-determination through the 2004 amendment that requires students to be invited to their IEP meetings. When youth with disabilities exercise personal control over their lives, they learn to take responsibility for their actions and experience the outcomes of their choices.

How early can teachers, parents, and other adults involved in the lives of children and youth with disabilities start teaching self-determination?

Self-Determination begins at birth. All children need to learn about who they are and how they can act or react to life events in order to become self-determined. Children who are given choices about simple decisions in their lives such as what food to eat, what clothes to wear, and what to do for fun, will also experience consequences for their choices. They learn at a very early age that they do have control and responsibility for their lives.

Parents can begin at home by listening and providing feedback to their children so that they understand their options and can use problem-solving skills to resolve issues. This not only builds self-esteem and self-advocacy skills, but also helps to develop the analytical skills and self-awareness needed for independence and interdependence.

Teachers can start very early in the school setting by helping each student understand how they learn and what the options are for expressing what they learn. Youth need teaching and learning methods, as well as experiential and hands-on opportunities to understand their disability and how it affects everything from work to relationship building. They need to understand their learning styles, strengths, and interests. They also need to have a chance to develop their own values.

Parents, teachers, community members, peers, and others need education and support to learn how to balance supporting youth with disabilities to achieve success. Youth also need to be given opportunities to take risks and to learn from natural consequences.

Does a person need certain abilities to become self-

determined? What are some ways that teachers and parents can provide opportunities for youth with significant disabilities to develop self-determination skills?

It is important to understand that self-determination is not just a verbal response to choice. Self-Determination is also an intrinsic need of human beings, an “innate natural propensity to engage in one’s interests and exercise one’s capacities and in so doing, to seek and conquer optimal challenges” (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 11). Never assume that the disability is too severe for communication to take place. Often it is lack of access to opportunities, not the disability, which prevents a person from being self-determined.

If an individual can benefit from an assistive technology communication device, request an assessment and use the recommended technology for communication. However, even if an individual is not using a communication tool, his or her body language, facial expressions, and behaviors will provide messages of choice, satisfaction, and future needs.

At home and in school, part of the parents’ and teachers’ role can be to listen and observe the reactions and actions of persons with severe disabilities and begin compiling a history of expressed choices, wants, and needs. These can be incorporated into self-determination goals on the IEP with specific steps to achieve those goals.

How does culture influence perspectives on self-determination?

A common goal of most cultures is that our children and youth grow to be responsible and caring adults within their community, clan, extended family, or other configuration of culture. Many Native American or clan cultures have rights of passage ceremonies or events that promote a sense of independence, autonomy, and mastery. The key difference within a clan culture is that an individual’s sense of self is connected to the entire community and that choices and goals are built around the needs of the entire community.

The terms “self-determination” and “independence” may not be used within a clan culture. Elders and other family members may in fact be the ones who make decisions and guide the younger members of that culture toward the future. For teachers and other adults who work with youth with disabilities, this may mean that the family, especially the elders, are included in discussions about self-determination and self-advocacy and that culturally specific rights of passage or rituals become part of the transition and IEP planning process. It may mean that the transition team begins the discussion by asking the elders what the ultimate goal is for all youth within their culture, and what they do to build a sense of self and community in their culture’s youth.

How can teachers and adult service providers continue to promote self-determination and work with families when there is disagreement over services and supports?

Start with the family’s understanding of self-determination. Each family, regardless of culture or educational level, will have their own values, priorities, and dreams for the future of their child. Educate parents and family members, along with their child, about the value of self-determination as it relates to normal child and adolescent development. Draw them into this through their own life experience.

Build safety nets for parents. Some resistance may come from fear of failure, fear of abuse, the vulnerability of their child, and fear of losing their role as advocate for their child’s rights. Some parents may feel it is their responsibility to defend and protect their child, and many have had to

work very hard to learn multiple systems and to fight for services and supports for their child. Changing roles and shifting that responsibility to their child does not happen quickly. If parents learn the value and long-term outcomes of self-determination (no matter how severe the disability of their child), they will be more likely to work with professionals to promote these skills and opportunities. Helping children and youth with disabilities to communicate with their parents can also help parents listen to their own child's needs.

Does self-determination mean that a child or youth no longer relies on or receives support from parents, other caring adults, or friends who are involved in their lives?

No, self-determination requires ongoing support for all of us. Adults with or without a disability may continue to seek assistance and support from others, personally and professionally. Self-Determination is not meant to be isolating. None of us are completely independent and it is healthy to seek advice and information from others in order to make informed decisions and ensure that success can be achieved.

Youth will need mentors and caring adults in their lives who provide ongoing support for them to take risks, build resilience amidst failure, speak assertively, and to develop the internal self-determination characteristics and the external self-advocacy communication skills needed for success.

What are ways that schools and communities can create learning opportunities for self-determination?

All children and youth will benefit from efforts to increase self-determination. Schools and communities can develop policies and practices for all youth that create a climate of youth leadership versus youth compliance. It is imperative that youth have opportunities for involvement in interactive leadership groups, both those that are primarily for youth and with youth, as well as those that include adults in the community.

One of the ways that all youth learn self-determination is through peer interaction. One method of encouraging this is to develop peer social groups that have a purpose or goal that is not disability-focused. This could include community service projects, career development exploration, study circles to discuss and share current thoughts regarding events in school, or involvement in school and community advisory groups. Providing ongoing opportunities for youth with disabilities to interact and gain a sense of purpose and value will increase self-determination skills and competencies.

In addition, all states must have state and local district Special Education Advisory Councils. Some have additional committees focused on transition. Including youth with disabilities on these committees and councils can increase their understanding of policy and how they can use their own experiences to influence program improvements and self-determination. Many schools have developed site-based management teams or councils as well. Again, including youth with disabilities on these will not only provide the youth with leadership opportunities, but will assist the school in understanding disability issues. Be sure to assign mentors to youth to help them learn how to participate and be effective.

Finally, use the IEP as a tool to set long-range goals with steps to achieve those goals and to build programs and services around an individual's choices. Functional skills are greatly enhanced when a young adult's level of satisfaction and sense of personal control are high.

What are the effective system change strategies developed by states that can be used to increase youth involvement and self-determination?

The Robert Wood Johnson foundation funded 19 state self-determination projects in 1996. Strategies gleaned from these projects include:

- **Flexibility:** allowing local providers the opportunity to utilize their own resources in ways that will benefit their unique program, school, or community;
- **Staff Leadership:** reliance upon identified staff to lead the systems change process;
- **Focus on Individuals:** an approach that focuses on the needs of individuals rather than programs;
- **Pilot Projects:** implementation through pilot projects designed to test new structures, policies, and practices before they are brought to the whole system;
- **System-wide Organization:** implementation through system-wide organization that changes the structure and functioning of the entire service system;
- **Long-term Capacity:** conceptualizing change as the development of a long-term capacity to support individuals in their communities, as well as schools;
- **Bottom-up and Top-down:** addressing change from the bottom up and top down by focusing on both the individual and state policy administrators at the same time; from the grassroots level to state officials to legislators;
- **Rules and Regulations:** changing rules and regulations when they get in the way or do not adequately support self-determination; and
- **Purpose and Goals:** consciously communicating a clear sense of purpose and identifying short-term goals and achievements.

How does the development of self-determination skills support students' capabilities as effective decision-makers during their Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings?

Youth are more likely to participate as effective decision-makers during their IEP meetings when they:

- understand their disability
- learn how that disability will affect their dreams of college, work, independent living, and relationships
- build the confidence to communicate their dreams and needs

Working with teachers, parents, family members, and others to develop these skills promotes a sense of control and a belief that others will listen and support their decision-making. Since part of transition planning and self-determination allows youth with disabilities to explore, try new approaches to learning, take risks, and learn from mistakes, youth and families can assume a more participatory role.

References

The following sources were cited in this Frequently Asked Questions. For additional research and resources, see our links to other pages on this topic below.

Deci, E. & Ryan, R. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York: Plenum.