

Ready to Make My Own Decisions: How Families can Support Student Self-Determination

Sean Roy, TransCen

Dr. John McNaught, James Madison University



Introduction

When does a person switch from being dependent on their family to beginning to make decisions based on their own views and preferences? This may be seen as beginning when a person develops language and progresses while a person matures and assumes more life responsibilities. This is not always the path given to individuals with disabilities. The concept in question is referred to as self-determination, and families play an important role in supporting their student to build skills needed to become the main driver of their life.

What Is Self-Determination and Why is it Important?

“Self-determination” is 1) the ability to know and believe in ourselves, 2) the ability to know what we want for the future and to make plans to achieve those goals, and 3) the ability to know what supports we need to take control of our lives. Most of us gained self-determination skills as we progressed through school and were given opportunities to make choices for ourselves. Unfortunately, individuals with disabilities are often denied the chance to make key life decisions. We know that the freedom to make one’s own choices is the first step towards self-determined behavior. With continued practice, these skills become ingrained, and lead to increased confidence and a hopeful vision for one’s future. Consider the example below:



Kayla is a student with an intellectual disability who is currently attending a high school transition program. She is interested in exploring jobs that match her love of sports, but the school wants her to have a work experience wiping tables in the cafeteria. Kayla is not confident in her ability to communicate her preferences verbally, so she created a Google Slides presentation where she shared her vision for work. After a successful internship at a health club Kayla is excited for her future and created more presentations letting people know where she would like to live and the new experiences she would like to have as she transitions to adult life in her community.

It’s Normal to Have Questions and Concerns

It is not uncommon for families and caregivers of youth with disabilities to have concerns about their student’s future. Questions arise over vulnerability, safety, and the ability to navigate a complex world in adulthood. This is completely normal and not unlike the emotions all families feel as they watch their loved ones grow up. The first instinct may be to assume that youth with disabilities are incapable of being the main decision-maker in their own lives and to take total control over planning for life after high school. Doing so may create a dependence on family members that will be difficult to unlearn.

The questions and concerns of families have to coexist with the goal of building student self-determination. Families can be a guiding force without completely taking away from their youth’s autonomy. This isn’t to say that families need to “let go” – what family actually lets go of their child? The idea here is for families to gradually hand over control of key life decisions, and to work in partnership with the student to achieve the desired life outcomes.

Key Elements to Self-Determination

I'm Determined is a project funded by the Virginia Department of Education and operated by James Madison University. It focuses on creating training, tools, and opportunities for youth with disabilities to build self-determined behavior. I'm Determined identified 9 elements that contribute to a person being self-determined. The grid below defines each of these elements and provides an example of how families can help build this skill.

| Element of Self-Determination | Family Support Example |
|--|---|
| Choice Making – The skill of selecting a path forward between two known options. | “Would you like to go out to eat or have chicken on the grill?” |
| Decision Making – The skill of selecting a path forward based on various solutions that have each been thoughtfully considered. | “Your room needs to be cleaned by Sunday at 6:00. It’s up to you to decide how to get it done between now and then.” |
| Problem Solving – The skill of finding solutions to difficult or complex issues. | Get your student involved in home-based problem solving such as coordinating a complex schedule or developing a menu on a budget. |
| Goal Setting and Attainment – The ability to set a goal, plan for implementation, and measure success. | Use the I’m Determined Goal Plan to help the student set small goals for school achievement or physical activity. |
| Self-Regulation – The ability to monitor and control one’s own behaviors, actions, and skills in various situations. | Develop strategies, such as a keyword, that helps the student recognize when they are exhibiting certain behaviors. Seek opportunities to increase things that trigger positive behaviors. |
| Self-Advocacy – The ability to speak up and to defend a cause or a person. | Help the student identify a cause they are passionate about and how to become involved in the community. |
| Internal Locus of Control – The belief that one has control over outcomes that are important to his or her life. | Provide plenty of opportunities for the student to practice age-appropriate ways to lead their own lives. Help student see the connection between their decisions and the outcomes they wanted. |
| Self-Efficacy – Belief in one’s own ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish specific tasks. | Celebrate when new tasks or skills are learned and treat unsuccessful attempts as natural steps in the process. |
| Self-Awareness – Basic understanding of one’s own strengths, needs, and abilities. | Help the student articulate what their disability is and how it impacts them in education, employment, and social situations. |

Charting the LifeCourse and Life Domains

Charting the LifeCourse is a framework that was developed to help individuals and families of all abilities and at any age or stage of life develop a vision for a good life, think about what they need to know and do, identify how to find or develop supports, and discover what it takes to live the lives they want to. The associated tools, which are free to use, are highly visual, user friendly, and offer families and students a method to stay focused what makes a “good life”, and not just “what services can I get.”

The LifeCourse framework recognizes that people interact with their families and communities within six “life domains”. For people with disabilities, we tend to focus on the “Safety and Security” domain, but the other areas are equally important. Families can help their student build self-determination skills with the six life domains in mind. Here are some key questions within each domain that families can help students plan for:



Daily Life and Employment

How can I make sure my viewpoint is considered during the IEP transition planning process?

Does my transition plan include opportunities for me to explore jobs I might be interested in?

What are the types of jobs I might be interested in exploring?

Will I need supports to be successful on the job and who provides those supports?



Community Living

When school ends, where do I think I want to live? With my family or on my own?

How can I learn about the different living options available to me as an adult?

What transportation options do I have to get around my community?

What supports will I need to either continue living with my family or have a place of my own?



Safety and Security

What skills will I need to be my own person so I will not need a guardian at age 18?

Do my parents or caregivers have any concerns in terms of my safety? How can we work together to address those?

How can I stay safe without have my right to make decisions taken away?

What skills do I need to learn to safely live in the community?





Social and Spirituality

What kind of activities are available at school or in the community that I enjoy doing?

Who is willing to answer my questions if I want to start dating?

Are there opportunities to be active in my faith community?

How do I use social media safely so I can stay connected to my friends without being taken advantage of?



Healthy Living

How can I begin taking responsibility for my own healthcare?

How can I find opportunities to learn about exercise and healthy eating?

Who is helping me understand reproductive health?

How can I learn to advocate for my disability and healthcare needs?



Advocacy and Engagement

How can I share my vision of my good life during IEP and support meetings?

How can I get more control over my life choices?

How can I make sure my strengths are seen as more important than my disability?

How do I give back to my community, including learning to vote and volunteering to causes that I'm passionate about.



Summary

The ability to make one's own choices and to be the main driver of a future path is a defining aspect of becoming an adult. This is broadly referred to as self-determination and students with disabilities often need the support of families and caregivers to build and practice new skills. This can be a scary prospect for families, but it is imperative that youth are empowered to make their own decisions. This does not mean families need to stay in the background. This brief offered key strategies to support the essential elements of becoming self-determined and to explore new experiences for students based on various life domains.

Key Resources

[I'm Determined](#)

[Self-Advocacy Resource and Technical Assistance Center](#)

[Charting the LifeCourse](#)



*A SPAN Project**

About RAISE raisecenter.org

In 2014, SPAN Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN), a parent-led and family-centered non-profit parent training and information center (PTI), was funded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) to provide support to individuals with disabilities through the transition from secondary school and into competitive employment and independent living.



About TransCen TransCen.org

TransCen, Inc., is a non-profit organization dedicated to improving education and employment success of youth and young adults with disabilities. TransCen provides employment services to youth and adults with disabilities by identifying their passions, skills, and talents, and developing them into career opportunities. They also provide training and consultation around the country to families and professionals within state agencies, school districts, adult service organizations, and employers who work with or employ people with disabilities.

RAISE was funded by a national grant from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) to provide technical assistance and support to eight (8) RSA PTIs.