

Supporting Families to Encourage Student Growth through Self-Determination

Sean Roy, TransCen

Dr. John McNaught, James Madison University



Introduction

It is estimated that by the time a student is 18 years old they will have spent only 14% of their life actually in school. The rest of their time is spent at home. When speaking about students with disabilities, this large time disparity illustrates the need to empower families and caregivers with strategies to maximize the time spent at home. To use this time to build decision making and problem solving skills that will be needed as the student enters adulthood. Family advocates and others who support families during the school years (including elementary and middle school) can play an important role in encouraging families to build self-determination skills in their loved ones with disabilities. This brief will offer tips and resources to engage families in a conversation in such a way that families feel comfortable and students are given the opportunity for growth and autonomy.

What Is Self-Determination and Why is it Important?

Self-determination is generally understood to be the ability for an individual to be the primary decision maker in regards to the path of their life. Most of us take this as a given – we make decisions for ourselves based on what we would like to see happen. However, people with disabilities often find it difficult to have a strong voice in their own lives. Here is the concept of self-determination broken down into its key “elements” as compiled by I’m Determined.

<p>CHOICE MAKING</p> <p>The skill of selecting a path forward between two known options</p> <p>Cm</p>	<p>DECISION MAKING</p> <p>The skill of selecting a path forward based on various solutions that have each been thoughtfully considered</p> <p>Dm</p>	<p>PROBLEM SOLVING</p> <p>The skill of finding solutions to difficult or complex issues</p> <p>Ps</p>
<p>GOAL SETTING & ATTAINMENT</p> <p>The ability to develop a goal, plan for implementation, and measure success</p> <p>Gs</p>	<p>SELF-REGULATION</p> <p>The ability to monitor and control one's own behaviors, actions, and skills in various situations</p> <p>Re</p>	<p>SELF-ADVOCACY</p> <p>The skills necessary to speak up and/or defend a cause or a person</p> <p>Ad</p>
<p>INTERNAL LOCUS OF CONTROL</p> <p>The belief that one has control over outcomes that are important to his or her own life</p> <p>Lc</p>	<p>SELF-EFFICACY</p> <p>Belief in one's own ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish specific tasks</p> <p>Ef</p>	<p>SELF-AWARENESS</p> <p>Basic understanding of one's own strengths, needs, and abilities</p> <p>Aw</p>



Building self-determination skills in students with disabilities is an essential part of transition planning and leads to important outcomes. Research shows that student self-determination is linked to increased academic success and engagement in schoolwork, students actively contributing to their transition planning, increased involvement in postsecondary education, and a higher quality of life and positive experiences in early adulthood (Tennessee Department of Education, 2013).

Perhaps equally as important is the feeling of responsibility and control a student feels when they are respected and given opportunities to make choices and experience the consequences of those choices. Self-determination helps change the narrative about how people with disabilities see themselves, and how they are viewed by society.

Key Strategies to Support Families

Self-determination can be a confusing concept for some families of students with disabilities because it runs counter to their instincts (“I need to protect my child”) and what they have been told (“It’s best if others make decisions for your child”). It can be scary when educators or advocates push families to “let go” and let their youth make key decisions. This is often done without adequate time to prepare families and students. Unfortunately, the push for self-determination tends to come during the transition years, after families and students have established their own habits and ways to support each other. In addition, the concept of self-determination is often pitted against the desire for parent engagement in the education process. This becomes especially tricky when the student expresses goals that do not align with what the family thinks should happen.

As advocates and family support professionals, your goal should be to create environments where family engagement and student self-determination can coexist. To structure support to families so they can gradually allow their student to make their own choices without feeling forced to. To show families how self-determination will improve the quality of their student’s life. That growth means risk, but that risk can be negotiated so everyone is comfortable. In short, to help families take a back seat and allow their student the opportunity to drive the planning of their own future.

Here are some helpful strategies for family advocates to support families in building student self-determination skills.

Start Early

By the time a student reaches high school parents are used to being in control and students are used to not being in control. Parent advocates should consider parent outreach around self-determination that focuses on elementary-age students. This way students can begin practicing key decision making skills before formal transition planning begins.

Start Small

There is a tendency to push students to exercise self-determination skills before they have had a chance to develop or practice them. This may result in students being more frustrated than empowered. Parent advocates can recognize when this is happening and encourage families and school programs to start small, then build. For example, families can take advantage of teachable moments that involve problem solving, processing options and solutions before a student is expected to try it on their own.

Build in Choice

When students start making their own choices it will become contagious. One strategy to begin this growth is to practice choice making that is rooted in high interest activities for the student. "You can play your video game for 2 hours. Would you like to do that now, after lunch, or after dinner?"

Help Families Model Self-Determined Behavior

Kids are very observant and watch how their families navigate situations. It is important that families model the behavior they want to see in their student. This includes treating all people with respect, appropriately advocating for one's needs, and approaching problem solving logically.

Scaffold Supports

Learning new skills and having new experiences often involve the possibility of not being successful on the first try. Some families are resistant to opening their student up to failure, but trying and failing is an important part of becoming self-determined. One key concept is "scaffolding supports". This simply means adding or subtracting needed supports based on how a student is adapting to a new experience or skill. For example, a student who is responsible for independently completing homework may not need regular check ins with teachers if they turning assignments in on time, or may require additional check ins if they are lagging behind.

Give Opportunities to Practice

There are opportunities for students to practice self-determination at home, at school, and in the community. Families can facilitate these opportunities by providing structure and natural consequences for certain choices. If a student struggles with completing chores at home, instead of getting into a power struggle, families can offer a timeframe with clear expectations. “Your room needs to be cleaned by Sunday evening. If it is not done, your screen time for the week will be cut by 2 hours.” Other opportunities for low pressure ways to practice self-determination are planning meals with a budget, picking chores from a list, and setting short-term personal goals.

Parent Training and Mentoring

Many families would benefit from information, training, and peer support to help them embrace self-determination as the goal for their student. Consider a tiered set of supports starting with printed information and videos, progressing to training sessions and peer support so they can learn from families who have been through similar experiences. Remember to show families success stories of individuals with significant disabilities who are supported to be the primary decision maker in their lives.



Charting the LifeCourse

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 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 Charting the LifeCourse tools are free to use and are ideal for family advocates to have meaningful discussions with families around building self-determination.

You can find more information on Charting the LifeCourse at www.lifecoursetools.com

Summary

Self-determination skills such as choice making, self-awareness, and goal setting allow students with disabilities to be the main driver of their lives. Handing over control of life decisions can be a scary prospect for families. Family advocacy and support professionals are well positioned to encourage self-determination skill building while still supporting families to assist their students in the transition planning process. When family engagement works hand in hand with opportunities to practice self-determination skills, students become better prepared to forge their own paths.

Citations

Tennessee Department of Education (2013). *Promoting Self-Determination Among Students with Disabilities: A Guide for Tennessee Educators*. Retrieved from <https://vkc.vumc.org/assets/files/resources/psiSelfdetermination.pdf> on 02/19/23

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Key Resources

[I'm Determined](#)

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





*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.

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