

What is Self Determination?

Self determination is the belief that all people have the right to control their own lives and make choices for their futures. Self determination is important for all people, but it's really important for young people with disabilities to have opportunities to learn and practice these skills.

As parents and caregivers, our role is often to protect our children and keep them safe from harm. Yet, by making every decision for them, or assuming they can't make choices for themselves, we're not allowing our children to practice self determination. This skill has long-term benefits; research shows that students who have strong self-determination skills have a better chance of being successful in making the transition to adulthood, including employment and independence.

How Can Self-Determination Skills be Developed?

The best way for children to learn new skills is to practice them and know that they will be supported if mistakes are made. Learning self-determination skills takes time, beginning in childhood and continuing through adulthood. If you're worried that you haven't helped your child develop these skills, it's never too late to start. The **Tips for Families** section of this fact sheet offers specific suggestions for developing these skills.

Self determination, along with making choices and decisions, are learned skills. As with all learned skills, the skill may need to be broken down into smaller steps, with one learned skill building upon another. Remember that all learning takes time. Be patient with yourself and your child.

How Can Families Support and Promote Self Determination?

Through Encouragement and Practice: Starting when our children are young, we can encourage them to practice self determination by giving them opportunities to make their own decisions. Let them decide what to wear or what to have for a snack and progress to more long-lasting decisions like which classes to take in their final years in school. Young children can benefit from taking part in meetings where their skills, abilities and successes are being shared, such as in Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings with school officials.

When children are ready, you can work with their schools to include them in conversations about employment, housing, recreational and community programs. Young adults will find that this prepares them with the information and experiences they need to make self-determined choices about their futures.

Through Peer Mentoring: An important way to help our children with disabilities explore their options for the future is to connect with others who have "lived it" successfully and become more independent. This is sometimes called **peer mentoring**. Your child's school staff may be able to help make this connection or try teaming up with Wisconsin's Independent Living Centers dhs.wisconsin.gov/disabilities/physical/ilcs-contact.htm. For help connecting with work related mentors, contact your county's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) representative dwd.wisconsin.gov/dvr/locations/default.htm.

"Self Determination means making your own choices, speaking up when you're not happy about something, having control over your own life, being willing to try new things, figuring out what you do and don't like, asking for help when you need it, knowing the whole story, and, taking responsibility for your decisions."
(Winnick and Bear, 2003)

Promoting Self Determination: Tips for Families¹

What can we do as families to support and encourage our children's self-determination skills? Here are some ideas to think about:

Model Expectations

- Model your expectation that your child be seen as competent and having the same rights as children without disabilities.
- Ask providers and other professionals to speak directly to your child.
- Expect the same full community life as you would for a child without a disability.

Offer Choices

- Give choices about clothing, meals, social activities, family events and other daily decisions.
- Involve children in school, health and related decisions in ways that are meaningful to them.
- Provide information in ways that are right for your child and give time to respond.

Explore the Possibilities

- Have your child explore the community every day through outings, books and community events.
- Talk with your child about the future the same way you would with any *typically developing* child.

Practice Self Advocacy and Self Awareness

- Talk to your child about his or her disability or health conditions.
- Help your child learn to talk with others about his or her special needs.
- Find opportunities for your child to practice self advocacy and leadership skills at school, in your house of faith, with friends and through community organizations or other programs.

Develop Goal Setting and Planning

- Teach your child how to set goals and talk about how to plan for future wants and needs. For example, explain how your family saved up for something new for the house.
- Visualize the steps needed to meet goals using road maps or other picture charts to help.

Learn to be Okay with Risk Taking

- Think of ways to slowly and safely move out of your own comfort zone.
- Make a list of the risks that you would be willing for your child to take and consider the benefits and consequences of each one.
- Be patient with yourself and your child. These skills can take time to develop as they can with all people.

InControl Wisconsin: incontrolwi.org

National Gateway to Self Determination: ngsd.org

Self Determination for Middle and High School Students: ncset.org/topics/sdmhs/default.asp?topic=30

To learn more about planning for the future, see our Family Voices Fact Sheet, "Imagining Your Child's Future," familyvoiceswi.org/resource-library/imagining-your-childs-future



Thank you!

TMG, an IRIS Consultant Agency,
(tmgwisconsin.com) for their financial support for this
Family Voices of Wisconsin publication!

¹Christine D. Bremer, Mera Kachgal, and Kris Schoeller, "Tips for Families," NCSET at ncset.org/publications/viewdesc.asp?id=962, 2003.