

## Section 2: Self-determination skills

### Section overview

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### Self-determination skills and why they are important

Self-determination means having the knowledge, skills and attitudes to steer your own life toward your goals and dreams for the future. Some people refer to this as “being the boss of your own life.” Several research studies identify a strong relationship between practicing self-determination and experiencing positive school and post-school outcomes, like graduating with a diploma, getting a job and going to college.

Self-determination skills are important because you need them to create the life you want. Additionally, it is critical to develop these skills before you turn 18, when parental rights transfer to you (see Section 9).

When you are the boss of your own life, you have freedom to make your own decisions, take responsibility for your actions, control of your services and supports, practice authority over your resources and know what works and doesn’t work for you. For students, this means:

- Actively participating in, or leading, your IEP meetings;
- Speaking up or “advocating” for yourself and saying what you like and don’t like;
- Making decisions about your own life with support from your family and other members of your planning team;
- Identifying your needs for support to reach your education and work goals;
- Giving feedback to your planning team about what works and doesn’t work for you;
- Accepting responsibility for the decisions you make and learning from mistakes.

Teachers and parents have complementary roles in helping students develop self-determination skills. To promote self-determination, teachers and parents can communicate high expectations to their students early and often. Students with disabilities are often aware of what they cannot do, and less aware of their unique strengths and abilities. High expectations make them more likely to succeed.



Figure 2. Self-determination skills

**Communicate high expectations to your students early and often.**



### Promoting self-determination at school

Teachers play an important role in teaching the skills and knowledge students need to become self-determined. They do so by providing opportunities to develop these skills in educational activities and experiences and documenting them in the IEP. Educational programs for all students should promote opportunities to:

- Speak up or advocate for themselves;
- Make choices based on personal preferences and interests;
- Participate in decisions that affect the quality of their lives;
- Set personal goals;
- Solve problems that act as barriers to achieving these goals;
- Create action plans to achieve goals;
- Self-regulate and self-manage day-to-day actions.

Below are examples of school-based learning opportunities teachers can implement for students from elementary school through high school.

#### Early elementary

- Provide opportunities for students to make choices. Teach them that they have control of these choices and that most choices have limited options.
- Promote early problem-solving skills by encouraging students to think aloud as they address simple problems. Teachers should model their own problem-solving processes.
- Provide feedback regarding the outcomes of student choices to teach students the connection between choices and consequences.

#### Late elementary and middle school

- Teach students to analyze options, identify pros and cons of each, and to examine past decisions to determine if the consequences were anticipated or desired.
- Coach students to set personal and academic goals, identify steps to achieve goals, and monitor their progress.
- Encourage students to evaluate their performance and reflect on how to improve.

#### Junior high and high school

- Encourage students to make decisions that affect their day-to-day activities, including academic goals, post-school outcomes, schedules and others.
- Emphasize the link between the goals that students set and the daily decisions they make.
- Teach students to direct their own IEP meetings.

### Student-led IEPs

We encourage all students to play an active role in IEP meetings to begin being the boss of their own lives. There are many benefits to participating. As active participants, students:

- Learn more about their disability, including how to talk about and explain the nature of their disability to others;
- Gain confidence in public speaking;
- Learn how to speak up for themselves and ask questions;
- Become more involved in their own education.



Another benefit of participation is preparing for the future. Once students turn 18 they are legally adults and the process helps prepare them for adult responsibilities and making decisions on their own (see Section 9).

You can lead your IEP meetings in many ways. Some students start by welcoming people to the meeting and introducing participants. With practice and preparation, you can also present important information about you (like your strengths and interests, progress on your goals, or ideas for new goals). You are free to communicate with spoken words or an assistive device, use a PowerPoint presentation or share written notes. How you participate is up to you.

## The role of parents

Parents have the opportunity to foster self-determination beginning at an early age. In addition to communicating high expectations, you can provide experiences at home to complement what should happen at school. The following ideas for fostering self-determination are from other parents of students with disabilities:

- Advocate for your child to be included in general education with peers without disabilities.
- Provide opportunities for your student to be as independent as possible at home and in the community.
- Teach your child problem-solving strategies by identifying the problem, brainstorming solutions, and weighing the pros and cons.
- Discuss issues related to living independently, like paying bills and living within a budget.
- Allow your student to speak for herself.
- Connect your student to activities with peers with and without disabilities that share similar interests.
- Support your student to participate in or lead her own IEP meetings.



**As the parent of a child with disabilities, you are the most important person in your child's education. You know your child better than anyone else.**

## Resources

### [Promoting Self-Determination: A Practice Guide \(2010\)](http://ngsd.org/sites/default/files/promoting_self-determination_a_practice_guide.pdf)

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### [Self-Determination and the Education of Students with Disabilities \(2002\)](http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED470036)

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### [Fostering Self-Determination Among Children and Youth with Disabilities: Ideas from parents for parents \(2011\)](http://www.waisman.wisc.edu/naturalsupports/pdfs/FosteringSelfDetermination.pdf)

<http://www.waisman.wisc.edu/naturalsupports/pdfs/FosteringSelfDetermination.pdf>

### [Student-Led IEPs \(2010\)](http://faculty.virginia.edu/PullenLab/EDIS5141OnlineModules/Mod10/Mod10_print.html)

[http://faculty.virginia.edu/PullenLab/EDIS5141OnlineModules/Mod10/Mod10\\_print.html](http://faculty.virginia.edu/PullenLab/EDIS5141OnlineModules/Mod10/Mod10_print.html)

### [Special Education: A Guide for Parents & Advocates, sixth edition \(2012\)](http://factoregon.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/DRO-SpEd_Guide-6e-with-fact-logo.pdf)

[http://factoregon.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/DRO-SpEd\\_Guide-6e-with-fact-logo.pdf](http://factoregon.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/DRO-SpEd_Guide-6e-with-fact-logo.pdf)