Self-Determination: Supporting Successful Transition

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Self-determination is a concept reflecting the belief that all individuals have the right to direct their own lives. Students who have self-determination skills have a stronger chance of being successful in making the transition to adulthood, including employment and independence (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). Starting with the 1990 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (P.L. 101-476), transition services must be based on student needs and take into account student interests and preferences. To accomplish this goal, students must be prepared to participate in planning for their future.

How is Self-Determination Learned?

The capabilities needed to become self-determined are most effectively learned through real-world experience, which inherently involves taking risks, making mistakes, and reflecting on outcomes.

> *Failure experiences are only learning experiences if they are mitigated. That is, students only learn from failure when they have the opportunity to try the experience again with a different strategy or level of intensity and succeed.*

Supporting a young person in becoming self-determined is not about simply removing limits and structure. It is, rather, about providing opportunities so a young person can make meaningful decisions about his or her own future. For families, teachers, and other adults, supporting self-determination requires being open to new possibilities and taking seriously youths' dreams for the future.

Self-determination helps youth with disabilities achieve positive adult outcomes. Beyond youth and their families, others such as teachers, employers, and institutions also need to be committed to creating and maintaining an environment in which self-determination can take place. The result will be a measurable increase in self-sufficiency and, perhaps even more importantly, greater sense of purpose and satisfaction in adulthood.

Promoting Self-Determination in Youth with Disabilities: Tips for Families and Professionals

Promote Choice Making	Promote Self Advocacy
- Identify strengths, interests, and learning styles; - Provide choices about clothing, social activities, family events, and methods of learning new information; - Hold high expectations for youth; - Teach youth about their disability; - Involve children and youth in self-determination/self advocacy; opportunities in school, home, and	- Encourage communication and self-representation; - Praise all efforts of assertiveness and problem solving; - Develop opportunities at home and in school for self-advocacy; - Provide opportunities for leadership roles at home and in school; - Encourage self-advocates to speak in class; - Teach about appropriate accommodation needs;

community;
- Prepare children and youth for school meetings;
- Speak directly to children and youth;
- Involve children and youth in educational, medical, and family decisions;
- Allow for mistakes and natural consequences;
- Listen often to children and youth.

Encourage Exploration of Possibilities

- Promote exploration of the world every day;
- Use personal, tactile, visual, and auditory methods for exploration;
- Identify young adult mentors with similar disabilities;
- Talk about future jobs, hobbies, and family lifestyles;
- Develop personal collages/scrap books based on interests and goals;
- Involve children and youth in service learning (4H, AmeriCorps, local volunteering).

Promote Reasonable Risk Taking

- Make choice maps listing risks, benefits, and consequences of choice;
- Build safety nets through family members, friends, schools, and others;
- Develop skills in problem solving;
- Develop skills in evaluating consequences.

Encourage Problem Solving

- Teach problem solving skills;
- Allow ownership of challenges and problems;
- Accept problems as part of healthy development;
- Hold family meetings to identify problems at home and in the community;
- Hold class meetings to identify

- Practice ways to disclose disability and accommodation needs;
- Create opportunities to speak about the disability in school, home, church, business and community.

Facilitate Development of Self-Esteem

- Create a sense of belonging within schools and communities;
- Provide experiences for children and youth to use their talents;
- Provide opportunities to youth for contributing to their families, schools, and communities;
- Provide opportunities for individuality and independence;
- Identify caring adult mentors at home, school, church, or in the community;
- Model a sense of self-esteem and self-confidence.

Develop Goal Setting and Planning

- Teach children and youth family values, priorities, and goals;
- Make posters that reflect values and are age-appropriate;
- Define what a goal is and demonstrate the steps to reach a goal;
- Make a road map to mark the short-term identifiers as they work toward a goal;
- Support children and youth in developing values and goals;
- Discuss family history and culture--make a family tree;
- Be flexible in supporting youth to reach their goals; some days they may need much motivation and help; other days they may want to try alone.

Help Youth Understand Their Disabilites

- Develop a process that is directed by youth for self-identity: Who are you? What do you want? What are your challenges and barriers? What supports do you need?
- Direct children and youth to write an autobiography;
- Talk about the youth's disability;
- Talk about the youth's abilities;
- Involve children and youth in their IEP;

problems in school; • Allow children and youth to develop a list of self-identified consequences.	• Use good learning style inventories and transition assessments; • Identify and utilize support systems for all people.

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