

Raising the Self-Determined Child

Choice-Making
Decision-Making
Goal-Setting
Problem-Solving



Tips for Parents of Children with Intellectual and
Developmental Disabilities

PAUL V. SHERLOCK CENTER ON DISABILITIES

RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE

Raising the Self-Determined Child

Every parent wants their child to lead happy, productive life. They hope their child will be part of a community, have friends, find meaningful employment, live as independently as possible, and enjoy health and well being. The self-determination skills children develop early in life can provide a strong foundation for success in adulthood. As with learning any new skill, it takes time and practice. For this reason, parents need to think about ways to promote choice-making, decision-making, goal-setting, and problem-solving throughout the early, middle, and teen years.

As a parent, you may wonder how to help your child learn to control his/her life and future while at the same time keeping him safe from harm. This may be especially true if your child has a disability. Taking risks is often part of taking steps toward independence and self-determination. Some parents do not want their children to take any risks and so they limit their child's experiences to only "safe" ones. The challenge is to manage risk, not avoid it. Risk *increases* when skill, experience and support are limited. Likewise, increasing your child's skill, experience and/or supports can reduce the risk.

Providing many opportunities for your child to make meaningful decisions that impact his/her daily life is important. Making meaningful decisions starts with careful consideration of the choices that are available. Offering a wide range of choices in matters big

and small can help your child discover his/her preferences, interests, strengths and learning styles. This knowledge can help your child build a fulfilling life that reflects his or her own dreams.



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Choice Making

Providing opportunities for your child to make meaningful choices that impact his/her daily life is the first step toward fostering self-determination. We make meaningful choices when we select from a number of possibilities. Offering your child a range of choices in matters big and small can help your child discover his/her own preferences, interests, strengths, and learning styles. This knowledge can help your child build a fulfilling life that reflects his or her own dreams. As children practice making choices, they become better at it – they tend to make better, more realistic choices. As a result, they are more likely to succeed in school and in life after school.



What You Can Do:

- ◆ **In the early years:** For young children, the choices need to be simple and clearly defined. **Examples:** “grapes or apple?” “striped shirt or plain shirt?” “color or read a book with dad?”
- ◆ **In the middle years:** As children get older, the variety and number of choices should increase. Provide choices about food and clothing, social activities, family events, recreation, and methods of learning new information. Involve children and youth in educational, medical, and family decisions. **Examples:** “It is your turn to pick a movie...what shall we see?” “What outfit would you like to wear to school today?”
- ◆ **In the teen years:** Encourage your child to identify options and make choices at home, at school, and in the community. Discuss and help your child evaluate choices regarding free time, work, friendships, intimate relationships, finances, and the transition to adulthood. **Examples:** “Which do you think you would like better... working at the day care or the supermarket... why?” “What would you like to spend your money on?”

What Research Tells Us:

Choice-making helps children with disabilities become more self-reliant and builds self-esteem. It fosters creativity, exploration, and imagination. The degree to which children experience choice-making influences their quality of life.

Children often see their own potential through the vision created by their parents. Offering as many different options and opportunities as possible helps children identify their unique strengths, abilities, and talents.

Children with disabilities are presented with fewer opportunities to make choices than their typically developing peers. Parents can offset this difference by offering realistic, meaningful choices that allow children to experience the outcome of the choices they make.

Decision Making

Making a decision is more than making a choice. As a parent, you can support your child with a disability to learn and practice the process of decision-making. Decision-making involves knowing about all the options available. You can help your child think about the consequences of each option. Depending on the decision, this might mean having a chance to try out each option. You can then guide your child to make the best choice for him/her based on what he/she found out. Help your child to think and talk about the decision afterward. Discussing whether or not it was a good decision will help your child to get better at making decisions.



What Research Tells Us:

Children with developmental disabilities are more self-determined when they have more chances to make their own decisions.

Families can support the development of children's decision-making skills at home.

Youth with disabilities can make decisions when given the right support.

Young adults with disabilities who are more self-determined (including having better decision-making skills) have better school, employment, and adult life outcomes.

What You Can Do:

- ◆ **In the early years:** Give your child chances to try lots of different activities. Talk with your child about what he/she likes or does not like about each one. When possible, involve your child in decisions that will directly affect him/her. **Example:** Give your child chances to play with many children. Talk with him/her about those experiences and then ask your child to help decide who to invite to future play dates.
- ◆ **During the middle years:** Teach your child to use different ways to gather information about activities, such as talking to people, making lists, gathering pictures, and by trying activities. Involve your child in team meetings that will result in important decisions. If your child does not use speech to communicate, support him/her to find other ways to express decisions and then honor choices made. **Example:** Your child wants a volunteer opportunity. Help your child to talk with youth and adults involved in the various options. Guide him/her to read, look at pictures, or watch videos about the activities. Help your child to list pros and cons before making a decision. Later, talk about if it was a good decision and why.
- ◆ **In the teen years:** Talk with your child about longer term life decisions (e.g., careers, relationships). Help him/her to find and try out options in settings with people without disabilities. Support your child to lead any decision-making teams. **Example:** Your daughter and her transition team will be deciding on community-based work trials. Support your child to state his/her opinions and preferences as each experience is evaluated.

Goal Setting

Goals are something your child would like to do, change, overcome, or experience. Setting goals encourages all children to do their best. It creates a climate where learning and effort are valued. Goals create structure – they are a map to help you and your child from where you are now to where you want to be in the future. Parents can help with analyzing, monitoring, and providing motivation along the way. No matter your child’s age, parents can help their children set **SMART** goals. SMART goals are goals that are **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**elevant, and **T**ime-bound.



What You Can Do:

- ◆ **In the early years:** Keep it simple and keep it fun. Goal setting requires the ability to think about the future and make plans. The brains of young children are still developing these abilities. Limit goals to simple things your child can achieve in a short amount of time and praise effort, not just achievement. **Example:** Set a goal of learning how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for lunch.
- ◆ **In the middle years:** Talk with your child about setting short-term, realistic goals and help your child make a plan to achieve those goals. Break goals down into small steps and chart progress along the way. **Example:** Set a goal to complete a school assignment your child is excited about. Talk about how to start, what specifically needs to be done for the assignment, and how to know when it is completed.
- ◆ **In the teen years:** Discuss short-term and long-term goals your child wants to achieve. Goals can be about school, work, or social activities. Break long-term goals into small steps so your child can see progress and to help maintain motivation. **Example:** Help your child to save money for a concert she would like to attend. Discuss how this may impact other things she may want to buy and then set a savings schedule to reach the goal.

What Research Tells Us:

Goal setting may have a powerful, positive effect on human behavior including improved task performance, motivation, and perceived self-efficacy.

Learning how to set and achieve goals may help students better understand and work toward what is most important to them. Achieving goals helps students as they seek direction and independence in school and life.

Children should be encouraged to set goals for their learning, personal growth, and their future. When children learn to set goals, and reach them, they can visualize their future and make good choices.

Problem Solving

When your child can problem-solve, he/she can respond to challenges and create solutions. Learning to solve problems makes your child feel more capable, independent, and safe at home, in school, and in the community. Problem solving-skills provide the basis for all learning and allow children to have control over their lives. Families play an important role in supporting a child's problem-solving skills. Creating and allowing time for your child or youth to develop problem-solving skills helps make him/her better prepared to deal with challenges throughout life.



What Research Tells Us:

Children of all ages, abilities, and intellectual levels can learn problem-solving skills.

Children who are taught problem-solving skills are able to set their own goals and reach them.

Teaching problem-solving skills allows children to be more active learners in control of their behavior.

Children need opportunities to practice setting their own goals, taking action, keeping track of their progress, and deciding if their solutions worked.

When teaching problem-solving skills it is best to start with an activity that will naturally get your child's attention and that he/she will enjoy.

What You Can Do:

- ◆ **In the early years:** Make pictures to show your child the steps you go through to solve every day problems. This will help him/her to solve problems on their own. Use the *I do, We do, You do* approach. Show the child, do with the child, and have the child do on his/her own with your support. **Example:** When your child is finished playing, ask "How can we make the toys fit in the toy box?"
- ◆ **During the middle years:** Read stories and talk about problems and solutions. As needed, use pictures to teach how to solve a problem in a specific situation and/or have your child draw out, point, or say the steps of a problem-solving plan. **Example:** Your child tells you he is having a problem with a student at lunch, ask "What can you do when a student hassles you in the cafeteria?"
- ◆ **In the teen years:** Help youth learn new routines, places, schedules, and rules by giving them opportunities to visit places in advance and learn the new surroundings. **Examples:** "What bus route will you take to get from school to your new job?"

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Resources

Publications

Self-Determined Learning Model for Early Elementary Students - A Parent's Guide, Beach Center on Disabilities, University of Kansas

This book provides a guide for problem-solving and goal-setting for parents to use with children. It is available online from the Beach Center Resource Library at <http://www.beachcenter.org> or use the following direct link:

http://www.beachcenter.org/resource_library/beach_resource_detail_page.aspx?intResourceID=2505&Type=book

Fostering Self-Determination Among Children with Disabilities—Ideas from Parents for Parents, Waisman Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison

This guide provides a menu of ideas developed by parents for parents to promote self-determination for children with disabilities. It is available online from the Waisman Center website at <http://www.waisman.wisc.edu/naturalsupports/pdfs/FosteringSelfDetermination.pdf>

These publications are also available for loan from the Resource Library at the Sherlock Center. See our website for library hours or call (401) 456-8072.

Websites

I'm Determined

<http://www.imdetermined.org>

The I'm Determined website, sponsored by the Virginia Department of Education Self-Determination Project, provides many tips, tools, and videos related to promoting self-determination in school-age youth with disabilities.

National Gateway to Self-Determination

<http://www.ngsd.org>

The National Gateway to Self-Determination website contains articles, videos, and other materials for families to learn about and promote self-determination with their children.



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