



Learning to Live Independently: Supported Decision-Making in Special Education Programs

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What's the point of Special Education programs? What should they do for students with disabilities?

There are many answers to these questions. Special Education programs are designed to increase inclusion, give students meaningful access to the school's curriculum, and provide a Free, Appropriate Public Education. But the best answer comes from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the law that created the Special Education system. IDEA says Special Education programs must give students "services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living."¹

That means Special Education programs must help students get what they need to lead their most independent, meaningful, and productive adult lives. That's especially important for students who have disabilities that make it harder for them to live independently – those at risk of guardianship.

Unfortunately, studies show that school staff often recommend that parents get guardianship without discussing other options.² Of course, for people who truly can't make decisions, guardianship can be a good thing. But, if people can make decisions, either independently or when they get help, guardianship can have a "significant negative impact on their physical and mental health."³

In this brochure, we'll tell you about an option called Supported Decision-Making that can help students with disabilities learn to make their own decisions, live as independently as they can, and avoid unnecessary guardianship. We'll also show you ways you can request and receive Supported Decision-Making supports and services from Special Education programs.

Supported Decision-Making: What Is It?

Supported Decision-Making is getting help when you need it, from people you trust, so you can make your own decisions.⁴

Isn't that how we all make decisions? When you have to make a tough choice, or a decision about something you're not familiar with, or just want to "talk it out," what do you do?



You get help, don't you? We all do. Think about all the clichés about decision-making like "get a second opinion," "don't make a snap judgment," and "make an informed choice." They all mean the same thing: when you need help making a decision, get it!

Everyone does! You may ask a friend for advice or a professional for information, or you may have "go-to" people for talking about specific subjects. They help you "think through" the issues, discuss the "pros and cons" to clear up your choices, and identify solutions. That way, you can understand your options and choose the one that's best for you.

When you do that, you're using Supported Decision-Making. People you trust give you support, so you can decide. That's it.

Preparing for “Further Education, Employment, and Independent Living” through Supported Decision-Making

When people use Supported Decision-Making, they make their own decisions and can have more control over their lives – more self-determination.⁵ That’s important because decades of research show that when people with disabilities have more self-determination, they have better lives; they are more likely to be independent, employed, and safer.⁶ For example, a recent study found that people with disabilities who used Supported Decision-Making were more independent and self-confident, were better at making decisions, and made better decisions.⁷

It’s the same for students with disabilities; those who have more self-determination are more likely to do better in school and more likely to live independently and work after they leave school.⁸ That’s why education experts have called self-determination “the ultimate goal” of Special Education programs.⁹



So, Supported Decision-Making and Special Education programs should go together, to help students with disabilities access “services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living.”¹⁰

Requesting and Receiving Supported Decision-Making From Special Education Programs

Here are ways you and your child can request and use Supported Decision-Making in Special Education programs.

Start Early

We recommend that you ask the school to start working on self-determination and Supported Decision-Making as early as possible. For example, the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) teaches students as young as age 3 to use Supported Decision-Making and “build networks of support...to ensure that they are familiar with the process and utilize it in day-to-day activities.”¹¹

It may seem strange to imagine young children using Supported Decision-Making to choose their snacks or toys. But, by doing that, DCPS is showing students that they should make their own decisions and should seek out and use help when they need it. That will help students form a habit of using support when they need to make decisions. Then, as they get older and their choices get harder, they’ll know to get the support they need. This can help students become better, more confident decision makers and show schools and parents that they don’t “need” a guardian to make decisions for them.

Work with the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team

Each year, your child’s IEP team must review their “present levels of academic achievement and functional performance.”¹² Then, the team must develop an IEP that addresses their unique needs and prepare them “for further education, employment, and independent living.”¹³

As we said, students with more self-determination are more likely to learn, live, and work independently. So, we recommend that you ask the IEP team to examine your child’s self-determination and ability to make decisions as it develops their IEP.

For example, the “I’m Determined” project has developed checklists to help students, parents, and teachers analyze a student’s self-determination and decision-making abilities. You can review and

download the checklists at www.imdetermined.org/resources/documents

The student's "score" on the checklist should help shape their IEP. For example, if a student "scores" low on areas related to self-determination, the IEP team should develop goals, objectives, and supports designed to help that student make and communicate decisions about their education and life.

Request an Evaluation

Parents and students have the right to request an evaluation to review and determine the student's "educational needs."¹⁴ We believe that self-determination and decision-making are "educational needs" because, as studies show, they are directly related to students' ability to achieve "further education, employment, and independent living."

Therefore, you can ask the IEP team to have a professional evaluate your child if you think they have limitations in self-determination and decision-making. We recommend that you request the evaluation by writing a letter or email to your child's IEP team coordinator or the school's Special Education Director. Here is sample language you may want to use or adapt:

"I believe [student's name] has limitations in self-determination and decision-making that are keeping [student's name] from making educational progress, including preparing [student's name] for further education, employment, and independent living. Therefore, I ask that you conduct an evaluation of [student's name] to determine if this is so and, if so, what services and supports will help [student's name] overcome those limitations."¹⁵

Use the Student-Led IEP

Education experts say that IEP teams should help students improve their "goal setting, problem solving, decision-making and self-advocacy skills...and [provide] opportunities for students to use these skills."¹⁶ The "Student Led IEP" gives students a chance to build and practice these skills.

In the "Student Led IEP," students play a lead role on their IEP Team and work with team members to develop their goals, objectives, and services. The student's responsibilities will increase as they progress in school, starting at as young an age as possible. For example, young



students can introduce themselves and talk to the IEP team about what they like to do. As they get older, they can talk about their favorite subjects, what they are interested in learning more about, and what type of supports work well for them. The ultimate goal of the "Student Led IEP" is for the student to "Chair the meeting" and "Cooperatively develop all aspects of the IEP."¹⁷

One of the benefits of the Student-Led IEP is it gives students a chance to "practice different decision-making methods in a 'safe environment.'"¹⁸ Research shows that students who led their IEP meetings "gained increased self-confidence and were able to advocate for themselves, interacted more positively with adults, assumed more responsibility for themselves, [and] were more aware of their limitations and the resources available to them."¹⁹

Create and Use "I Statement" IEP Goals

Students can use the Student Led IEP to create goals and objectives that help them build skills and overcome their limitations. For example, if students have limitations in decision-making and self-determination, their IEPs should include goals and services designed to help them

improve in those areas. Studies find that goals focused on building self-determination help students do better in school, at work, and in life.²⁰

We recommend creating these goals by using “I Statements.” I Statement goals say what the student will do and how they will do it. Instead of saying, “The student will use proper grammar 75% of the time,” an I Statement goal would say, “I will work with my teacher to choose subjects I’m interested in and write stories about them, using proper grammar 75% of the time.”

To meet this goal, the student must choose what to write about, instead of just following grammar rules. The student must also work with their teacher to choose the subject, write the story, and use proper grammar. If the student is still having trouble with grammar, the goal encourages the student to work more, or differently, with their teacher. Therefore, this goal can help students improve their writing and meet education requirements while, at the same time, helping them build their self-determination and practice Supported Decision-Making.²¹

Students can create “I Statement” goals for any subject. Here are some examples:

- I will attend and lead my IEP team meetings, working with my supporters to develop and review my goals and objectives.
- I will identify people I trust who will help me choose education, employment, and independent living programs and supports I am interested in.
- I will work with my teacher to develop a plan to make sure I get to class on time at least 75% of the time.
- I will work with my teacher, aide, and supporters to develop a study plan to help me improve in social studies by at least one letter grade.
- I will improve in spelling by working with my teacher and parents to identify and play word games that I like twice a week.

Transition Services

As students get closer to graduation, they have a right to receive Transition Services to help them prepare for life after they leave school.²² In a related brochure, we discuss ways to request and receive Transition Services that can help students build the skills they need to live as independently as possible and avoid unnecessary guardianships.

We Can Help!

Wherever you are on your Supported Decision-Making journey, we can answer your questions or connect you with people and organizations that may be able to help. Feel free to contact us at:

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402-474-3183
www.disabilityrightsnebraska.org
Brad Meurrens, Public Policy Director, brad@drne.org

Nebraska Council on Developmental Disabilities

301 Centennial Mall South
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402-471-2330
www.dhhs.ne.gov/pages/DD-Planning-Council.aspx

Nebraska University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities

Munroe-Meyer Institute for Genetics and Rehabilitation
985450 Nebraska Medical Center
Omaha, NE 68198
402-559-6483
www.unmc.edu/mmi

Scan this code with your
smart phone’s camera for
additional resources.

Or visit go.unmc.edu/mmi-sdm



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Protection and Advocacy for People with Disabilities