

# Self-Determination and Students with Disabilities

## What is Self-Determination?

Self-determination is defined as “the ability to make choices, solve problems, set goals, evaluate options, take initiative to reach one’s goals, and accept consequences of one’s actions”.<sup>1</sup> Self-determined persons believe they have a level of control over their own lives and futures; they make their own choices, solve-problems, set goals, and work to reach their goals.

In order for students to learn and develop self-determination skills, they need direct and explicit instruction in self-determination. They also need opportunities to practice these skills. Starting early, before formal transition planning begins, and long before transitioning into the workforce or postsecondary education, students with disabilities should be given opportunities to practice and use their self-advocacy, decision-making, and problem-solving skills. Direct instruction in self-determination is a research-based practice associated with improved post-school outcomes for students with disabilities.

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1 Rowe, D. A., Mazzotti, V. L., & Sinclair, J.-(2015). Strategies for teaching self-determination skills in conjunction with the common core. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 50(3), 131-141.

## Preparing for Life After School

TransitionSource.org is managed by the Transition Services Professional Development Support Center, with funding provided through the New York State Education Department.

## Why is Self-Determination Particularly Important for Students with Disabilities?

Self-determination is important for everyone, but for young people with disabilities, it is distinctly important and may be more difficult to learn. Well-meaning individuals may wish to take care of family members or friends with disabilities by making many of their decisions for them. Parents and teachers may also attempt to protect students with disabilities from the consequences of their choices by prioritizing short-term success over the risks of allowing students to make decisions, experience consequences, learn from these experiences, and realign their long-term goals. Transition researchers remind us that students with disabilities not only need to acquire specific self-determination skills, but also to practice them in meaningful settings where they have some control. Research suggests that students who develop self-determination in high school achieve better post-school outcomes in education and employment, and have an enhanced quality of life.



## Should all Students with Disabilities Learn Self-Determination?

All students with and without disabilities should learn self-determination skills. The goal of providing instruction in self-determination for individuals with disabilities is to participate meaningfully in decisions about their own lives to the greatest extent possible, regardless of their ability level.

## How Can We Teach Self-Determination to Students with Disabilities Before they Become Adults?

All students require time and practice to develop self-determination skills. One promising way to achieve success is for students with disabilities to be actively involved in the individualized education program (IEP) process and their IEP meeting. When students attend and take on a leadership role in their IEP meetings, they are more likely to develop skills related to self-determination and to become more knowledgeable about transitioning to life after high school.<sup>2</sup> Teachers can help students with disabilities become more actively involved through instruction in the self-directed IEP process; where students learn about their strengths, their needs, and taking on a leadership role in developing their IEP. This can assist students with disabilities

by empowering them to advocate for themselves, especially to adults in decision-making roles.

### Learn More about the SD – IEP Process:

Practice Descriptions from the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (Setting up a free account may be required to access these resources):

Using the Self-Directed IEP to teach student Involvement in the IEP meeting:

<https://transitionta.org/node/195>

Using ChoiceMaker Self-Directed IEP to Teach IEP Meeting Participation:

<https://transitionta.org/node/1397>

Explore the Zarrow Center Choicemaker Curriculum:

“The ChoiceMaker Self-Determination Transition Curriculum (pdf) teaches middle and secondary students the self-determination skills needed to be successful in school and adult life. It consists of three strands: Choosing educational, vocational, and personal goals; Expressing goals via active student involvement in IEP meetings; Taking action to attain IEP goals.”

[Download the ChoiceMaker Lesson Packages - ou.edu](https://transitionta.org/node/1397)

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<sup>2</sup> Seong, Y., Wehmeyer, M. L., Palmer, S. B., & Little, T. D. (2015). Effects of the self-directed individualized education program on self-determination and transition of adolescents with disabilities. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 38(3), 132-141.

## Additional Resources

**I'm Determined** - <http://www.imdetermined.org>

**Self-Determination Assessments** - <http://www.imdetermined.org/educators/resources>

**Lesson Plans** - [http://www.imdetermined.org/quick\\_links/life\\_lines](http://www.imdetermined.org/quick_links/life_lines)

The I'm Determined project, a state directed project funded by the Virginia Department of Education, focuses on providing direct instruction, models, and opportunities to practice skills associated with self-determined behavior.

**It's My Future! App** <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/its-my-future!/id599009088?mt=8&ignmpt=uo%3D2>

It's My Future! is designed to support adults with developmental disabilities to become more self-determined and to meaningfully participate in their annual planning meetings. This App, produced by AbleLink Technologies, Inc. in conjunction with the Kansas University Center on Developmental Disabilities at the University of Kansas, provides self-paced videos to enable people with developmental disabilities to learn more about planning meetings.