



NASET's Education Children with Severe Disabilities Series

Self Determination

Part IV

(The ability to control one's destiny)

What it means and how to help your student develop self

One of the most significant concepts to emerge in the last few decades is the awareness of the importance of self-determination in the life of an individual with a disability. For too long, professionals made decisions for people with disabilities with little input from the individual or parents. While these decisions were motivated by good intentions, they may have overlooked the desires, hopes, and aspirations that remained hidden within the person with disabilities. As our society has become more sensitive to the needs and rights of the disabled, we have moved to the concept of self-determination as a crucial element in the design of a life plan.

Self-determination is a person's ability to control his or her own destiny. A crucial part of the concept of self-determination involves the combination of attitudes and abilities that will lead children or individuals to set goals for themselves, and to take the initiative to reach these goals. To do this one must be in charge, which is not necessarily the same thing as self-sufficiency or independence, make his or her own choices, learn to solve problems effectively, take control and responsibility for his or her life, learn to experience and cope with the consequences of making decisions on his or her own.

Martin and Marshall (1995, cited in Wehmeyer et al., 1998) summarize the evolving definition of self determination in the special education literature as describing individuals who:

Know how to choose-they know what they want and how to get it. From an awareness of personal needs self determined individuals choose goals, and then doggedly pursue them. This involves asserting an individual's presence, making his or her needs known, evaluation progress toward meeting goals, adjusting performance and creating unique approaches to solve problems (p. 147).

The Development of Self-Determination Skills

The development of self-determination skills is a process that begins in childhood and continues throughout one's life. It must be fully understood by parents when a child is still in school. This process begins early, so that the child learns how to grow up as a self-advocate and not be afraid to voice his or her needs, concerns, and opinions.

Parents of children with adequate mental competence sometimes "protect" them by making all their decisions. Parents interested in developing self-determination skills for their children must help them learn to:

- set goals
- evaluate options
- make choices
- work to achieve goals
- practice self-determination experiences by offering opportunities for decision making, socialization, leisure activities
- explore employment and housing options
- explore community recreation programs in their community by utilizing their own network of relatives and friends, as well as formal service systems
- take an active role in the decisions that will determine their future--even if it means allowing them to make mistakes.

Helpful Links on the Topic

Kids as Self Advocates: KASA is a national, grassroots network of youth with special needs and our friends, speaking on behalf of ourselves. We are leaders in our communities, and we help spread helpful, positive information among our peers to increase knowledge around various issues. Those issues include: living with special health care needs, health care transition issues, education, employment, and many more.

<http://www.fvkasa.org/index.php>

PACER Center: Self determination is believing you can control your own destiny. Self-determination is a combination of attitudes and abilities that lead people to set goals for themselves, and to take the initiative to reach these goals. It is about being in charge, but is not necessarily the same thing as self-sufficiency or independence. It means making your own choices, learning to effectively solve problems, and taking control and responsibility for one's life. Practicing self-determination also means one experiences the consequences of making choices. <http://www.pacer.org/>

The Self-Determination Toolkit is designed for teachers, parents, students, and other professionals interested in supporting self-determination in home, school, and community settings. The Toolkit is a collection of resources, which provide a basic framework to build self-determination activities into both traditional and adapted curricula for students of all ages. - See more at:

<http://www.uaa.alaska.edu/centerforhumandevlopment/selfdetermination/#sthash.pEebrSDS.dpuf>

Express Yourself: Assessing Self Determination in your Life- Pdf file: This self-assessment is designed to help you discover how much self-determination you have in your life. You are the person in charge of this assessment. To complete it, you'll read a series of statements and think about whether they describe your life. This will help you identify life areas (such as money or relationships) where you'd like to increase your level of self determination and other areas where you're already satisfied. The simple act of thinking about these things will increase your awareness of the presence of self-determination in your life.

<http://www.psych.uic.edu/uicnrtc/sd-self-assessment.pdf>

National Gateway to Self Determination: a clearinghouse for resources, training, and information on promoting self-determination. This site provides a single access for self-advocates, professionals, policy-makers, families, and the general public on the current best practices and evidence-based activities in enhancing self-determination in the lives of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

<http://www.ngsd.org/>