

“Education, Employment and Independent Living:”

Supported Decision-Making
in Special Education Programs

What's the point of Special Education programs? What should they help students learn and do?

There are a lot of answers to these questions, like increasing inclusion and providing 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 schools must make sure that students with disabilities learn and get what they need to live as independently and productively as they can. This is especially important for students who have disabilities that make it harder for them to learn, work, and live independently – those at risk of guardianship.

Unfortunately, studies show that teachers and school employees often recommend that parents get guardianship without discussing or trying other options² As we said in our brochure, “Do I HAVE to get Guardianship,” 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 may 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 everyone – people with and without disabilities – makes 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? You may ask a family member or professional financial or health care questions, go to a coworker about your job, or talk to your best friend when you have relationship problems. They help you "think through" the issues and "clear things up." 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. It's simple, really: they give you support, so you can decide.
That's Supported Decision-Making.



“Many, if not most” people with disabilities – even those with the most significant disabilities – can use Supported Decision-Making, just like you.⁵ And if they can make decisions just like you, then, just like you, they don’t need guardians.



Self-Determination and Supported Decision-Making: Keys to “Education, Employment, and Independent Living”

When people use Supported Decision-Making, they make their own decisions and can have more control over their lives—more self-determination.⁶ 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.⁷

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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 researchers and experts have called self-determination “the ultimate goal” of Special Education programs⁹ and said that schools should help students learn to make their own decisions and advocate for themselves.¹⁰

So, Supported Decision-Making and self-determination can go hand-in-hand. For students with disabilities, that means using Supported Decision-Making can help them “reap the benefits” of self-determination including “independence, employment, and community integration.”¹¹

Requesting and Receiving Supported Decision-Making

Putting it into Practice

Here are some ways you and your child can request and receive Supported Decision-Making from 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 three 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.”¹²

That may seem funny – encouraging children to use Supported Decision-Making to choose their snacks or which toys to play with. But, by doing that, DCPS is showing the students that they should make their own decisions and get help when they need it.



That's an important habit to form because, as they get older and their decisions get harder, they'll know how to get and use support to make them. This can help students become better, more confident decision-makers as they age, proving that they can make their own decisions and don't "need" guardianship.

Work with the IEP Team

Each year, your child's IEP team must review his or her "present levels of academic achievement and functional performance."¹³ Then, they must develop an IEP that prepares him or her "for further education, employment, and independent living."¹⁴

As we said, students with more self-determination are more likely to learn, live, and work independently. So, we recommend that you ask your child's IEP team to review his or her self-determination and ability to make decisions and use that review to develop an IEP.

For example, the Virginia Department of Education's "I'm Determined" project has developed checklists to help students, parents, and teachers review a student's self-determination and decision-making abilities. You can download the checklists here: imdetermined.org/resources/documents/

The student's "score" on the checklist can help shape his or her IEP. For example, if a student "scores" low on areas related to decision-making, the IEP team should develop goals, objectives, and services designed to help that student use Supported Decision-Making.



Ask for an Evaluation

IDEA gives parents and students the right to request an evaluation to determine the student's "educational needs."¹⁵ We believe that self-determination and decision-making are "educational needs" because studies show that they are directly related to students' ability to achieve "further education, employment, and independent living,"

You can ask the IEP team to have a professional evaluate your child if you think he or she has limitations in self-determination and decision-making. If the evaluation finds any limitations, it should also recommend supports and services to help the student improve.

We recommend that you request the evaluation by writing a letter or note 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.¹⁶



Use the Student-Led IEP

The “Student-Led IEP” gives students a chance to build and practice their self-determination and decision-making skills. Education experts say that IEP teams and the IEP process should help students improve their “goal setting, problem solving, decision-making and self-advocacy skills ... and [provide] opportunities for students to use these skills.”¹⁷

In the “Student-Led IEP,” students take a leadership role on their IEP Team and work with team members to develop and implement their goals, objectives,

and services. As we've said, parents should make sure their children get involved in the IEP process as young as possible. That way, their involvement, responsibilities, and skills will grow as they do. 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 eventually "Chair the meeting" and "Cooperatively develop all aspects of the IEP."¹⁸

Doesn't that sound like Supported Decision-Making? Isn't that a good description of people working with friends, family members, and professionals to help them make decisions?"¹⁹ That's one of the benefits of the Student-Led IEP: it gives students a chance to "practice different decision-making methods in a 'safe environment.'"²⁰

Research shows the many ways that students may benefit from this process. One study found 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."²¹

Use “I Statement” Goals to Build Self-Determination and use Supported Decision-Making

We recommend that students and parents use the “Student-Led IEP” to create goals and objectives that help them build skills and overcome their limitations.



If students have limitations in decision-making and self-determination that are preventing them from progressing toward “further education, employment, and independent living,” their IEPs should include goals and services designed to help them improve in those areas. Studies have found that goals focused on building self-determination can help students do better in school, at work, and in life.²²

One way to create these goals is to use “I Statements.” Traditionally, IEP goals just require students to follow rules or meet requirements.

For example, a writing goal may say, “The students will use proper grammar 75% of the time.” The problem with this goal is it’s passive and negative - if the student doesn’t use good grammar, he or she fails. The student isn’t encouraged to learn or do anything new or get help when he or she needs it.

“I Statement” goals can help students learn and build their education, self-determination, and decision-making skills.

For example, an “I Statement” writing goal might 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 take action and choose what to write about, instead of just following grammar rules. The student must also work with his or her teacher to choose the subject, write the story, and use proper grammar. As a result, the goal can help students improve their writing, build their self-determination, and use Supported Decision-Making.²³

Remember: good “I Statement” goals make students take action and work with supporters. That way, they will build self-determination and use Supported Decision-Making while addressing their “educational needs.”

Here are some examples of “I Statement” goals:

- 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 supporters to identify three things I want to do after I graduate.
- 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 and supporters to develop a study plan to help me improve my social studies grades 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

The year students turn 16, they have a right to receive Transition Services to help them prepare for life after they leave school.²⁴

In a later brochure, we'll show you 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.

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We Can Help!

Whether you're just starting to think about how you'll plan for your future or you already know what you want to do, we can help! We can answer your questions or connect you with people and organizations that may be able to work with you.

Feel free to contact us at:
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OUR NETWORK PARTNERS

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