

A photograph of three young women sitting outdoors. The woman on the left has dark hair with bangs and is wearing a colorful patterned sweater. The woman in the middle has dark hair and is wearing a dark blue jacket over a red top, with her hands clasped near her face. The woman on the right has dark hair and is wearing a white knit sweater, smiling broadly. The background is a soft-focus green outdoor setting.

Planning for the Rest of their Lives: Supported Decision-Making in Special Education Transition Services

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Supported Decision-Making Series

“What are you going to do after you graduate?”

Every year, High School juniors and seniors hear this question and look for answers. For students without disabilities, this a time for job internships and college applications, when they make contacts, find mentors, and move toward adulthood and independence.

But, for students with disabilities this can be a time of confusion, of looking for supports and trying to find funding streams, when they wonder whether they can be independent.¹ During these years, parents are often told to get guardianship by people and professionals they trust.²

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 can help students with disabilities 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 through Special Education Transition Services.

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 might:

- Ask a family member or professional for financial or health care advice
- Go to a coworker about your job
- 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.

That’s important because when people use Supported Decision-Making to make their own decisions, they have more control over their lives – more **self-determination**.⁶ 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, part of their communities, and safer.⁷



Transition Services:

What Are They?

Transition Services help students receiving Special Education prepare for life after High School. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) says that Transition Services should start the school year the student turns 16 and:

- Be based on the student's needs, and consider his or her strengths, preferences and interests;
- Help the student move from school to post-school life, including further education, employment, adult services, independent living, and community participation; and
- Include education and other services like community experiences, employment and helping the student develop adult living objectives and daily living skills.⁸

In other words, Transition Services should help students identify the goals and supports they need to lead independent and productive lives. However, even though IDEA stresses “independent living,”



teachers and school personnel often recommend that parents get guardianship without discussing alternatives like Supported Decision-Making that could help their children live independently.⁹ This can be harmful because in most guardianships, the Court takes away the person’s self-determination and gives the guardian the power to make all health, personal, and financial decisions for the person.¹⁰

To avoid unnecessary guardianships, schools, students, and parents should work together to develop Transition Services that help students prepare for and pursue “independent living,” “adult living objectives,” and “adult daily living skills.”



Think about it:
What is more important for “independent living” than being able to choose where and how you live, who you spend time with, and what you do? What is a better example of an “adult daily living skill” than decision-making?
What is a more important “adult living objective” than directing your own life?

In other words, decision-making and self-determination are keys to successful Transition Services.¹¹ Research shows that Supported Decision-Making can help students make their own decisions and “reap the benefits” of self-determination, like increased independence, employment, and independent living.¹²

Here are some ways you and your child can request and receive Transition Services that build their Supported Decision-Making skills and self-determination.

Work with the IEP Team, Request Evaluations, Use I Statements

In our brochure, "[Education, Employment and Independent Living](#)": [Supported Decision-Making in Special Education Programs](#)," we showed you ways students and parents can request Supported Decision-Making services from their schools. We recommend that you review that brochure and follow those steps – including requesting evaluations, using the Student-Led IEP, and creating "I Statement" IEP goals – throughout your child's educational career.

In particular, "I Statements" can help students build self-determination and Supported Decision-Making skills at the same time they identify their Transition goals and supports.



Here are some examples of Transition “I Statements”:

- *I will work with my IEP team to identify an agency or program that will help me live independently.*
- *I will work with my counselor to identify jobs I am interested in and find internships.*
- *I will work with my teacher to learn how to develop a budget and manage money.*
- *I will work with my counselor to identify and take college preparatory classes.*

“I Statement” goals like these make students take action and work with supporters to choose their Transition Services. In that way, they’ll use Supported Decision-Making and increase their self-determination while they create their Transition goals and identify the supports they need to reach them.



Take the Lead in Developing Transition Goals and Supports

Students should take the lead in discussing their “strengths, preferences, and interests,” with their IEP teams, including what they are interested in doing after High School. That will help them develop Transition goals and supports that match what they are interested in and what they want to get better at. Students should also work with their teams to monitor their progress and adjust their goals and supports as needed.

Supported Decision-Making is a key part of this process. Parents, teachers, and educational professionals should help students feel more comfortable talking about their abilities and limitations. IEP team members should also give students information about programs, supports, and services that can help them reach their goals for independent living, work, and other “adult living objectives.” Students can then use this support to choose goals and supports that match their “strengths, preferences, and interests.”

That’s the essence of Supported Decision-Making - the team supports the student and the student uses that support to make decisions. This method can also help students do better in and outside of school. Research shows that students who develop their own Transition goals and plans to meet them, with support from their IEP teams, are more likely to meet or exceed their goals and their teachers’ expectations.¹³



Work with a Supported Decision-Making Team

Students should identify and work with a network of people, professionals, and agencies to help them develop Transition goals and choose the supports they need to reach them.

Agencies and organizations that may be helpful include:

The Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

This program provides information and services to help people with disabilities work. You can learn more about VR at:

<https://dese.mo.gov/adult-learning-rehabilitation-services/vocational-rehabilitation>

Independent Living Centers

This program provides education, advocacy, training, counseling, and other services to help people with disabilities live as independently as possible. You can find your local Center at:

<https://mosilc.org/mo-centers-db/>

Community Work Incentive Coordinators

This program provides information, supports and services to help people with disabilities get and keep jobs while also keeping their Medicaid, SSI, SSDI, and other public benefits. You can learn more at:

<http://www.moadvocacy.org/WIPA.htm>

Agencies that provide information and other services to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, including us: the Missouri Developmental Disabilities Council, Missouri Protection and Advocacy Services, and the UMKC Institute for Human Development. Our contact information is available at the end of this brochure.

Students should make contact with these and other resources and work with them to identify programs, training, and other opportunities to learn about and develop skills in areas they are interested in. Then, they should invite the people and professionals they work with to be a part of their IEP team.

At the IEP team meeting, each member should provide the student and team with information about the specific supports it provides. Then, using this information and other support from the IEP team, the student should choose Transition goals and the supports they need to reach them.¹⁴ Research shows that when students, agencies, and IEP teams collaborate in this way, students are more likely to meet their goals.¹⁵

Create a Supported Decision-Making Agreement

Finally, students should create Supported Decision-Making Agreements when they turn 18 to identify the people, professionals, and agencies that they want to work with to develop their Transition goals and supports.

Schools may tell parents that after their child turns 18, they can't attend IEP meetings unless they get guardianship.

That is not true.

Students receiving Special Education do gain the right to make their own decisions when they turn 18 – the same way everyone else does. However, they can still invite whoever they want to come to their IEP team meetings and support them.

Therefore, when students turn 18, they can create Supported Decision-Making Agreements to tell their school who they want to come to their meetings, see their records, and help them develop their goals and supports.

For example, when District of Columbia Public School (DCPS) students turn 18, they are given the chance to sign a Supported Decision-Making Agreement. You can review DCPS' Agreement form here: <http://supporteddecisionmaking.org/node/362>

The district's Agreement lets students identify the people who "make up their educational support network," the areas where they want support, and the support they want. The student and supporters then sign the plan and work together to develop the student's Transition goals and supports, with the student being the final decision-maker.

You can create a Supported Decision-Making plan by adapting DCPS's Supported Decision-Making Agreement or creating your own form and presenting it to the IEP team. This will ensure that students have people at their IEP meetings who will help them use Supported Decision-Making to understand the process, identify options, and choose goals and supports that match their "strengths, preferences, and interests."

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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:
(800) 500-7878
moddcouncil.org



OUR NETWORK PARTNERS

**Missouri Protection and
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