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AUTHOR	Field, Sharon
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ABSTRACT

This fact sheet emphasizes the importance of self-determination in effective transition planning for students with disabilities, their families, teachers, and service organizations. Encouraging student self-determination is a key component of quality transition programming, and the importance of self-determination is underscored in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act legislation and amendments. Guidelines are provided so that schools, families, and adult agencies can promote student self-determination. (SLD)

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Self Determination: Assuming Control of Your Plans for Postsecondary Education

Sharon Field

2003

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Fast Facts from
The George Washington University

HEATH Resource Center

Self Determination; Assuming Control of Your Plans for Postsecondary Education by Sharon Field, Ed.D

Many HEATH inquirers are high-school aged students with disabilities and their families who are considering options for living and learning beyond high school. Self-determined students, with the help and encouragement of family and teachers, are best positioned to make informed, appropriate choices about their futures. The following fact sheet emphasizes the important role of self-determination in effective transition planning for students with disabilities, their families, teachers, and service organizations.

Encouraging student self-determination is a key component of quality transition programming. Student self-determination is important during the transition process for several reasons. First, students' transition plans will be more relevant if they reflect students' needs, interests, and preferences. In addition, research indicates that students are more likely to achieve goals when they have participated in the goal setting process. Finally, the quest for self-determination is important throughout one's lifetime. When students acquire skills that foster self-determination during their transition years, they develop skills that will benefit them throughout their lives.

The importance of self-determination is underscored in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) legislation and The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 amendments. For example, IDEA requires that students' preferences and interests be taken into account and that students be invited to participate in individualized education program (IEP) team meetings when transition services are discussed. The Rehabilitation Act amendments affirm that persons with disabilities have a right to self-determination and require that individuals with disabilities be included as participants in the development of their Individualized Written Rehabilitation Plans.

What is self-determination?

According to Field and Hoffman (1994, p. 164), self-determination is the "ability to identify and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself." This definition is consistent with the themes throughout various definitions of self-determination. Throughout all of the definitions of self-determination that have been offered, there is an emphasis on knowing oneself, making choices, taking control, believing in oneself, and taking action to reach one's goals.

How can schools help students become more self-determined? There are many things schools can do to encourage student self-determination.

1. Schools can provide instruction for students in the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to be more self-determined. Characteristics that have been linked to self-determination in several models of self-determination include:

- Awareness of personal preferences, interests, strengths, and limitations.
- Ability to differentiate between wants and needs.
- Ability to make choices based on preferences, interests, wants, and needs.
- Ability to consider multiple options and to anticipate consequences for decisions.
- Ability to initiate and take action when needed.
- Ability to evaluate decisions based on the outcomes of previous decisions and to revise future decisions accordingly.
- Ability to set and work toward goals.
- Problem-solving skills.
- A strive for independence while recognizing interdependence with others.
- Self-advocacy skills.
- Ability to self-regulate behavior.
- Self-evaluation skills.
- Independent performance and adjustment skills.
- Persistence.

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The George Washington University
HEATH Resource Center
2121 K Street, N.W. Suite 220 • Washington, DC 20037
Voice/TTY: 202-973-0904 • 1-800-544-3284 (toll-free) • Fax: 202-973-0908
Email: askheath@heath.gwu.edu Website: www.heath.gwu.edu

- Ability to use communication skills such as negotiation, compromise, and persuasion to reach goals
- Ability to assume responsibility for actions and decisions.
- Self-confidence, pride and creativity.

Many schools already have instructional efforts aimed at many of these components. By systematically examining instructional offerings to assure that instruction is provided in all of these areas, and that students have the opportunity to apply these skills and characteristics in a cohesive manner, schools can help students become better equipped to be self-determined. In addition, several instructional packages are available to teach to these skills and characteristics. (For reviews of instructional materials, see A Practical Guide to Teaching Self-Determination in the references.)

2. Schools can provide opportunities for students to practice self-determination. Providing students with ample opportunities for choice, encouraging appropriate risk taking, and supporting exploratory activities (e.g., career exploration) all help to encourage self-determination for students.

3. Schools can provide an environment where self-determination is encouraged throughout the school community on a system-wide basis.
By encouraging self-determination for students, parents, and staff, students will be provided with appropriate role models and with a setting that is conducive to student self-determination.

How can families help students become more self-determined?

Families play an important role in the development of students' self-determination. Davis and Wehmeyer (1991) compiled a list of specific strategies families can use to encourage student self-determination. Examples of these strategies are provided below:

1. Walk the tightrope between protection and independence. Allow your son or daughter to explore his or her world... While there are obvious limits to this, all parents have to "let go," and it is never easy.
2. Encourage your son or daughter to ask questions and express opinions. Involvement in family discussions and decision-making sessions is one way of providing this opportunity to learn.

3. Self-worth and self-confidence are critical factors in the development of self-determination. Model your own sense of positive self-esteem for your child. (For more information on what parents can do to promote self-determination, see A Practical Guide to Teaching Self-determination and Ten Steps to Independence: Promoting Self-determination in the Home in the references.)

How can adult agencies encourage self-determination?

Research has shown that students who are more self-determined in high school are more likely to be employed and to be employed at a higher rate of pay after high school than students who were less self-determined (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). Adult agency staff can encourage self-determination in the following ways:

1. Participate in collaborative transition planning meetings. Stress the importance of student self-determination for success in adult outcomes with other planning team members.

2. Support the active, meaningful involvement of students in transition planning meetings and other educational and transitional activities.

3. Encourage students, families, and educators to see that self-determination skills are lifelong skills that will be needed throughout adulthood. For example, educate your transition team members about provisions of the rehabilitation legislation that are related to self-determination (e.g., that participants will be involved in the development of their Individualized Written Rehabilitation Plans.)

References and resources

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