

What are Self-Determination Skills and Why Are they Important?

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As a parent, you want what is best for your child. Research shows that persons with disabilities who demonstrate self-determination skills also experience a higher quality of life (Wehman, 2006). So, what are self-determination skills and how can you help your child develop them?

Self-determination includes a variety of components that in turn increase a person's ability to successfully make independent decisions. Common components include:

- Choice-making skills
- Decision-making/Problem-solving skills
- Goal-setting and attainment skills
- Independence, Risk-taking and Safety skills
- Self-observation, Evaluation and Reinforcement skills
- Self-instruction skills
- Self-Advocacy and Leadership skills
- Sense of control over one's life
- Development of Self-esteem
- Self-Awareness/Self-Knowledge

These skills emerge throughout childhood and adolescence. By fostering the development of self-determination skills, you can increase your child's sense of control over situations and events in his or her life. Self-determination can be exerted even if your child is not physically able to complete a particular task. This can be done by guiding a personal assistant to help complete the desired outcomes (Wehman, 2006). You can help your child increase these skills through daily living experiences such as taking risks, making mistakes, and reflecting on the outcomes (Bremer, C., Kachgal, M., & Schoeller, K., n.d.). The following table outlines some basic examples of ways to support your child's development of self-determination skills in each of the component areas:

Tips for Parents

Choice-making skills	Self-Advocacy and Leadership skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow your child to choose between 2 or more options. <i>Would you like to wear the red shirt or the blue shirt? Would you like to play Bingo or Candyland?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teach your child to speak up for himself. <i>Let's talk with your teacher so she knows which test accommodations allow you to do your best work.</i>
Decision making/Problem-solving skills	Development of Self-esteem
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow your child to make judgments about the best solution to a situation. <i>Would it be better to do your homework first or play your computer game?</i> Help your child find the answer to activities or tasks without an obvious solution. <i>If you have a bag of mini candy bars, how will you know if you have enough to share with your class?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help your child develop a positive perception about what he is able to accomplish by building on past experiences. <i>Remember how worried you were when you didn't know anyone at school? Look at how many friends you have made. I bet the same thing will happen at your new school.</i>
Goal-setting and attainment skills	Sense of control over one's life
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help your child clarify what he hopes to accomplish. <i>Should we get your book report done by Friday, so you won't have any homework over the weekend?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help your child develop a sense of control over situations and events. <i>If you choose to practice (reading/exercising/social skills) you are making positive choices that will impact your ability to be successful in the future.</i>
Self observation, Evaluation, and Reinforcement skills	Self-Awareness and Self-Knowledge
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coach your child to determine if he is satisfied with the results of his work and encourage him to reflect on his success or shortcomings. <i>Now that you've cleaned up your room, let's figure out if you have done a good job. Let's look around. . . Do you think Mrs. Smith would say that you have done a good job? . . . You're right; you have done a good job. How does it feel to see your room so tidy and organized? Will it be easier to find what you are looking for?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teach your child to recognize his unique strengths, and abilities, as well his support needs and limitations. <i>Since you scored so well on the ACT, I understand that you plan to go to college, however, with your new powerchair, you are going to have to think about the layouts of some of the campuses you are considering.</i>
Self-instruction skills	Independence, Risk-taking and Safety skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help your child develop "self-talk" to help him through situations. <i>"I finished putting away my toys, now I will check to see what I need to do next."</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage your child that independently taking risks within safe boundaries is an important opportunity for growth. <i>We are going to take your training wheels off your bike, but we will spend time practicing riding in the driveway before you venture out on your own.</i>

The above are some simple tips that you as parents can begin using to help your child develop stronger self-determination skills. By incorporating these tips into your daily routine, you are helping your child make important strides towards greater independence.

References

Bremer, C.D. , Kachgal, M., & Schoeller, K. (2003, April). Self-determination: Supporting successful transition. *Improving Secondary Education and Transition Services through Research*. 2(1). Retrieved on February 17, 2010 from <http://www.ncset.org/publications/viewdesc.asp?id=962>

Wehman, P. (2006). *Life Beyond the Classroom*. (4th ed.) Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.