



SELF-DETERMINATION AND Transition Planning

by

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Contents

Series Preface	vii
Editorial Advisory Board	ix
About the Author	xi
Preface	xiii
Acknowledgments	xv
1 What Is Self-Determination and Why Does It Matter in Transition?	1
What Is Self-Determination?	
Why Does Self-Determination Matter?	
Self-Determination and Transition Planning	
2 Accommodating Individual Differences	11
Assessing Student Self-Determination	
Understanding Individual Differences in Self-Determined Behavior	
Collaborating with Students and Families to Promote Self-Determination	
Accommodating Individual Differences	
3 Promoting Self-Determination Skills Through Choice Making	29
Expressing Preferences and Making Choices	
Impact of Choice and Preference on Outcomes	
4 Promoting Skills Leading to Enhanced Self-Determination Through Self-Management	43
Teaching Self-Management Skills	
Considerations When Applying Self-Management Systems	

5	Promoting Skills Leading to Enhanced Self-Determination Through Goal Setting	59
	Goal Setting and Attainment	
	Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction	
6	Promoting Skills Leading to Enhanced Self-Determination Through Self-Advocacy.....	75
	Teaching Self-Advocacy Skills	
	Impact of Self-Advocacy on Outcomes	
7	Creating Opportunities for Self-Determination	89
	Attitudes Associated with Self-Determined Behavior	
	Assessing Opportunities for Self-Determination	
	Creating Repeated Opportunities for Self-Determination	
	Considering Culture When Creating Opportunities for Self-Determination	
8	Creating Systems of Supports for Self-Determination.....	103
	Supports and Support Needs	
	Building a System of Support	
	Role of Systems of Supports in Promoting Self-Determination	
9	Systems Change to Promote Self-Determination.....	115
	Characteristics of Schools and Communities that Support Student Self-Determination	
	Self-Determination and Ongoing Restructuring Efforts	
	Conclusion	
	References	127
	For Further Information.....	137
	Index	141



About the Author

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1

What Is Self-Determination and Why Does It Matter in Transition?

Transition is kind of a huge deal. So when we planned his transition to adulthood, we were doing a move, a change of schools, and a change of jobs all at once. We decided up front that self-determination was going to be an integral part of the transition process. We set everything up so Michael could make choices and everything would be done with his interests and preferences in mind. We went slowly; first we just did weekends at the new location. When we actually made the move, we took him to the new school, he started his new job, and we noticed almost no behavior problems! When we had transitions in the past, like going from elementary to middle school, we've had no sleep, screaming, and aggression. But, this transition was different because we built in Michael's self-determination. We focused on his choices and preferences, even his preference for going slowly. After we made the move, there were still so many changes, but he was fine. He was able to handle all of them; I think that's the power of self-determination.

(Kay—Michael's mom, personal communication, June 5, 2012)

I have made my decision. It was a very difficult decision and after several tries to get the words out of my mouth to make such a big announcement, I decided to go through with the surgery and I will most likely have it in early to mid-June. It was pretty grown up of me to make such a huge decision, probably the hardest I've made in my life. I thought that I would focus on my education and finish my senior year in high school, get my diploma, and then have the operation because of my dedication to school. Making a decision like this really reminded me of the self-determination PowerPoint and how we talked about self-determination and decision making.

(Jake, personal communication, February 21, 2010)

Promoting student self-determination is a critical part of effective transition services (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998b; Hasazi et al., 2005; Test, Fowler, et al., 2009). The opening quotes demonstrate that self-determination can make a real difference in the lives of individuals with disabilities and their families. Kay, whose son Michael has multiple disabilities and is receiving community-based services focused on employment, highlights how self-determination enables Michael to exert control over his world, have his preferences respected, and experience the quality of life that he desires. His family plays a key role in creating an environment that supports his self-determination. Jake, a young man with high-functioning autism who made the transition from his neighborhood high school to a local community college, describes how learning about self-determination allowed him to make adult decisions, particularly about a needed operation on his foot and figuring out when and how to schedule this operation so it did not conflict with his last semester of high school. He had to problem-solve, weigh the pros and cons of the different

options, and make a decision. He used a number of skills that are central to self-determined behavior, skills he learned throughout his life while learning about self-determination.

Although most of us would personally and professionally agree that self-determination is important, we would probably also agree that it can be difficult to figure out how to support the students we work with to become self-determining. Jake and Michael are both self-determined young men, but they express their self-determination in different ways and need different supports from their families and friends. Each student we work with is unique; they each have their own profile of strengths and support needs. Plus, there are so many demands on our time and so many things that are important to teach.

This book provides strategies to make self-determination more meaningful and accessible for students with disabilities. It focuses on 1) clarifying the definition of self-determination and what it can mean to students with disabilities (Chapter 1), 2) identifying strategies to individualize self-determination instruction (Chapter 2), 3) identifying strategies to teach skills associated with self-determination (Chapters 3–6), 4) creating opportunities for expressing self-determination (Chapter 7), 5) building supports for self-determination (Chapter 8), and 6) promoting self-determination in the systems in which we work (Chapter 9). Research-based information on how to promote self-determination is blended with real stories from the lives of individuals with disabilities and their families. The stories of Michael and Jake, who were featured in the chapter's opening quotes, are followed throughout the book. Each of these individuals has been supported to develop self-determination skills and to use these skills to achieve the lives that they want. Illustrations from their lives are used to show how this has worked. Other students, parents, and professionals are heard from throughout the book to understand the real-world application of self-determination, showing that teaching self-determination skills and creating opportunities for students to practice the skills can happen for all students, regardless of their support needs (see Chapter 2). It is all about ensuring that the research-validated practices that professionals and people with disabilities and their families acknowledge are important are actually implemented in practice. The Evidence-Based Practice, Clinical Judgment, and Values research box talks about the importance of evidence-based practice that takes into account research, professional wisdom, and student and family values.

WHAT IS SELF-DETERMINATION?

Self-determination can be an elusive concept. We all have an idea of what it means to us, but we also recognize that it might not be the same for all people. People work toward different goals and want different things out of life. They make different choices and encounter different problems, which makes it confusing. How do we support all students to be self-determining if the outcomes look different for everyone? Researchers have suggested that there are essential characteristics of self-determination that apply to all students (Wehmeyer, 1997, 2003a, 2003b), and that all students can become self-determining and work toward the adult outcomes that they personally value with individualized instruction that considers personal characteristics, culture, and preferences of students and their families (Shogren, 2011).

Though critically important for students with disabilities, self-determination is relatively new to special education, with a real research focus only beginning about twenty years ago, in the 1990s.

Definition of Self-Determination in Special Education

Although it may seem like self-determination is always a topic of discussion when we are talking about the transition to adult life, the idea of self-determination for students with

Evidence-Based Practice, Clinical Judgment, and Values

A review of evidence-based practice definitions reveals a common thread: Practices should be supported by rigorous scientific research and consistently lead to positive outcomes (LaCava & Shogren, 2012). A debate exists in the field regarding the definition of *rigorous scientific research*. Some groups have emphasized specific types of research designs (e.g., the importance of randomized control trials; What Works Clearinghouse, 2008), whereas others have emphasized that diverse research designs can contribute to identifying evidence-based practices (Odom et al., 2005).

There seems to be a growing consensus, however, that a variety of research designs can contribute to the knowledge of evidence-based practice as long as the design allows for an evaluation of the degree to which an instructional practice caused a change in a student outcome. This can include group and quasi-experimental designs (Gersten et al., 2005) as well as single-subject designs (Horner et al., 2005). Cook and Cook (2011) highlighted the importance of the 1) research design, 2) quality of research studies, 3) quantity of research studies, and 4) magnitude of effect. There should essentially be a sufficient number of high-quality studies that use research designs that can document a relationship between an instructional practice such as self-determination and a student outcome. Furthermore, the effect of the instructional practice should be of sufficient magnitude to make a difference in the lives of students and their families.

Seek out instructional practices that have research to support their impact on outcomes when working with individual students to promote self-determination. But remember that research studies are not the only thing that goes into evidence-based practice. The American Psychological Association's Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice defined *evidence-based practice* as the "integration of the best available research with clinical expertise in the context of patient characteristics, culture and preferences" (2006, p. 273). Whitehurst defined *evidence-based education* as the "integration of professional wisdom with the best available empirical evidence in making decisions about how to deliver instruction" (2002, Slide 3). Consider professional wisdom and knowledge of student characteristics, family preferences, and culture to select the most appropriate intervention. Also, data must be collected to document that practices are effective with individual students. Numerous factors should be considered in promoting positive outcomes. Figure 1.1 shows factors that the special education field has suggested are important to consider when implementing evidence-based practices (National Autism Center, 2009; Prizant, 2011; Simpson et al., 2005). Figure 1.2 provides a model for using these factors when making instructional decisions.

disabilities is relatively new in the special education field. It was only in the 1990s and early 2000s that significant attention was devoted to the need to support students with disabilities to become self-determining to promote positive adult outcomes. An explosion of writing on self-determination has occurred since that time. For example, Wood and Test (2001) reviewed the literature on self-determination at the turn of the century and found that more than 800 resources, including 450 peer-reviewed articles on self-determination, were published between 1972 and 2000, with most of this literature published in the 1990s. Imagine how many more books and articles have been published since the turn of the 21st century.

Given all of this literature, we need an organizing framework for understanding the key elements of self-determination and what it can mean for students with disabilities. Because of the diverse understandings of self-determination, Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, and Wehmeyer—all researchers who developed frameworks for understanding

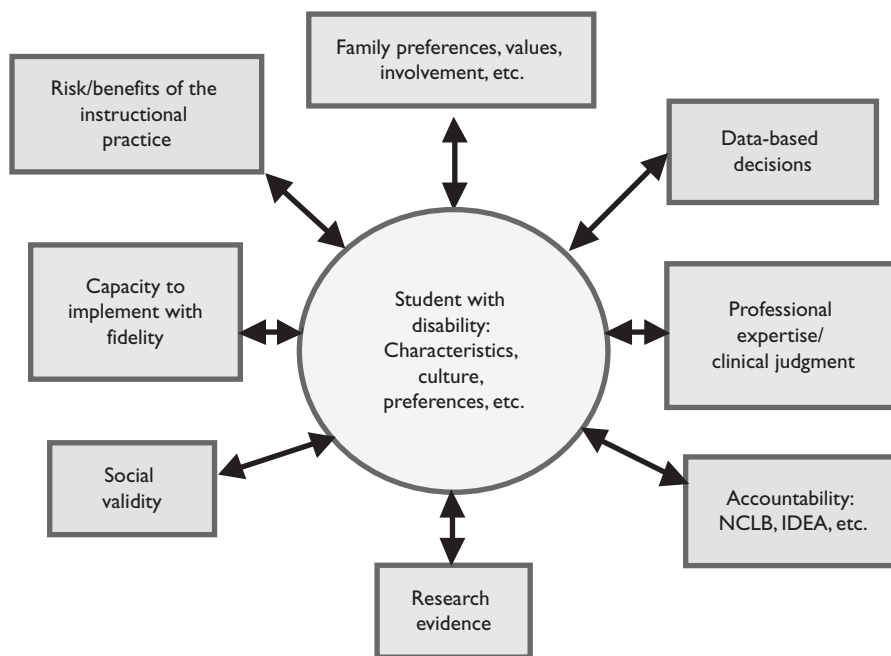


Figure 1.1. Factors to consider when using evidence-based practices. (From LaCava, P.G., & Shogren, K.A. [2012]. *Evidence-based practice and autism spectrum disorders: The intersection of research, practice, and policy*. Paper presented at the 136th Annual Meeting of the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Charlotte, NC; reprinted with permission from Paul LaCava.)

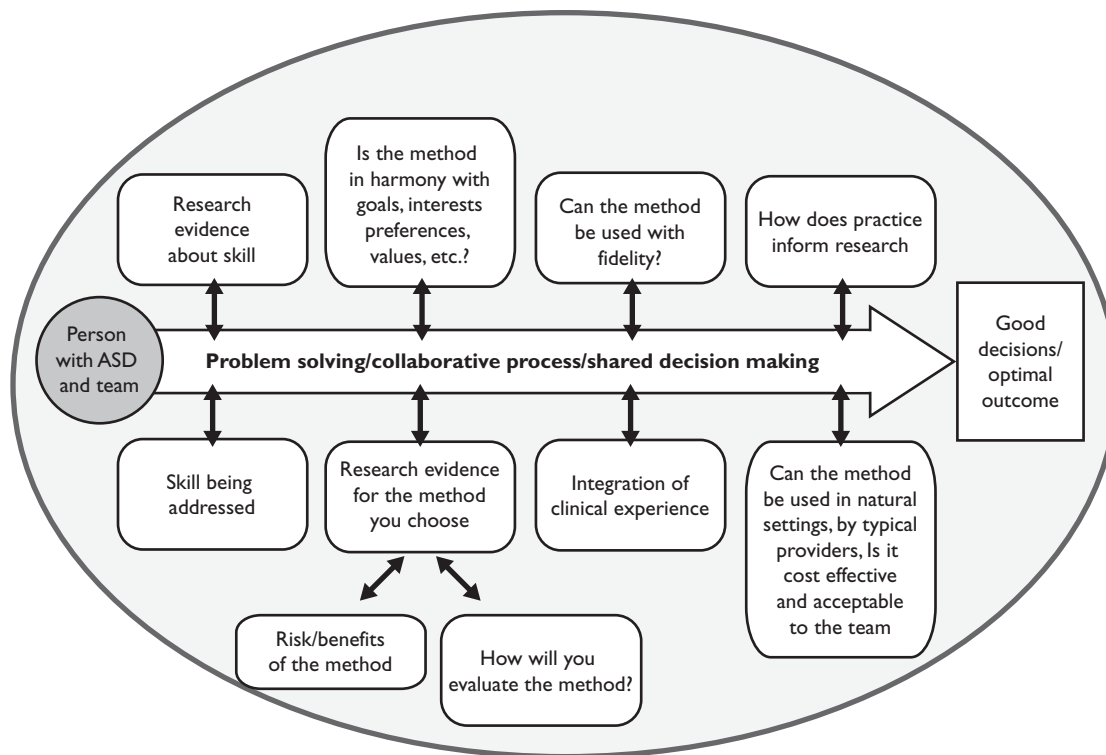


Figure 1.2. Model of implementing evidence-based practices. (From LaCava, P.G., & Shogren, K.A. [2012]. *Evidence-based practice and autism spectrum disorders: The intersection of research, practice, and policy*. Paper presented at the 136th Annual Meeting of the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Charlotte, NC; reprinted with permission from Paul LaCava.)

self-determination—highlighted the evolving definition of self-determination, stating that *self-determination* is

A combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one's strengths and limitations, together with a belief of oneself as capable and effective are essential to self-determination. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals have greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults in our society. (1998a, p. 2)

Functional Theory of Self-Determination Wehmeyer (1997, 2003b, 2005) introduced the functional theory of self-determination, one of the most cited definitional frameworks for self-determination. Wehmeyer argued that self-determination cannot simply be defined as a set of behaviors because almost any behavior can be used to exert control over one's life. He instead stated that self-determination has to be defined by the function of a person's actions or behaviors. He specifically said that self-determination is "volitional actions that enable one to act as the primary causal agent in one's life and to maintain or improve one's quality of life" (2005, p. 117). Although this definition might seem complex, breaking down the three key aspects of the definition makes it easy to see how self-determination is relevant for students with disabilities.

1. *Volitional actions*: Volitional action is purposeful and has a specific intent. Students who are self-determined are being purposeful and acting as a causal agent over their lives (Wehmeyer, 2005). Jake was being purposeful in his decision making when he opted to have his surgery (with support from his family and doctor) after the end of his senior year of high school so that he could experience his last semester with his peers.
2. *Causal agency*: Causal agents are people that make things happen in their lives. Students with disabilities are self-determining when they act with the intent of being a causal agent or of causing the things they want to happen in their lives (Wehmeyer, 2005). Michael used his behavior to express his preferences and communicate the things he wants to happen in his life (e.g., easing into changes such as a new house, school, and job).
3. *Quality of life*: Quality of life is about the hopes and dreams people have for their lives. Researchers have identified key domains of quality of life that include emotional well-being, interpersonal relations, material well-being, personal development, physical well-being, self-determination, social inclusion, and rights (Schalock et al., 2002). Each person's hopes and dreams for their quality of life are influenced by personal characteristics and environmental factors. People act in a self-determined way (i.e., with intent and as the person that makes things happen in his or her life) to improve their quality of life across these eight dimensions. Jake acted to improve not only his physical well-being by having his foot surgery but also his personal development by finishing his high school education with his class. Michael used his behavior to improve his emotional well-being by ensuring his preferences were understood and respected by his parents.

Self-determination is acting with intent to improve one's quality of life, and these actions are identified by four essential characteristics: 1) the person acted autonomously, 2) the behaviors are self-regulated, 3) the person initiated and responded in a psychologically empowered manner, and 4) the person acted in a self-realizing manner (Wehmeyer, 2003a).

This sounds deceptively simple, right? How do we enable students to be the people that make things happen in their lives, to be autonomous, to be self-regulated, to be psychologically empowered, and to be self-realizing? We focus on teaching and creating opportunities for specific skills and attitudes to develop that lead to the essential characteristics of self-determined behavior. These skills and attitudes, which Wehmeyer (2003a) called the component elements of self-determination, are listed in Table 1.1 and are discussed in greater detail in Chapters 3–6.

The importance of teaching skills, creating opportunities, and providing supports for students to use these skills to become causal agents—or people that make things happen to improve their quality of life—are the key takeaways from the functional theory. It is also important to remember the following:

The key takeaways from the functional theory of self-determination are the importance of teaching skills, creating opportunities, and providing supports for students to become people who make things happen to improve their quality of life.

- The purpose of self-determined behavior is for people to act to achieve their hopes and dreams for their lives.
- Self-determination develops over time as students develop the skills and attitudes associated with self-determination.
- Supports and accommodations are critical to developing and expressing self-determined behavior.
- Repeated opportunities and appropriate supports are critical for growing self-determination skills. These opportunities and supports will look different as students with disabilities age. Figure 1.3 shows how Jeanine, Jake’s mom, thinks about her role in supporting the development of Jake’s self-determination over time.

Culture and Self-Determination The role of culture is one factor that often comes up when discussing self-determination. Cultural factors may influence how individual students and their families define quality of life and their expression of self-determined behavior. Culture is not the same as categorical labels (e.g., Caucasian, Hispanic, African American), but instead is shaped by multiple factors, including gender, disability, race/ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic background. There is a small but growing body of research that examines the influence of culture on self-determination. The Self-Determination and Culture research box summarizes key findings from this body of research that inform our thinking about supporting students from diverse backgrounds to be self-determining.

Table 1.1. Skills and attitudes associated with self-determined behavior

Choice making
Decision making
Problem solving
Goal setting and attainment
Self-management (self-monitoring, self-evaluation, self-instruction, and self-reinforcement)
Self-advocacy and leadership
Internal locus of control
Perceptions of self-efficacy and positive outcome expectancies
Self-awareness and self-knowledge

Sources: Wehmeyer, 1997, 2003a, 2005.

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