
Building Self-Determination in my Child

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Ms. Panter and Dr. Mitchell are a mother/daughter team who work with students, teachers, and parents in the field of special education. Beth was in special education since second grade and while Dr. Mitchell was a special education teacher, she was also the mother of a daughter in special education. Beth and Vickie use not only what is backed by education research and practices to train others, but they also teach what they learned as a mother and daughter walking down the road of special education services. As Beth tells students, “your disability does not fall off of you because you are an adult, but you also need to know that your disability is not who you are. So learn who you are, what works for you, and learn how to help yourself.” The training your teacher and child have recently received was designed to do just that--teach children how to help themselves. But there is another very important team member, the parent. This information and the parent/child discussion activity are designed to help parents teach their child self-help/self-determination skills.

What is Self-determination?

As parents, we work today to develop our children to be the adults of tomorrow. What we know is that “building the adults of tomorrow” is a step-by-step, day-by-day building process. What we also know is that we cannot wait until our child turns 16 or is a senior in high school to begin to develop adult skills, whether they have a disability or not. Developing “self-reliant” children begins even before elementary school.

Two key skills in self-determination include the ability to solve problems and set goals. Educational research about successful young adults indicates that the earlier a child learns self-determination skills the more likely they are to use these skills in adolescence when they become even more critical for success.

So what is self-determination? Well, it is composed of two words, “self” and “determined.” Self-determination is the ability to begin to take control of one’s life to make decisions, set goals, and basically to learn to help yourself and work through plans to meet goals for life, home, and/or school. Successful adults have self-determination skills. It is what helps us to be self-reliant. As noted above, the earlier we learn these skills the better off we will be. If we do not help children to move towards self-determination in elementary school, it is not a pretty picture in middle and high school. The elementary student who says “I can’t do that” or “I don’t want to do that” is not a concern unless they eventually become a 13 year-old or high school student who says “I can’t do that” or “I don’t want to do that.” The elementary child who finds it difficult to make choices and make decisions is far more at risk of problems if the lack of decision-making skills continues into the teenage and adult years. Hopefully, we have made the case. Start now, but remember they are children so they won’t learn the skill immediately or quickly. However, by starting now and

helping them build self-determination skills over time, you will help to develop some very important survival skills in your child. We all learn differently and at a different pace. This is a concept that is learned over a period of years. For children with more significant disabilities, the child may not be independent as an adult, but it does not mean they must be totally reliant upon other people for making all their decisions or choices.

Start now. Even if a child does not know they are in special education and have not been told they have a disability, rest assured they know there is a problem and they struggle when other children do not. However, without information to understand the disability (not the definition, just how the disability affects them) children come up with an explanation in their head and simply think, "Something is wrong with them." The absence of information can result in some very interesting and sometimes troublesome childhood beliefs.

Help your child to understand that their disability is not who they are. It is simply something we must work with, work around, or sometimes get some help to get the job done. It is no different than the mother who wears glasses, the grandfather with high blood pressure, or the aunt who has diabetes. The health condition is not who they are, and as long as they know how it affects them and what to do so they can go on and live their life, then there are great possibilities for the future. That is what we are talking about with self-determination: building decision-makers, goal-setters, and leaders from elementary school through high school.

How can I help my child have more self-determination?

1. Encourage your child to make choices in their every day life
2. Help them to identify their strengths and weaknesses
3. Help your child understand choice and consequences
4. Help your child have goals
5. Promote disability awareness *(They don't have to know the technical stuff or all the logistics ... just help them to understand they have a weakness but they also have strengths. Just like different medicines, there are lots of side affects to a disability but we don't always have all of them ... Just because your child has a certain disability does not mean he or she has all of the characteristics of that disability that you read about in a book or on the internet. Don't look for problem; look for strengths and create opportunities.)*
6. Help your child with problem solving

Did you know that one year after graduating from high school, children with disabilities who have self-determination skills are more likely to be employed and/or attending postsecondary education than students without self-determination skills?

Wehmeyer & Palmer (2002). Self-Determination and the education of students with disabilities. ERIC Digest #E-632.

WHAT YOU CAN DO AT HOME:

Ages 2 – Kindergarten:

1. Allow choice making: *(This will allow your child to feel free to make choices but with you still in control.)*
 - a. “Would you like this or this for lunch?”
2. “What do you want to wear today, this or that?”
3. Explain: “Why did you make that decision?”
 - a. “Why did you choose this for lunch over that?”
 - b. “Why do you want to wear this over that?” *(For example, help them understand why if it’s a cold day they wear long sleeves and not short sleeves. ANOTHER IDEA: If the weather is cold and they did not pick a coat, go and look out of the window with the child and together describe a mental picture of them playing outside, getting in the car to running errands with you, or waiting for the school bus. What is the weather like? Will you be warm or cold? Did you choose the right clothes you need for warm or cold weather?)*
4. Provide feedback: *(Provide feed back for everything.)*
 - a. “I agree, you should wear the long sleeve shirt today because it is cold outside.”
 - b. “You made a good decision about the clothes you need for school today. You were very smart to think about wearing a coat so you can stay warm.” *(In other words, you are reinforcing the mental process they used to make a decision. Sometimes children do things and they can’t do it right a second time because they do not know what they did right the first time. By giving your child feedback describing the thinking and decision-making process they used successfully, you increase the chance of good decisions occurring more than one time. Be patient. It will take many times of giving feedback for it to stick in the “long-term memory compartment” of the brain!)*
5. Planning:
 - a. “We are going to the pool today. What do we need to bring with us?” *(Here you are teaching children how to plan ahead and to think about what they need? Why is it that as parents we have to keep doing things for our children that they are capable of doing for themselves? Sometimes it is because we have taught them since they were two and three years old that we parents will do the thinking for them. If your child is already in elementary school, you may have to do some “unlearning,” but it is certainly easier to go through the re-teaching and unlearning bad habits in elementary school than it is in the teenage and adult years.)*

Grades First to Fifth:

1. Strategies to discover “what works” and to make choices:
 - a. “When I help you study for your spelling test, is it better for you to write the words down or spell them out loud?”
 - b. “Do you prefer to do your homework when you first get home or you would like to have a snack/watch one show and then do your homework?”
2. Problem and solutions:
 - a. “This morning you forgot your lunch money. How did that affect you at lunch?” *(If the child says, “I got to eat anyway,” make sure they realize the extra steps they had to make in order to eat by asking questions. For example, they had to talk to the teacher, get money from the office, call you, or whatever they had to do. Then ask them what they could have been doing if they had not had to take that extra step to get the money for lunch. For example, would the child have had more time at the lunch table talking to friends, more time for recess, etc.? You may have to look long and hard to make sure they understand the negative side of forgetting money and try to make sure that you and the school do not “rescue” them. No one learns to do things differently if there are no negative consequences.)*
3. Your decision? Feedback:
 - a. “Today when you could not figure out the math problem on your homework you threw your pencil...Why did you do that? Was that the right or wrong thing to do? If you get upset next time, what could you do differently?”
 - b. “You did very good on this paper (or math on the report card). Good job! What did you do differently that worked better this time compared to last time?” *(You may need to help your child remember if they have forgotten. Maybe they attended tutorials. Maybe they met with their teacher. Maybe they spent an extra 30 minutes on their homework. Maybe they simply TURNED IN their homework, which they had not turned in the first semester. If need be, make a list of what is working and post it on the refrigerator door. The list of strategies that worked at home and at school become a “Toolbox for Success” that can be reviewed when your child is needing to solve a problem at home or at school.)* Help your child to begin to recognize at an early age what the work habits and learning strategies are that work for them. This will not only help them in school, but this self-awareness knowledge will help them as adults.

How can my young child participate in his or her ARD/IEP Meeting?

1. We have developed a “Parent and Student Discussion Worksheet.” Use the Parent and Student Discussion worksheet. Use the questions to start a conversation with your child to help him/her to recognize their strengths and barriers to learning, but more importantly to help them think about how to help themselves in the future.
2. Locate a comfortable place to have the discussion. Don’t be distracted by other things like the cell phone, TV, or the computer. Your body language of “being busy with other things” and the “lack of eye contact” speaks volumes to your child about the importance or lack of importance of their opinion or of the topic you are talking about. Make it a conversation and not a lesson. Sit back, relax. Make it fun and not a chore. Break it up into small pieces, if needed, and talk about one question per day or at one time. Help your child to recognize that what is the problem in school, what is discouraging to them in school, to identify solutions, AND BEST OF ALL, to discover “THE SOLUTION IS THEM” is a gift for a lifetime!
3. Go over the worksheet with your child before the ARD/IEP meeting. This will help you be able to go into the meeting prepared and better able represent your child if he or she does not attend the meeting.
4. CAUTION: Do not have this conversation the day of or the day before the ARD/IEP meeting! Rushed conversations are stressful. Have the conversations weeks before the meeting. In fact, have it now, why wait? Then, after you talk with your child, tell them if they think of anything else that they can add to the list the two of you have made about how to help themselves.
5. ANOTHER CAUTION: Do not ever identify a problem without identifying a solution. Think of ways for the solution to be implemented by the child. Have the child report the results to you. Remember, not every solution works and not every solution works the first time it is implemented. That is life. Talk with your child.

The Vickie (Mother) and Beth (Daughter) Story (True Story):

Once upon a time there was a third grader named Beth. She was very unhappy with her teacher and believed she had been “wronged.” She wanted her mother (Vickie) to call and talk to her teacher about the problem. Vickie told Beth that the problem belonged to Beth and so Beth would need to solve the problem. Together the mother and daughter brainstormed solutions for Beth and role-played the activity. The next day, Beth came home from school exasperated and told her mother that the idea did not work and now it was time for mom to call the teacher. Because Vickie was a teacher, she knew there were two sides to every story, so she asked Beth to describe the event in detail. As Beth described how she implemented the solution, the problem became evident that it was not the Beth’s solution that did not work, it was Beth’s timing! As adults, we have learned that timing is everything. Beth was trying to tell the teacher the problem when the teacher was trying to round

up the 3rd grade students into a line to leave the classroom. The teacher did what any teacher or parent does when they are in a rush and a child is asking for something--they just say "No." Vickie told Beth about the concept of "timing." She suggested Beth try again, but this time ask the teacher in the morning in one simple sentence, "Mrs. Smith, I need to talk to you today. When is a good time?" Well, you can guess what happened. Yes, this time the strategy worked. Mrs. Smith told Beth to talk to her during recess. When Mrs. Smith had time to listen and Beth had time to plead her case, Beth got the results she was looking for. Not only did Beth solve her problem, but two more things happened. Beth was more likely to attempt to solve problems for herself in the future instead of asking mom to do it and she learned a very valuable adult skill. She learned that solutions do not always work the first time. You must always analyze why the solution did not work and make the necessary adjustments.

Did you know that three years after graduation from high school, children with disabilities who have self-determination skills are more likely to have a job that provides benefits, vacation time, and are more likely to live somewhere other than the family home?

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Young adults/teenagers DO NOT learn self-help skills and confidence in their own abilities to solve problems during their teenage years. It begins at birth and becomes a big part of "who they are" in elementary school. Start now to teach your child self-determination skills.

ONLINE RESOURCES

1. **I'm Determined** <https://www.imdetermined.org/>
2. **The Self-Determination Handbook**
<http://www.authorstream.com:80/Presentation/Garrick-35463-self-determination-handbook-Continued-People-Want-Skills-Use-Life-Choose-Or-Ar-as-Entertainment-ppt-powerpoint/>
3. **National Center on Secondary Education and Transition**
<http://www.ncset.org/>
4. **Self-determination.org** <http://www.self-determination.org/>
5. <http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/eric/e632.html>