

## Tips and Tools

As family members learn about self-determination, it is important that they put what they are learning into action if their new information is going to have an impact on the ability of their sons and daughters to be self-determined. Provided are some practical strategies parents can use to encourage self-determination. Parents should consider these suggestions in the context of the needs of their sons and daughters, their specific family dynamics, and their parenting styles to make determinations about what might not work for them. We encourage parents to try out different strategies and use the self-determination process to reflect on and learn what works well and what doesn't work for them and their son or daughters.

Davis and Wehmeyer (1991) provided these specific "10 Steps to Self-Determination" for parents of children with disabilities:

1. Walk the tightrope between protection and independence. Allow your son or daughter to explore his or her world. This may mean biting your lip and watching from the kitchen window when your child first meets the neighbor's kids, instead of running out to supervise. While there are obvious limits to this, all parents have to "let go," and it is never easy.
2. Children need to learn that what they say or do is important and can have an influence on others. This involves allowing risk taking and exploration. Encourage your child 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 to your child. Tell your child that she is important by spending time with her. Again, involve her in family activities and in family decisions.
4. Don't run away from questions from your child about differences related to his disability. That doesn't mean, however, to focus on the negative side of the condition. Stress that everyone is individual, encourage your child's unique abilities, and help him to accept unavoidable limitations.
5. Recognize the process of reaching goals; don't just emphasize outcomes. Children need to learn to work toward goals. For older children, encourage skills like organization and goal setting by modeling these behaviors. Make lists or hang a marker board in the laundry room showing the daily schedule for each family member. Talk about the

steps you are going to use to complete a task, and involve them in tasks leading to family goals, such as planning for a vacation.

6. Schedule opportunities for interactions with children of difference ages and backgrounds. This could be in day care centers, schools, churches, and when playing in the neighborhood. Start early in finding opportunities for your son or daughter to participate in activities that help all children realize that everyone is unique.
7. Set realistic but ambitious expectations. The adage that our goals should extend just beyond our reach is true here. Take an active role in your child's educational experience. Be familiar with his or her reading ability and identify books that provide enough challenge to move to the next reading level. Be sure you don't just force activities that lead to frustration, but don't assume that all of the progress should occur at school.
8. Allow your child to take responsibility for her own actions—successes and failures. Provide valid reasons for doing things, instead of simply saying, "because I said so!" Providing explanations give the child the opportunity to make an activity his own.
9. Don't leave choice-making opportunities to chance. Take every opportunity to allow your child to make choices; what he or she wears, what is served for dinner, or where the family goes for vacation. And, although this is not always practical or possible, make sure that these choice opportunities are meaningful. For example, for most children, choosing between broccoli and cauliflower is not a choice! Also, when offering choices, make sure that the child's decision is honored.
10. Provide honest, positive feedback. Focus on the behavior or task that needs to be changed. Don't make your child feel like a failure. For example, if your son or daughter attempts to complete a school activity, say, a math sheet, but is unable to do so, phrase the feedback so that he or she knows that the failure was specific to the worksheet and not in him or her. We all learn from our mistakes, but only if they are structured so that they do not lead us to believe that the problem is within us.

Some additional strategies parents may wish to try with their children to encourage self-determination include reading stories related to self-determination with their children, making the most of teachable moments, and acting as role models of self-determination.

# Family Support For Self-Determination



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“Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the rights of individuals to live independently, enjoy self-determination, make choices, contribute to society, pursue meaningful careers and enjoy full inclusion and integration in the economic, political, social, cultural, and educational mainstream of American society.”

- Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992, Sec. 2 (a) (3) (A - F)