

# Promoting Student Self-Determination Skills in IEP Planning

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## Goals and Objectives

- I will select which type of work I want and why.
- I will develop action steps to achieve my employment goal.
- I will evaluate my functional reading and writing skills using my daily check sheet.

- Do you consider self-determination for students a high priority in planning instruction?
- Do you include self-advocacy goals in students' education programs?
- What is best practice in developing such goals and promoting self-determination in students?

It may be that you or your colleagues have not received instruction in how to write self-determination goals and objectives for your students with disabilities. This article explores ways to increase the inclusion of self-determina-

tion and self-advocacy goals and objectives in individualized education programs (IEPs) as a first step to increasing their inclusion in classroom instruction.

### Self-Determination Synthesis Project

The Self-Determination Synthesis Project (SDSP) was funded in 1998 to synthesize and disseminate best practices related to promoting self-determination for students with disabilities. To this end, the purpose of the project was to improve, expand, and accelerate the use of this

knowledge by the professionals who serve children and youth with disabilities; parents who rear, educate, and support their children with disabilities; and students with disabilities. To accomplish these tasks, the SDSP Project conducted an extensive review of the literature, a meta-analysis to determine what levels of outcomes researchers have achieved using self-determination interventions

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(Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, & Wood, 2001; see box, "What Does the Literature Say?") and qualitative case studies of six school-based programs.

One of the findings of the SDSP is that whenever researchers discussed self-determination in relation to the IEP, it was usually with regard to increasing student involvement/leadership in the IEP and transition planning processes

(i.e., achieving self-determination by involving the student in the IEP process; Field et al., 1998; Martin, Huber-Marshall, Maxton, Jerman, & Miller, 1996; Powers, et al., 2001; Wehmeyer & Lawrence, 1995). Although we believe student involvement in the development of IEPs and participation or leadership in the IEP meeting process is essential, we also feel that IEPs should specifically target self-determination and transition plans, in the form of goals and objectives.

To assist teachers with developing IEP goals and objectives targeting self-determination, we provide sample goals and objectives in this article. We garnered some goals and objectives from the six model school programs that we visited for the qualitative component of

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the SDSP. We wrote other goals for fictional students derived from a composite of students. We emphasize that students should be involved or take a leadership role in developing their own IEP and transition goals.

### **Self-Determination in IEPs**

In developing self-determination goals and objectives, you need to know what skills comprise self-determination, decide what skills to teach to individual students, and know where to find instructional materials to provide instruction (i.e., self-determination curricula). In this article, we address the first two of these issues, as well as offer some examples of self-determination goals and objectives that might be included in an IEP. Test et al (2000) provided helpful information about choosing a self-determination curriculum.

### **What Does the Literature Say About Self-Determination?**

Over the past decade, special education has seen a major focus on promoting self-determination skills in students. Special education literature has offered information on self-determination, including the following:

- Definitions and conceptual analyses (Browder, Wood, Test, Algozzine, & Karvonen, 2001; Martin, Huber-Marshall, & Maxton, 1993; Ward, 1988; Wehmeyer, 1992a).
- Approaches for promoting self-determination (Martin & Marshall, 1995; Pocock et al., 2002; Salembier & Furney, 1994).
- Models for instruction (Abery, Rudrud, Arndt, Schwauben, & Eggebeen, 1995; Field & Hoffman, 1994).
- Both quantitative and qualitative intervention studies (Algozzine, et al., 2001; Allen, Smith, Test, Flowers, & Wood, 2001; Cross, Cooke, Wood, & Test, 1999).

Self-determination was first written into law in the Public Housing Act of 1988, and quickly followed in other major pieces of legislation written for people with disabilities, including the Rehabilitation Act of 1992 and 1998 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 and 1997.

Defined by Wehmeyer (1992b, 1996), as "acting as the primary causal agent in one's life free from undue external influence or interference," self-determination was termed the ultimate goal of education by Halloran (1993). Since the late 1980s, the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has promoted development and dissemination of programs and materials, and information on self-determination by offering discretionary funding opportunities for research and demonstration projects.

Self-advocates with disabilities have been demanding self-determination as adult citizens and have been a major force behind the federal initiative at both the adult and school levels. In addition, research has demonstrated a positive relationship between self-determination and improved postschool outcomes (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998a), which is also contributing to the tidal wave of support for promoting self-determination in education and adult disability services.

Although researchers have focused on promoting self-determination and publishers have produced more than 60 curricula on self-determination (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998; Test, Karvonen, Wood, Browder, & Algozzine, 2000), a significant lag remains in the degree to which self-determination content is reflected in the goals and objectives of students' individualized education programs (IEPs) and, consequently, in classroom instruction.

For example, Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1998a) conducted a content analysis of transition related goals written for 136 students with mental retardation. Out of 895 IEP transition goals analyzed, none were found to target self-determination skills. Agran, Snow, and Swaner (1999) found that although a majority (75%) of teachers of transition-aged students rated self-determination as a high priority, 55% indicated that self-determination goals were not included in students' IEPs or only in some students' IEPs. And more recently, Wehmeyer, Agran, and Hughes (2000) found only 22% of secondary level teachers who reported writing self-determination goals in IEPs for all of their students, while 47% included one or more self-determination goals for some students, and 31% did not include them at all.

## Knowing What to Teach: Skills That Comprise Self-Determination

First, self-determination is a complex construct that includes a combination of skills and knowledge. Wehmeyer, Kelchner, & Richards (1996) used factor analysis to empirically validate one conceptualization of the construct of self-determination and broke self-determination down into teachable, measurable skills. Wehmeyer, Agran, and Hughes (1998) further defined these measurable skills as the following components and subcomponents:

- Choice making.
- Decision making.
- Problem-solving.
- Independent living (risk taking and safety skills).
- Goal setting and attainment.
- Self-observation, evaluation, and reinforcement.
- Self-instruction, self-understanding, self-advocacy, and leadership.
- Positive self-efficacy and outcome expectancy.
- Internal locus of control.
- Self-awareness.

In our review of articles on self-determination, the SDSP developed a list of definitions for 8 out of 10 of these components (see Table 1). Independent living was not addressed here because it has been adequately addressed apart from self-determination in student IEPs. Locus of control was not included because of concerns related to construct validity.

Teaching these component skills will not guarantee that every individual student will achieve self-determination. The environment remains a critical factor in how well a student achieves self-determination, in that the people in the student's lives must

- Encourage generalization of self-determination skills and behavior.
- Honor the choices and decisions the student makes.
- Support the goals that the student sets.

Therefore, when you as the teacher decide to promote self-determination skills with your students, you may also need to commit to some level of school staff and parent education. By preparing others in addition to the student, you can ensure that a student's emerging

self-determination skills will have a receptive audience.

## Deciding Which Self-Determination Skills to Teach

Second, you should assess student self-determination skills. Many methods and materials are available that you can use to assess a student's knowledge and skills related to self-determination, including the following:

- Reviewing records and background information.
- Interviewing the student and others.
- Observing the student.
- Using of norm-referenced or criterion-referenced tests (Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1995).
- Using curriculum-based assessment techniques.
- Creating a portfolio of skills (Field et al., 1998).

**Self-determination includes teachable, measurable skills, such as choice making, decision making, and problem-solving.**

A few examples of published assessment instruments include the Arc's Self-Determination Scale, (Wehmeyer, 1995); the ChoiceMaker Self-Determination Transition Assessment (Martin & Marshall, 1995); the Self-Determination Assessment Battery (Hoffman, Field, & Sawilowski, 1995); the AIR Self-Determination Scale (Wolman, Campeau, DuBois, Mithaug, & Stolarski, 1994); and the Minnesota Self-Determination Scales (Abery, Elkin, Smith, Springborg, & Stancliffe, 2000).

Publishers have developed several self-determination assessment instruments to accompany curriculum packages focused on teaching self-determination skills (e.g., ChoiceMaker); whereas other publishers have developed other assessments, such as the Arc's Self-Determination Scale and the AIR Self-Determination Scale (Wolman

et al., 1994) as stand-alone instruments. The Arc's Self-Determination Scale is designed for self-reporting by adolescent students with disabilities, whereas other assessments gather data from a combination of sources including the student, teachers, and parents. Some self-determination assessment instruments also offer ways to evaluate the environment to determine to what degree students have opportunities to act in self-determined ways and to what degree the environment is receptive to students' self-determined behavior (e.g., the Minnesota Self-Determination Scales; Abery et al., 2000).

Although most assessment instruments offer information that educators can use to develop goals and objectives for instruction, a few that specifically address this step are the AIR Self-Determination Scale and the ChoiceMaker Self-Determination Assessment.

### *Teacher-Made Assessment Measures.*

In the absence of a published self-determination assessment instrument, you can take several steps *with students* to assess their strengths and needs for the purpose of developing IEP goals and objectives. For example, you can construct a general-purpose, teacher-made checklist or questionnaire based on any one or more of the self-determination components in Table 1. If you were interested in teaching choice-making, you might include some of these questions:

- "What kinds of choices does the student make?"
- "When given a choice between two or more options, does the student indicate a choice?"
- "How does the student indicate her or his choice?"
- "How does the student assess different options in preparation for making a choice?"
- "Does the student understand that there are consequences associated with the choices that we make?"
- "Can the student use experiences from past choices to make better choices in the future?"

To determine where to begin, you may ask questions pertaining to how well students can articulate things about themselves. For example, can

**Table 1. Self-Determination Component Definitions**

Self-Determination Component	Operational Definition
Choice-making skills (CM <sup>a</sup> )	Making a choice involves the indication or communication of a preference from among two or more options. Teaching choice-making skills involves teaching students to identify interests and preferences and to appropriately select an option based on those preferences and interests.
Problem-solving skills (PS <sup>a</sup> )	A problem is a task, activity, or situation for which a solution is not immediately known or attainable. Teaching problem-solving skills involves teaching students to identify and define a problem and to generate potential solutions.
Decision-making skills (DM <sup>a</sup> )	Decision making is a process of selecting or coming to a conclusion about which of a set of potential solutions is the best. Teaching decision-making skills involves teaching students to use problem-solving skills.
Goal setting and attainment skills (GSA <sup>a</sup> )	Goal-directed behavior involves actions that enable a person to reach a specified preferred outcome. Teaching goal-setting and attainment skills involves teaching students to define and articulate a goal, identify current status in relation to the goal, develop an action plan, and evaluate progress toward achieving the goal.
Self-regulation skills (SG <sup>a</sup> ) * Self-observation * Self-evaluation * Self-reinforcement	Self-regulation refers to the human response system that enables individuals to examine their environments and their repertoires of responses, and to revise their strategies as necessary. Teaching self-regulation skills includes teaching students to solve problems or employ self-management strategies (e.g., anger control).
Self-advocacy (SA <sup>a</sup> ) * Knowledge * Individual * System	Self-advocacy means to advocate on one's own behalf, while leadership skills are those needed for a person to lead, guide, or direct. Teaching self-advocacy and leadership skills involves teaching students about their basic rights and responsibilities (knowledge), how to use self-advocacy skills and how to be effective team members (at an individual and/or system level).
Self-awareness or self-knowledge (SW <sup>a</sup> )	Self-awareness or self-knowledge refers to a comprehensive and reasonably accurate knowledge of one's strengths and limitations. Teaching self-knowledge involves teaching students to identify common psychological and physical needs of people, recognize differences among people, and understand how one's actions influence others.
Self-efficacy (SE <sup>b</sup> )	Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in his or her ability to successfully engage in a specific behavior within a certain context. Self-efficacy is not usually taught directly, but it may be enhanced through repeated successful experiences in applying the skills/components listed above.

<sup>a</sup> From "The Self-determination Focus of Transition Goals for Students with Mental Retardation," by M. L. Wehmeyer and M. Schwartz, 1998b, *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 21(1), pp. 75-86.

<sup>b</sup>SE based on "TAKE CHARGE for the Future: A Controlled Field Test of a Model to Promote Student Involvement in Transition Planning," by Powers et al., 2001, *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 24, pp. 89-103.

they identify things they like and dislike, people they like to be to be with, places they like to go, things they like to do, and personal strengths and weaknesses?

**Where to Begin.** In deciding which skill component or components to start with, you might want to consider the age of the student and current and future environments of the student. Doll, Sands, Wehmeyer, and Palmer (1996) examined the typical ages at which children begin to exhibit certain self-determination skills. First, they found that although young children (ages 2-5) exhibit some here-and-now choice-making skills, they have limited knowledge of their options and limited ability to reflect on past choices.

Second, children between the ages of 6 and 8 begin to identify and solve simple problems and can generalize solutions across different and future problems. These children, however, still have trouble learning from consequences of prior choices and require adult guidance to set and work toward goals.

Third, children between the ages of 9 and 11 begin to set goals and use those goals to determine their actions and can recognize and make corrections when actions are not working to achieve their goals.

Finally, students over the age of 12 can make decisions, generalize problem-solving skills, set and focus on long-term goals, and evaluate and change plans as needed to achieve goals.

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### **Children ages 9-11 begin to set goals and use those goals to determine their actions.**

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You will want to consider teaching students skills based on current and future environments where the student will need to function. For example, teaching the student to take the lead in her IEP meeting may help her take the lead in the rehabilitation counselor's office when it comes time to set career

goals and plan services. Teaching one student about his rights as a student covered by IDEA and how to be a self-advocate with his teachers, may help him when he needs to learn about the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and needs to practice his self-advocacy skills with an employer. In some cases, given the particular needs of the student, her age, and abilities, the teacher may find that it makes sense to skip teaching about IDEA and focus on teaching about the ADA, the Rehabilitation Act, and Social Security.

A transition-aged student learning to take more responsibility for his learning by selecting elective courses; choosing what academic areas to work on each day; and, in some systems, making decisions about his graduation options, can then use those skills when making decisions about what services he may want to access as an adult. For students with more severe disabilities, teachers will need to provide specific training in future environments to ensure the transfer of skills.

### **Writing Self-Determination Goals and Objectives**

The final step is to write specific goals and objectives designed to promote self-determination. Table 2 contains examples of IEP goals and objectives targeting at least one of each of the self-determination skill components. Most are written as "I" statements from the student's perspective. Though educators have traditionally written goals and objectives in third person, goals and objectives written in first person imply that the student is integrally involved in the planning and decision-making process pertaining to her IEP. It also suggests that a student has accepted a personal responsibility for achieving her goals.

Because it is expected that students are involved in all phases of the IEP process, the use of "I" statements in the IEP document is appropriate and indicates the student's role as the key participant. Assisting students to develop their own goals and objectives as "I" statements in the IEP can and should be generalized to all goals, not just those targeting self-determination skills.

You can write IEP goals to target content to be learned, (e.g., "I will learn the skills I need to advocate for myself by taking the Self-Advocacy class") or to target content or skills to be applied in real situations, (e.g., "I will complete three job shadowing experiences and report my preferences to my career teacher"). For example, if a student wanted to begin self-advocating for his own teaching accommodations as specified on his IEP, he may first want to learn about his interests, his strengths and weaknesses, and how he learns best.

**Goal:** I will learn more about my particular learning needs.

**Objective #1:** I will learn about my learning needs by reviewing my IEP document.

**Objective #2:** I will learn about my disability.

**Objective #3:** I will learn about various accommodations that might be used to assist me to learn more better.

Then the student may want to apply what he has learned by being able to explain his disability and what teaching accommodations he needs to his classroom teachers.

**Goal:** I will explain my disability and ask for learning accommodations that work for me.

**Objective #1:** Given in-class practice, I will explain my disability to another person.

**Objective #2:** Given a menu of options of learning accommodations, I will try various options and record which ones work best for me.

**Objective #3:** Given in-class practice, I will negotiate with my teacher to allow accommodations that facilitate my learning.

In many cases, when students begin to participate more in their IEP planning and implementation, they may need to learn content related to what an IEP is, the different parts of an IEP, about their specific learning needs, and their rights as a student under IDEA. Skills that they will use as they assume a more active role in the IEP process may include: introducing IEP team members, summa-

**Table 2. Examples of IEP Goals and Objectives on Self-Determination**

SD Skill	Student Description	IEP Annual Goal	IEP Objectives
Choice and decision-making	<p>Karen is a 17-year-old student with behavior/emotional disability. Karen has difficulty getting along with her peers and adults in authority. She has been suspended several times for fighting. She has said that she does not want to go to school after she graduates, but would rather find a job that she likes. She says that the only job that she knows she does not want to do is to work in food service, because she says that is the job her mother has and she doesn't think she would like it. She has a boyfriend who is older who has been trying to talk her into quitting school. Although Karen says she hates school, she says that she wants to be able to take care of herself, because she has seen her mother be independent, and wants to be independent also.</p>	<p>Given exposure to at least 5 different job types, I will select which type of work I want and why.</p>	<p>1.1. Given 75 hours of community-based work experience in 5 different employment settings, I will be able to discuss the positives and negatives of each job experience.            1.2. Based on my weighing the positives and negatives of each job type, I will decide which job type I want to pursue for summer employment.            1.3. Based on the job type that I select for summer employment, I will identify 5 possible job sites for my summer employment.            1.4. Based on the 5 possible sites that I identified for summer employment, I will complete applications for jobs at 3 of the 5 locations.            1.5. Based on the job that I have targeted for summer employment, I will identify my work skills that are strong and my skills that need improvement and develop a plan to improve those skills.</p>
Choice making (with communication)	<p>Jamar is a 19-year-old student with severe mental retardation. Jamar is non-verbal and does not use a symbolic language system.</p> <p><i>Note:</i> At this time, the IEP team did not use "I" statements for Jamar's goals because they are still working to understand his preferences.</p>	<p>Jamar will indicate his choices for leisure activities to others.</p>	<p>1.1. Jamar will select between 2 leisure options using an eye gaze.            1.2. Through daily selections, Jamar will indicate at least 3 consistent preferences.            1.3. Jamar will request 1 of his consistent preferences by hitting a Big Mac switch with his fist.            1.4. Jamar will protest if his choice is not honored by hitting a foot buzzer.</p>
Problem-solving skills	<p>Ben is a 13-year-old student with behavioral and emotional disability. He is in a self-contained classroom because he often becomes aggressive and combative with his teacher or classmates. Also, his mother asked that he be placed in a group home because she said she could not handle his aggressive behavior. When his teacher met with him to talk about planning his IEP for the next year, Ben said that he gets frustrated when he can't figure things out.</p>	<p>Given a challenging situation, I will use a problem-solving process.</p>	<p>1.1. Given simulations of challenging situations, I will be able to define what the problem is and come up with possible solutions.            1.2. Given written examples of challenging situations that were solved by others, I will analyze what actions were taken to solve the problems and evaluate if there might have been a better solution.            1.3. Given challenging situations, I will define the problem and list actions that I might take to solve the problem.</p>
Decision-making	<p>Janie is an 8-year-old student with mild mental disability. Her mother expressed an interest in Janie learning to take responsibility for some of her actions. She related a story about Janie deciding to paint a picture on the floor with the new carpet.</p>	<p>I will learn to make better decisions.</p>	<p>1.1. From a list of possible solutions, I will choose the best option.            1.2. I will learn from my decisions by discussing what happened and why and how I might have acted differently.</p>

**Table 2. (Continued)**

SD Skills	Student Description	IEP Annual Goal	IEP Objectives
Goal setting and attainment	Carl is a 14-year-old student served in a classroom for students with learning disabilities. He is not a good student and says that he wants to leave school and get a job. His teacher has convinced him that the school can help him improve his job skills and that he should be making the decisions and setting his goals for getting a job that he wants.	I will develop a goal and action plan to get the job that I want when I leave school.	<p>1.1. I will develop a career interest portfolio that addresses my job strengths and interests.</p> <p>1.2. I will select 5 community-based work experience sites that I will go to and learn about different jobs.</p> <p>1.3. I will analyze my skills and interests in relation to the job duties and responsibilities on the 5 different community-based work experiences.</p> <p>1.4. I will set goals for work skills that I will need to succeed in the employment field I have chosen.</p> <p>1.5. I will develop action steps to achieve my employment goal.</p> <p>1.6. I will monitor my progress in taking the action steps and make changes as needed.</p>
Self-regulation	Katrika is a fifth-grade student with moderate mental retardation. She likes school; and when she "wants" to, she can be a good student. She can read 25 functional reading words, can write her name, her telephone number, and part of her address. Her teacher wants to see if she can take over responsibility for maintaining these skills. She suggests a goal to Katrika; and with Katrika's consent, the objectives are written as "I" statements.	Katrika will maintain her functional reading and writing skills on her own.	<p>1.1. I will (with my teacher) construct a weekly recording sheet.</p> <p>1.2. I will evaluate my functional reading and writing skills using my daily check sheet.</p> <p>1.3. I will create a weekly schedule for working on my functional reading and writing skills.</p> <p>1.4. I will determine when I have reached mastery or ask for help to meet my goal.</p>
Self-advocacy	Glenn is a 10th-grade student with a learning disability. He goes to a learning disabilities resource classroom for 1 period every day. His learning disability affects his written language expression, and he has difficulty reading. He is frustrated because some of his teachers don't use the accommodations that are listed in his IEP. He discussed this problem with his special education teacher and decided to learn more about his disability so that he could better communicate with his teachers.	Given my IEP and personal student file, I will learn about my particular learning disability.	<p>1.1. I will verbally explain to my teachers how my specific learning disability affects my ability to learn.</p> <p>1.2. I will develop a personal list of learning accommodations that work best for me.</p> <p>1.3. I will negotiate accommodations with my teachers.</p>

**Table 2. (Continued)**

SD Skill	Student Description	IEP Annual Goal	IEP Objectives
Self-advocacy and self-awareness	Mike is a 14-year-old student with moderate mental retardation. His school district's special education program is committed to increasing student participation in the IEP process. His teacher, also committed to this goal, is putting a goal into all of her students' IEPs designed to meet the specific needs of each one.	Given 1 practice session in a mock IEP meeting each week, I will be an active participant in my transition IEP meeting in May.	1.1. Given practice in mock IEP meetings in class, I will be able to introduce all the members of my IEP team at the beginning of the meeting. 1.2. Given a menu of choices that I have been previously introduced to, I will express my preferences as to what goals I would like to work on for the next school year. 1.3. Given practice sessions in class, I will talk about my strengths and weaknesses. 1.4. Given practice in class, I will identify what types of services or supports I need to meet my transition goals and objectives.
Self-efficacy	Juan is a 12-year-old student with learning disabilities. His mother says that he hates school because he says he can't do anything right.	I will learn to value my strengths and abilities.	1.1. I will keep a list of all my skill accomplishments for the year. 1.2. I will list my accomplishments during my IEP meeting. 1.3. I will set 1-2 goals that I will work on for the coming school year.

Note: SD = self-determination; IEP = individualized education program.

rizing their present level of performance, expressing their future goals, asking questions of meeting participants, and others (Martin et al., 1996).

All these skills will contribute to students' being more self-determined adults and may transfer directly from the IEP process to the rehabilitation counselor's office for the development of the Individual Plan for Employment, or to a college's disability services office for accommodations in a post-secondary education environment.

### Final Thoughts

A positive relationship exists between self-determination and improved postschool outcomes (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998a). Teachers view self-determination as an important skill (Agran, et al., 1999; Wehmeyer, et al., 2000). Unfortunately, many teachers are not including these important skills in student IEPs.

We hope that the suggestions and examples provided in this article will encourage teachers to incorporate self-determination skills into the IEPs of all students. But more importantly, having the skills listed as goals and objectives in their IEP will increase the likelihood that students will receive instruction that will enhance their abilities to be self-determined citizens.

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