

Promoting Self-Determination



Anthony Canty (left) with colleagues on the job at Rochester General Hospital in Rochester, NY. From the postsecondary transition film *Untapped*.

What is Self-Determination?

When we think about self-determination, we usually think of people who are completely independent and who make their own (good) decisions. What about the skills and opportunities that every person needs to learn and practice so they can effectively control their own lives? The National Parent Center on Transition and Employment says, “(self-determination) is about being in charge, but is not necessarily the same thing as self-sufficiency or independence.”¹

Self-determination skills include setting goals, self-advocating, problem solving, self-awareness, and self-regulation skills. As we see in the [Intelligent Lives](#) documentary, in past decades it was believed that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities could not—or should not—control their own lives, and so they were not provided with opportunities or instruction to learn these

self-determination skills. Imagine not having a choice about where you live, the foods you eat, and what you get to do every day and with whom. People with intellectual and developmental disabilities are capable of deciding how they want to live their lives. They may need help to achieve their goals, but these goals are attainable when self-determination skills are cultivated daily.

Why is Self-Determination Necessary?

Self-determination skills improve academic and post-secondary outcomes such as obtaining and retaining employment, living independently, financial security, engaging in more positive recreation and leisure activities, and enjoying a better quality of life. Additionally, research has shown that students with strong self-determination skills are more likely to be included in their

communities after leaving high school. Self-determination skills, such as making choices, are both small and large parts of our lives and directly influence our immediate environment and long-term paths.

How do we do it? Examples from the *Intelligent Lives* project

Typically, we might tell a child, “There are three things you need to do today.” As a person with intellectual disability enters adulthood, we might say, “Here is the place you will live.”

Initially, it might seem difficult for service providers (i.e. teachers, job coaches, parents, transition specialists, etc.) to allow the individual we are working for and with to have control/be in charge. In our efforts to protect those with disabilities, we sometimes deny them the dignity to make their own mistakes. If we take away the dignity of risk, we are diminishing that person’s ability to become self-determined.

One of the easiest ways to promote self-determination is to provide opportunities for people to make choices, beginning at a young age. When Micah Fialka-Feldman (*Intelligent Lives* film subject) was in elementary school, special education students were expected to enter the school through a different door than those students without disabilities. As Micah describes [on his website](#), “I came home one day in first grade and I told my parents I wanted to go through the same door as all of the other students at a school. I wanted to be with my friends and peers.” This expression of self-determination led Micah and his parents to advocate for an inclusive experience from the time he was in elementary school through college, where he continues to make decisions about his life with the support of his “Circle of Friends.”²

When film subject Naomie Monplaisir was in high school, she was given little choice about her daily activities. She often had to assemble jewelry for little or no pay in the school’s sheltered workshop. However, after transitioning to competitive, integrated

employment with progressive supports, Naomie is now taking part in social capital meetings (as seen in the film) where she and her team are exploring a wide variety of job opportunities, based on her interests and strengths.

Once a person’s day and life are determined by the choices they make, possible next steps might include evaluating the success of their choices. Micah continually meets with his Circle of Friends to review his recent decisions and future goals. Naomie meets with staff at her employment center on a regular basis to check in on her work experiences. And film subject Naieer Shaheed has worked closely with his art teacher and college counselor to learn how to take his painting to the next level by studying art in college.

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The *Intelligent Lives* transition films provide additional examples. In the film [Jamia and Peyton: I Can Work](#), Jamia and Peyton have settled on clear career goals. They have used their own experiences and preferences, as well as some interest assessment tools, to assist them in their choices. Garrett ([Garrett Shows: I’m in Charge](#)) and Anthony ([Untapped](#)) are participating in internships and employment that will help them make informed choices regarding the direction of their respective lives. Garrett and Anthony both know how they would like to live their lives in terms of housing and relationships, and have identified the steps needed to achieve these goals. Self-determination may start with small steps such as choosing an activity or identifying a goal; however, with appropriate supports it is the cornerstone of achieving a happy and fulfilling life.

THREE PHASES OF SELF-DETERMINATION

► STEP 1

Opportunities to make choices

One of the easiest ways to teach people how to make choices is to **provide them with opportunities to do so, beginning at a young age**. Typically, we might tell a child, "There are three things you need to do today." As a person with intellectual disability enters adulthood, we might say "Here is the place you will live." If we think about how we can shift some of the control over to the other person, we can say instead, "There are a few things that need to happen today. Which one do you want to start with?" To the adult, we could say, "Would you rather live with a friend or alone?" or "What type of housemate would you want? Someone who is neat? Someone who does not mind a mess?"

► STEP 2

Evaluation of the choice

When a person's day and life are determined by the choices they make, a possible next interventional step might be to **evaluate the success of their choices**. Continuing with the example above, at the end of the activity or day, we then can revisit the choices and discuss the outcomes. A structured review might include observations/questions such as, "You chose the most difficult activity first. Did that give you enough time to finish the other two?" or "You chose the most difficult activity first. Did it feel good to get it over with or did it make you too tired to keep going?"

► STEP 3

Informing future choices

A third part of this self-determination process is to remind the person about the result of his or her choices, and how he or she can **use that knowledge to inform the choice the next time**. This intervention conversation might sound like, "Yesterday you chose the most difficult activity first and it made you so tired that you couldn't finish the others. Think about what choice you can make today that will make things easier."

For larger questions, such as living arrangements, it is difficult to have the person reflect on the effect of the actions. Instead, we can provide examples of potential long-term outcomes based on different choices. For instance, "What is it like living with a messy housemate or a clean one?" These choices can be in the format of pictures of neat and messy rooms or providing examples of the type and number of chores needed to complete when living alone vs. living with a housemate. The person can then make a choice about which list fits best with their preferences.

So, a simple way of structuring a self-determination intervention is:

1. Provide a choice(s)
2. Evaluate the effectiveness of the choice(s)
3. Use new information to make future choices.

Think about how this intervention can be used in school, on the job, in relationships, and a thousand other contexts. Remember that it's okay for people to make mistakes in this process. Most of us make the same mistakes twice (or even more!) before we learn.

Writer

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Resources

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¹PACER's National Parent Center on Transition and Employment. *Self-Determination*. Retrieved February 6, 2018, from <http://www.pacer.org/transition/learning-center/independent-community-living/self-determination.asp>.

²A key part of Micah's journey was the development of his "Circle of Friends." See more about the Circle of Friends in the Fialka-Feldman family's book *What Matters* and in their article "[Inclusion Includes Belonging: How to Create and Sustain a Circle of Support](#)."