

Promoting Self-Determination in Early Childhood Services



This toolkit is intended for early childhood care providers who want to learn more about how to promote self-determination skills in early childhood. This could include early interventionists, developmental specialists, speech and language pathologists (SLPs), occupational therapists (OTs), behavior analysts (BCBAs), and preschool teachers, as well as anyone else who provides intervention and support to young autistic children and children with developmental disabilities. It is focused on autism and autistic individuals, but these strategies can be used for all children.

Identity-first language is used throughout this pamphlet. For more information, please visit: triad.vumc.org/identity-language.

What is self-determination?

Self-determination is the act of **making up one's own mind** about what to think or what to do by **making choices and decisions** about one's life.

For children, self-determination relates to identifying personal interests and needs, making choices, solving problems, and regulating behavior, often with adult support.

Self-determination is not a new idea, but it has been more widely recognized as an area to support within early childhood.

While it is important to know what self-determination is, it is equally important to know what self-determination is not.

Self-determination

Is NOT the same as total independence

Is NOT allowing children to "do whatever they want"

Is NOT the same as "successful" behavior

Young children will not have full personal control or independence, but they deserve the chance to make and learn from mistakes. We want children to actively engage in making choices and decisions that directly impact their own experiences.

Self-determination is a combination of concrete skills that can be used to promote self-directed behavior. Children begin to create a sense of self between 19 months and three years of age. This means we can still have meaningful goals that allow for this developmentally appropriate independence while providing the support and guidance they need to be successful.



A more detailed review of this material and additional resources can be found in the interactive online toolkit. Register for a free account at [triad.vkclearning.org](https://www.triad.vkclearning.org) and access the information in either the **Early Childhood** or **Early Intervention** folder.



Why is self-determination important?

It is important to start building self-determination skills in early childhood.

- Toddlers and preschool-aged children may not have a clearly defined set of values, but they will likely have preferences for what brings them joy, comfort, and security.
- When we start considering self-determination skills in early childhood, we allow plenty of time for skills to continue to develop. We give opportunities for significant adults in children's lives to practice supporting and guiding children to build skills.
- Children need practice and support to build choice-making, decision-making, problem-solving, and goal-setting skills to use these skills effectively into adulthood. Simply "growing up" does not guarantee that children will build these skills, particularly for children with developmental disabilities such as autism.

Self-determination skills are important at all ages.

- While self-determination skills are important for all children, adolescents, and adults, they are even more important for children with disabilities. Youth with developmental disabilities have been found to have less self-determined behavior than their typically developing peers (Pierson et al., 2008; Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2008).
- By teaching self-determination skills, we can help take an active role in preventing low self-efficacy and dependence on others. These skills require and promote children's active and meaningful engagement from a young age.

Below are some examples of early self-determination skills. Some of these skills exist very early in life, while others are more appropriate for other developmental stages.

Skills in early childhood

Choice-making: skill of selecting between two known options

Decision-making: skill of choosing between all known options and evaluating the consequences of each option

Problem-solving: skill used when a solution is not readily known; decision-making and choice-making are part of the process

Goal-setting & attainment: skill of determining how you are going to accomplish what you want (setting the goal, planning for, implementing, and measuring success)

Self-regulation (skills include self-observation, self-evaluation, self-reinforcement): process of monitoring one's own actions

Self-awareness and self-knowledge: skills of knowing one's own strengths, weaknesses, abilities, and limitations, and knowing how to use these unique traits to beneficially influence one's own life

Skills that may develop after early childhood

Self-instruction: skills that help children in using their own prompts to solve problems

Self-advocacy: skills necessary to be able to speak up or defend a cause or person

Internal locus of control: belief that one has control over outcomes that are important to life

Self-efficacy: conviction that one can successfully complete the behavior required to produce a given outcome

**MORE
INFO**



Learn more about the definition and history of self-determination and examples of self-determination skills in the interactive online toolkit referred to on Page 2.

Using self-determination to guide creation of goals

There are many ways to incorporate self-determination goals into a child's intervention or education plan. In setting these goals, it is important to consider the child's existing functional communication skills, creation of opportunities for practice, and promotion of the child's engagement.

The shift we want to make in creating goals is a focus on self-determination skills as foundational skills to respect the voice of the child. We do not simply want to use these skills to master short-term goals, but instead to think of this as a framework to incorporate respect, dignity, and autonomy even as goals change.

The content focus of the goal

Goals that align with building early self-determination skills for autistic children and those with other disabilities include:

- Promoting behaviors that allow the child to be successful within daily routines, such as playing with toys or asking for help.
- Following directions to prevent the child from engaging in unsafe behaviors.
- Promoting engagement within a specific environment that can fit within many skills of self-determined behavior including choice-making, decision-making, problem solving, and self-regulating behavior.

Goals that **do not** align with building early self-determination skills for autistic children and those with other disabilities include:

- The reduction of self-stimulation behavior, such as hand flapping, unless dangerous to self or others.
- Limiting restricted interests or opportunities to play with or talk about preferred toys or topics.
- Following directions simply to be compliant with adult requests.
- Passive actions such as tolerating, receiving, improving, maintaining.

The amount of adult-directed goals

It is still okay to have adult-directed goals, but it is important to think about **why those goals are in place** and **how they could promote positive self-determination skill outcomes**.

When thinking about ways to re-work adult-directed goals, consider:

- The motivation or desired outcome from adult-directed goal.
- Whether the goal is something that will help build self-determination skills or behaviors/actions that will help child access/engage across environments and people (e.g., waiting, cleaning up, personal hygiene, behavioral regulation skills).
- Opportunities for self-determination skills to be intertwined within an adult-directed goal.

It may be helpful to ask yourself the following questions when you are writing goals:

- Does the child show preferences (free time, social activities, intervention activities, etc.)?
- Does the child recognize when they need help and have a way to communicate that need?
- Does the child know their interests and non-interests?
- Does the child have a way to communicate information (e.g., verbal, visuals, augmentative device)?
- How can I involve the child and caregiver in goal-setting?
- What self-determination skill does this goal map onto?
- How does this goal relate to long-term self-determination outcomes?

Collaborating with caregivers in creating self-determination goals

- Early childhood professionals can work with families to find ways to guide caregivers to developmentally appropriate goals that consider self-determination.
- It is important to discuss the role of caregivers in self-determination. Caregivers can build on child motivation to continue to build engagement and communication skills.
- Discuss with caregivers the important role they play in generalizing skills and teaching in natural environments. Real life happens at home and in the community, not in a clinic or therapeutic setting.
- Professionals can empower caregivers to make decisions regarding goals that fit with family values and self-determination.

Families identified three components for working with providers:
(Summers et al., 2014)

Establish a foundation of trust and high expectations.

Recognize the family as unit/context.

Focus on clear and consistent communication.

The child should be an active member of the goal-setting process, even if they have limited communication skills. This can be done by:

Following the child's lead in terms of interests and preferences.

Considering strengths of the child across domains.

It is important to collect information from family members during the initial interview, but these questions can be asked throughout your work with a family:

- Tell me about your family.
- What is your family's idea of becoming a successful adult? What skills will your child need to be successful in this way?
- What does your child's typical day look like?
- What would your child's ideal day look like?
- What materials does your child play with? How do they get these items?
- What choices does your child make and how do they make those choices?
- What does your child do when they are left to their own devices?
- How does your child move about your home?
- How does your child engage with the people and things around them?
- How does your child regulate their emotions, behavior, or attention?
- How can you tell if your child likes something or doesn't like something?
- What are your child's strengths?
- What are some things that are difficult or overwhelming for your child, and how do they currently cope with those?

There are many strategies that caregivers can use in structuring their child's environment to promote self-determination skills.



See examples of questions to ask families and more examples of goals in the interactive online toolkit referred to on Page 2.

Using self-determination to guide implementation and mastery of goals:

Monitoring progress and defining mastery of goals are important for any intervention. While “self-determination” is not mastered, skills related to self-determination such as choice-making, problem-solving, goal-setting, and self-regulation can be set up to be specific and measurable so children can demonstrate mastery.

Remember that certain goals can set the stage and prepare for later goals. For example:

- Choice-making will likely precede decision-making and problem-solving.
- Setting a schedule can help to begin goal-setting and attainment as well as self-regulation.
- Incorporating the child’s preferences into intervention activities promotes self-efficacy, self-awareness, and self-knowledge.

You are not in this alone. It is important to continue to collaborate with caregivers.

When working with families, continue to:

Maintain a foundation of trust and high expectations.

Recognize family unit/context:

- » Continue to check-in with families regarding goal changes or updates. This can help to maintain trust and build collaboration. It also helps to recognize how the child and family unit may be affected and how goals may be adapted to fit family needs and values.

Use effective communication with updates on progress:

- » Set up clear lines of communication and link them to the family’s preferences. This may include in-person meetings or digital messaging.
- » Focus on discussing both progress and lack of progress. If there is a lack of progress, it is important to recognize and work with families to jointly problem solve. Ask families for their perspectives on progress and work with families to modify current goals or create new goals as needed.

Continue to check that the following are being incorporated as new goals are set or goal progress is monitored:

- » The child’s interests/preferences
- » The child’s strengths
- » The behaviors you are trying to promote
- » The location of opportunities and learning
- » The times for skill practice throughout the natural course of the child’s daily play/activities
- » The reinforcement for behavior

Conclusion

You will have small goals along the way. Remember, self-determination is not an end goal. It is not something you ever fully achieve, but it is something that you want to continue to support. Children will continue to develop self-determination skills throughout later childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

Continue to think about how you can use the framework of self-determination as goals change. You want to create a foundation of skills to build on rather than only measuring and assessing them as they relate to an individual goal.

References and Resources

Full references used for the development of this material can be found at triad.vkclearning.org.

The **Vanderbilt Kennedy Center Treatment and Research Institute for Autism Spectrum Disorders (VKC TRIAD)** is dedicated to improving assessment and treatment services for children with autism spectrum disorders and their families while advancing knowledge and training. TRIAD offers free trainings and resources. triad.vumc.org

- ❑ The **Paul V. Sherlock Center on Disabilities at Rhode Island College** has information about raising the self-determined child, including fact sheets by topic and resources. w3.ric.edu/sherlockcenter/sdchild.html
- ❑ The **University of Kansas Beach Center on Disability** has information about self-determination for children and adults, including downloadable resources. beachcenter.lsi.ku.edu/beach-self-determination

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