Fostering Self-Determination Among Children and Youth with Disabilities—

Ideas from PARENTS for PARENTS

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Introduction

The word "self-determination" is heard more and more within conversations about preparing children and youth well for adulthood. In fact, helping students with disabilities become more self-determining is an increasingly prominent theme of recent policy initiatives, practice recommendations, and conference gatherings. And there are some very good reasons for this heightened emphasis. Numerous research studies have shown a strong link between the development of self-determination and a host of positive outcomes while children are still in school and long after they graduate.[1]

Although many different definitions exist, "self-determination" generally refers to having the abilities and opportunities to steer your own life in ways that you choose for yourself and that bring you personal satisfaction[2]. Helping children with intellectual disabilities and autism become more self-determining as they grow up and prepare for adult roles was the focus of this project.

As a parent, you may be wondering what you can do to foster the skills, knowledge, and opportunities that can contribute to self-determination among children and youth with intellectual disabilities and autism. What steps might you take to encourage your child to begin to become more self-determining as they grow up? This guide provides a menu of ideas to draw upon as you consider how best to promote self-determination among your own children with disabilities.

But first, let us provide a little background about how we developed this guide.

Up until now, most of the research on self-determination has focused on what teachers and service providers can do to teach the skills and knowledge that help children become self-determining. Far less attention has focused on the important roles parents can play in encouraging self-determination beyond the school day. We consider parents to be the first and best experts on their children. And so we launched a research project to find out just how parents are nurturing self-determination and to learn about their recommendations for doing this well.

In the spring of 2011, we completed a large-scale survey study involving more than 700 parents of school-age children (ages 5-21) with intellectual disabilities or autism from 34 randomly selected school districts in Wisconsin. As part of this survey, we asked parents to share their own ideas for how parents might help their own children with disabilities develop skills that can enhance self-determination, skills like choice making, goal setting, self-advocacy, and self-management. We received more than one thousand recommendations! As a project team, we combined and collapsed these strategies into the categories included in this guide.

On the pages that follow, you will find a rich array of ideas generated **by parents for parents**. This guide is neither exhaustive nor prescriptive. Rather, it simply offers a menu of ideas that can spur and encourage your own efforts. Indeed, we encourage you to draw upon, adapt, and add to the strategies in this guide in ways that best meet the needs of your child and family. Becoming self-determined is an ongoing process for all children and youth, whether or not they have a disability. And so the approaches you take may look different across the age span or depending on the individual strengths and needs of your child.

We hope you will find this collection of ideas to be both promising and practical. Enjoy!

See reviews by: [1] *Carter, Lane, Crnobori, Bruhn, and Oakes (2011); Cobb, Lehman, Newman-Gonchar, and Alwell (2009); Wood, Fowler, Uphold, and Test (2005)*
[2] *Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, and Wehmeyer (1998); Wehmeyer and Field (2007)*

Foster choice making

Choice making is the ability to show a preference among two or more available options. Choice-making skills allow children to gain increasing control over their immediate environment. For children and youth with developmental disabilities, being able to express preferences and make choices has been shown to decrease challenging behaviors and increase engagement in appropriate tasks.[3,4]

> "In order to make choices, a person needs to be given choices. I give my son choices over issues both big and small that affect his life."
>
> —*Parent*

Parent-suggested strategies

- **Model a choice making process for your child.** When you have a choice to make, think aloud about the information you are considering and why you chose a specific option. This will enable your child to hear how you navigate your own choices. For example, when choosing whether to wear pants or shorts for the day, say "It's not very warm today and it's windy. I think I will be too cold if I wear shorts. I'll wear pants today." By explicitly talking through this process, your child will build a foundation for independently making choices.
- **Provide opportunities for your child to make choices throughout the day.** Give your child choices as often as possible and appropriate. Ask your child which clothes she would like to wear each morning and what she would like to eat for a snack in the afternoon. Have your child choose an activity for the family, or allow your child to pick out a toy with which to play. By providing opportunities to make choices, your child will see that she has control over many parts of her life. This may help your child develop confidence and become more comfortable making her own choices.
- **Expect and encourage your child to make choices.** When there is an opportunity for your child to make a choice, anticipate that she will do so. When it is time for your child to do homework, expect her to choose which subject area to do first, rather than waiting to be told. If your child sees that you expect her to make choices, it may become more routine for her.
- **Use visuals such as pictures, icons, or words to help your child make choices.** For many children, visuals are an effective way to process and understand information. By pairing visuals with language, your child may find it easier to understand the choices being offered and to make her own choice. Show your child pictures of different dinner foods from which to choose or write down the names of activities she can do after school.

[3] *Shogren, Faggella-Luby, Bae, and Wehmeyer (2004)*
[4] *Wehmeyer et al. (2007)*

- **If your child has limited verbal communication, support her choices by using a communication device and other systems.** By providing your child with an alternative form of communication and being attentive to her body language, she can be involved in making choices. Your child can use Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) cards to signify her choices, such as where she wants to play, (e.g., her bedroom, the living room, or the basement). Be creative about the many ways a child might indicate her choices.
- **Limit the number of options available to your child at one time.** Provide your child with two or three options when she is first learning to make choices. Offering a small number of options may seem less overwhelming to a child not yet fluent in making choices. For example, when giving your child choices about a game to play, let her choose among two or three preferred games. When giving your child a choice for snacks, let her choose between an apple and grapes.
- **As your child's choice-making skills improve, increase the number of options available to her.** When your child becomes more comfortable and skilled with making choices, offer several different options. For example, when planning an activity for a Saturday, say, "What do you want to do? Would you like to go to the mall, the park, the library, or the movies?" By expanding the number of choices available to her, your child has to consider and weigh her own preferences and be more thoughtful in the choice-making process.
- **Give your child the chance to choose different options other than those presented to her.** As your child becomes more skilled at choice making, allow her to choose something not initially given as an option. For example, when your child wants a snack, say "Would you like crackers, grapes or something else?" Or, if after you offer your child several choices, she picks an appropriate option not mentioned, honor this choice. This expanded choice making gives children more control over their environments and lives, and it encourages independent thinking.
- **Teach your child to identify choices throughout her day.** Show your child that there are many choices to make throughout the day and these choices can occur in various settings, such as at home, at school, and in the community. If appropriate, point out that she has a choice to either walk or take the bus when going somewhere in the community. As your child recognizes the numerous opportunities she has throughout the day to make her own choices, she will learn to better manage the course of her day by making safe and appropriate choices.
- **Foreshadow an upcoming choice your child will need to make**. When you anticipate your child will have to make a choice in the near future, let her know she will be expected to do so soon. When it is almost time to clean up, say "In ten minutes, you can either pick up your toys or you can make your bed. You get to make that choice in ten minutes." By foreshadowing upcoming choices, your child may know what to expect, have more time to consider her options, and feel more prepared to make a choice.
- **Encourage your child to think about the consequences of her choices.** Explain to your child that all choices have a consequence. If your child chooses painting as a play time activity, encourage her to think about the possibility of getting paint on her clothes or that there might not be time to play with another toy. By helping your child consider the possible consequences of choices, she will realize the need to make thoughtful choices.
- **Call attention to the choices others make and the outcomes of those choices.** When her sibling or another family member makes a choice, bring this to your child's attention. Describe the outcomes, both positive and negative, of that choice. Say to your child, "Your sister Ellie chose to wear a sweater instead of a t-shirt. She will be warm enough if it gets colder outside tonight." Your child will recognize choices she can make and will see the importance of considering outcomes when making a choice.

Support decision-making 2

Decision making is the ability to consider possible solutions and select the one best suited to one's individual needs, while considering how the decision affects oneself and others.[5] Decision making helps children carefully weigh all possible options in order to reach a desired outcome. It also provides a base for problem solving, goal setting, and self-management. Here, decision making is focused on decisions having an impact on one's life and future.

> "Show by example. Let your child see you and others make choices and decisions. Talk with the child about how you or others made the choices and decisions." —*Parent*

Parent-suggested strategies

- **Teach your child what it means to make a decision.** Directly teach your child about decisions. Provide specific examples of decisions that people typically have to make. For example, explain that a decision is a process people use to generate options and determine which one is best for them. Give your child examples of decisions that are often made, such as which classes to take in high school, what to do after high school, and whether or not to have a pet.
- **Talk through the decision-making process with your child before he makes a decision.** Discuss the process of considering available options when making a decision. For example, if your child is deciding whether he would like to go to a camp for the summer, go over the potential factors he should take into consideration before making the decision (e.g., what activities occur at the camp, whether being away from home will be difficult, if there will be any other children there your child knows, etc.).
- **Teach your child the motto: "Stop, Think, Act."** This motto, or one similar to it, provides him with a simple process to follow when it is time to make a decision. Teach him to (a) stop his body and actions, (b) consider the pros and cons of each option before making a decision, and (c) act on the decision made. Role-play using this motto to give your child practice before he needs to use it on his own.
- **Provide opportunities for your child to make decisions.** Give your child the chance to make decisions about his life. For example, allow your child to make decisions about the classes he will take or have your child determine the extracurricular activities in which he will participate. By providing opportunities for your child to make decisions, you may help him develop the decision-making skills he'll need as an adult.
- **Guide your child to make the best decision.** Ask questions that lead your child to consider what he hopes to gain from a particular decision or any other considerations he should take into account. For example, when helping your child decide what to do after high school,

[5] *Beyth-Maron, Fischhoff, Jacobs Quadrel, and Furby (1991)*

ask him questions such as, "What kind of job do you want to have after high school?", "Do you need to continue to go to school to get that type of job?", and then "Do you want to go to college?"

> "Allow them to make decisions at home and about their life – don't do everything for them. Encourage independence!"
>
> —*Parent*

- **Highlight outcomes of decisions by using the phrase "if_____, then _____".** The "if _____, then _____" phrasing emphasizes the cause and effect aspect of decisions. For example, if your child is trying to decide whether he should join a club after school, say, "If you join the club, then you will meet more people and spend less time at home."
- **Explain the outcomes of positive and negative decisions to your child.** Before your child makes a decision, talk through possible outcomes and how the decision may impact others. For example, if your child is trying to decide whether to get a part-time job, talk with him about possible positive and negative outcomes (e.g., learning a new skill, but having less time to do homework or spend with friends). Discuss how deciding to take a part-time job may affect others since he will no longer be available to take care of the neighbor's dog or mow the yard.
- **Reflect with your child about a decision he made.** Have your child think about a decision after he makes it. Referring to the summer camp example, whichever way your child decides, ask him to reflect on the decision at the end of the summer. Discuss the outcomes of the decision, both positive and negative, and how your child views the decision. For example, if your child decided not to go to camp, ask, "What are good things that happened because of this decision? What were some not-so-good things that happened because of this decision?"
- **Ask your child why he made a certain decision.** After your child makes a decision, ask for the reasoning behind that decision. For example, if your child decides to join an extracurricular art class, ask him why he decided to join the class.
- **Encourage your child to become independent in his decision making.** Prompt your child to make a decision on his own, and respect the decisions your child makes independently, as long as he is safe. For example, if your child asks you what picture he should draw, say, "Why don't you decide what you would like to draw and then you can show me when you're done."
- **Be supportive when your child makes decisions, providing positive feedback or appropriate incentives.** Show your child that you support him in decision making. When your child puts a lot of consideration into a decision, praise him or provide another form of positive reinforcement. Through your support and feedback, your child may learn it is important and worthwhile to make mindful decisions.
- **Let your child know it is okay to make mistakes, and allow him to learn from those mistakes.** When your child makes a mistake, reassure him that everyone makes mistakes. After all, mistakes help us learn what to do differently the next time. If your child makes a decision to join a club and it does not turn out to be a positive experience, talk with your child about what he learned from being part of the club, why it was not a good experience, and how he can use this information in the future. Encourage your child to continue making decisions despite the possibility of making mistakes.
- **Share examples from your own life of when you made good or bad decisions, along with the reasons for making those decisions.** Educate your child about decision making by sharing times in your life when you made decisions – both good and bad. For example, consider sharing with your child how you selected your current job and your reasons for living in your city or town. Highlight the various considerations and alternative options you had, as well as why you made the decisions you did.

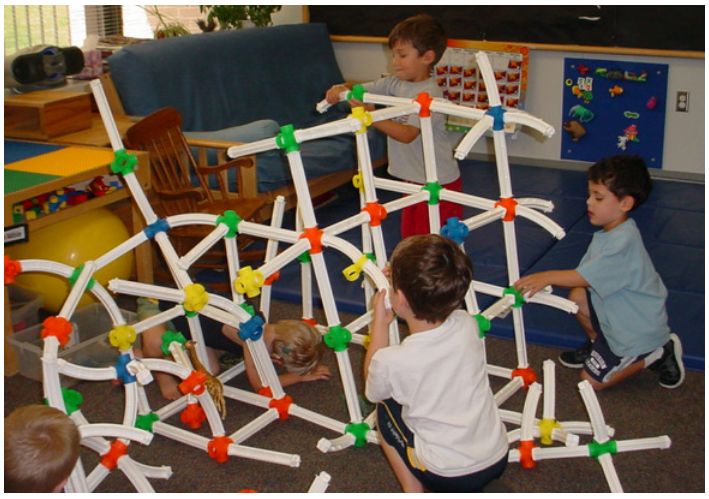
Encourage problem solving 3

Problem solving refers to the ability to effectively respond to and generate solutions for challenging situations that arise. Learning to effectively solve problems leads to increased competence and independence at home, in school, and in the community. It may also increase the ability of children to safely navigate different environments.

> "I role play conversations that might be effective in peer situations, so that he might be more likely to try to communicate verbally to solve a problem." —*Parent*

Parent-suggested strategies

- **Teach your child problem-solving strategies by identifying the problem, brainstorming solutions, and weighing the pros and cons.** There are a variety of methods you can use to teach your child problem-solving strategies, such as the "IDEAL" problem solver[6] or social stories[7]. You can have your child practice problem solving by discussing possible solutions to "What would you do if…" scenarios and having your child work on puzzles. Teaching and then practicing problem-solving strategies may help your child when she encounters inevitable challenges in life.
- **Use visuals to teach problem-solving skills.** Consider using visuals to teach and help your child with problem-solving skills. For example, use a Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) board or a sequence of pictures to teach a problem-solving plan for a specific situation. Visuals may help your child better understand the steps associated with problem-solving.
- **Model problem-solving strategies for your child.** Demonstrate the process involved in solving a problem when one comes up in your own life. For example, if you need to mail something and the post office is closed, talk with your child about the problem, some possible solutions, and the most reasonable solution: "I need to mail this letter, but the post office is closed. I could get mad because the post office is closed or I could drive the letter to where it is going or I could mail it tomorrow. Getting mad will not change anything, and I don't want to drive that far. I will just mail it tomorrow." After hearing your own thought process, your child may be better able to apply the process to her own problems.
- **Have your child choose the best solution to a problem after providing her with a limited number of solutions.** When your child encounters a problem, give her some possible solutions from which to choose. For example, if your child wants to bake a cake and is missing the eggs, have her choose to bake something else or walk to the store to buy eggs. With this method, you are supporting your child in the problem-solving process by giving her opportunities to identify the best solution.



[6] *Wehmeyer et. al (2007)*
[7] *Gray (2000)*

- **Guide your child to solutions by asking targeted questions.** When your child encounters a problem, ask questions to help her arrive at a solution. For example, if your child forgot her homework at school, ask her if she could get a copy from a classmate, if the school building is still open, or if there is a class website she could check.
- **Write down the solution to a problem.** When a problem occurs, have your child write down the solution that she used. For example, if your child is locked out of the house one day, write down how the problem was solved. Writing down the solution, or having your child write or draw a picture of the solution, may help her remember it if the same problem occurs again.
- **Remind your child of a successful problem-solving process and use it as a model.** When your child encounters a problem, remind her of a time when a similar problem was successfully solved. For example, if your child is being teased by another peer, remind her of the last time it happened and what she did to solve the problem. This may enable your child to generalize to a new context.
- **Provide opportunities for your child to problem solve.** Allow your child to solve a problem when one occurs. For example, if your child is frustrated when a toy or computer program will not work, rather than fixing the problem yourself, ask leading questions about what to do next and prompt her to use problem-solving strategies. These supported opportunities may help your child feel more capable and confident about solving problems independently.
- **Allow your child to solve a problem on her own before you offer assistance.** After you have taught your child problem-solving strategies, give her time to solve a problem independently, and then offer your help only if she continues to struggle. For example, if your child and a peer are having a difficult time sharing, give them time to work it out among themselves before stepping in.
- **Encourage your child to come to you with problems to discuss possible solutions.** Let your child know you are available and willing to discuss her problems. This openness allows you to provide guidance and assistance to your child, which will help her become a more independent problem-solver.
- **Use different characters or people when discussing a problem.** Consider discussing a current problem with your child by replacing herself with a super hero, athlete, or TV character. For example, ask, "What would Aaron Rodgers do in this situation?" This may enable your child to think about the problem more clearly if she is somewhat removed from it.
- **Use media—including movies, TV, and books—to start discussions about problem solving.** Reference movies, TV shows, and books to talk about how to solve problems. For example, *A Day's Work* by Eve Bunting is an example of a book you can use to talk about the problem-solving process with your child.
- **Help your child identify the magnitude of a problem.** Assist your child in determining if a problem is a small problem or big problem. For example, use a 5-point scale to help your child rate the severity of a situation by asking if the situation is a "big elephant problem" (5 points) or a "little mouse problem" (1 point). Your child may be better able to put the problem in perspective if she learns to identify its magnitude.
- **Discuss appropriate reactions considering the magnitude of a problem.** As your child learns to identify the severity of problems, talk with her about an appropriate reaction for a small problem compared to a big problem. For example, talk with your child about how upset you would be if you lost a pencil ("a tiny bit bothered") compared with losing your house keys ("very upset").
- **Involve your child in solving family problems by meeting together.** Consider having family meetings to apply problem-solving skills together. For example, meet as a family each Sunday night and allow each family member to express any needs or problems. Other family members can offer possible solutions and/or assistance. Your child will see problem solving in action by observing others trying to solve their own problems, getting ideas on how to solve her own problems, and contributing possible solutions.
- **Help your child broaden her perspectives on situations.** Guide your child in looking at situations from a different perspective. For example, if your child is upset because a classmate does not want others to touch a special photograph brought in for Show and Tell, explain to your child that the photograph likely has great meaning to the classmate and he is trying to keep it safe. Have your child think of an item that is special to her, and reflect on whether she would feel similarly.

Promote goal setting and planning

4

Goal setting refers to identifying an achievable objective and developing a plan to reach that objective. Learning goal setting helps people to identify what is important to them and gives them a sense of direction and purpose. Children with disabilities who set their own goals may become more independent and proactive.

Parent-suggested strategies

- **Set short-term goals with your child.** Set goals that can be accomplished within the same day or over the course of a few days. For example, set a goal that he will work on homework for 15 minutes tonight or will brush his teeth for three nights in a row. Developing short-term goals allows your child to practice goal setting and feel successful when he reaches a goal.
- **Let your child provide input on his goals**. Give your child the opportunity to contribute ideas to what his own goals should be. For example, if you want your child to participate in an extracurricular activity to support his social development, allow your child to choose the club or activity. Your child may be more motivated to achieve these goals if he provides input on them.
- **Write down goals and create a step-by-step plan with your child for how a goal can be reached and what resources might be needed.** If your child has a goal to be in a play, brainstorm a list of associated tasks: find out when auditions will be held, practice lines, and role-play an audition. To learn more about the specific play, he could refer to various resources like a movie or book version.
- **Use visuals to help your child see progress toward goals.** Use a chart, graph, or other visual to help your child see the progress he is making toward his goals. For example, write down your child's goals for the week and place a sticker of your child's choice next to each goal when it is completed. Seeing progress made may push your child to reach his goals.
- **Post goals in a location where everyone will see them each day.** Write down your child's goals (or help him to write down his own goals), and post them in a location where they will be noticed, such as on the refrigerator or next to the front door. This may help your child and other family members maintain focus on his goals and incorporate them into daily life.
- **Encourage your child to ask for help reaching his goals.** Let your child know that it is okay to ask for help if he needs assistance to reach a goal. Talk about people he knows who would be available to help. Consider giving your child examples from your own life when you asked someone for help related to a personal goal. This may help your child see that people in his life are supportive and ready to help.

- **Help your child to set realistic goals.** As all children set goals for their future, they often choose hard-to-reach goals that will be very difficult to attain, such as becoming a professional athlete or a famous singer. This can also be true of children with disabilities. For example, if your child has the goal to play professional football, encourage him to work on the steps leading to that, such as starting an exercise routine and joining or managing the football team at school. Do not guarantee that your child will reach the ultimate goal. Consider saying, "That may be a goal for some day, but let's figure out what parts of the goal you can work on right now." Setting realistic goals may help your child focus his energy and increase the chances of reaching the goal or a similar, easier-to-reach goal.

- **Start setting goals for (and with) your child at an early age.** Teach your child the importance of setting goals by starting when he is quite young. For example, when your child is pre-kindergarten age, set a goal that your child will pick up at least one toy to help clean up. By making goal setting part of your child's life at a young age, he will be more accustomed to setting goals as he gets older.
- **Create a schedule of when steps of a larger project are due.** When your child has a major school project to complete, help him make a schedule with deadlines for when each part should be completed. For example, if the assignment is to create a model of the solar system, help him schedule when each planet will be constructed. Having a schedule may make the project seem less overwhelming to your child.
- **Set goals of varying levels of interest for your child.** While your child will likely be more motivated to work on goals of interest, it is also important for him to develop a work ethic to achieve less interesting goals. Although a particular goal may not be of concern to your child, it can still have importance with respect to his social, academic, and daily-living skills. For example, even if your child does not like brushing his teeth, it is still important to learn this skill. By working on a variety of goals, your child may recognize the importance of all goals and experience success in areas he previously had limited interest.
- **Set more complex goals as your child masters simple goals.** Work with your child to set more challenging goals as he achieves simple ones and becomes more comfortable with goal setting. For example, if your child masters buttoning a shirt, help him set a goal that he will fully dress himself each day. Your child may learn important skills and become more independent through the process.
- **Demonstrate that there is more than one way to achieve a goal.** Explain to your child that there are many ways to reach a goal and that persistence is essential when trying to achieve goals. For example, if your child's goal is to learn to ride a bike, explain that there are different ways to learn: he could start with training wheels, a tandem bike, or a tricycle. If your child starts with one method and is unsuccessful, let him know that a different method might work and that he should not give up. Your child may come to see that if a goal is not reached as originally planned, he can still try another possible avenue.
- **Discuss future plans with your child starting at a young age.** Have early conversations with your child about his future. For example, when your child is in elementary school, ask him what he wants to be when he grows up. Starting discussions about the future at an early age may help your child gain a sense of control over his future and feel more determined to achieve short- and long-term goals.
- **Include your child in making long-term plans.** Involve your child in conversations about his own future. Discuss with your child what he would like to do next year, like take swimming or drum lessons, or after high school, such as continuing his education or getting a job.
- **Take your child's strengths and interests into account when talking about possibilities for his future.** Help your child prepare for the future by discussing possible opportunities and jobs related to his interests. For example, if your child likes animals, talk with him about volunteering or working at a pet store or at the Humane Society. Children with disabilities, like all individuals, have valuable contributions to make to society and having a job aligned with one's interests and strengths increases the likelihood of success.
- **Encourage your child about his future.** Draw your child's attention to thoughtful ideas he has about his future. For example, if your nature-loving child suggests that a job in a park or public garden would be enjoyable, praise your child for thinking about his interests and how they can be used in a future job.
- **Attend events with your child that provide information about jobs and education.** High schools and local colleges often offer college and career fairs, open houses, and transition workshops. Also consider contacting your local regional center and disability organizations about any upcoming events they may be hosting. Attending these activities with your child allows both of you to see what kind of opportunities and support are available after high school.
- **Explain why certain tasks are important for his future.** Discuss with your child the ways in which some tasks will help him achieve a successful future. For example, completing homework teaches responsibility and group projects teach work and collaboration skills. Although some of these tasks may not be enjoyable for your child, connecting them to his future may clarify the reason why these tasks are important.

Reinforce self-directed behaviors

5

Behavior is self-directed when it is managed and regulated on one's own. Self-directed behaviors include monitoring and evaluating one's behavior, selecting and providing one's own reinforcement, setting one's own schedule, and managing one's learning through strategies like self-instruction. When individuals are able to direct their own behaviors, they have a greater chance of experiencing positive outcomes now as well as later in life[8].

> "Encourage your child to find comfort independently in stressful situations by presenting a variety of options—i.e. rocking chair, having blanket, etc. . . make these things available so that the child can seek them out herself." —*Parent*

Parent-suggested strategies

- **Teach the importance of self-regulation.** Explain to your child that self-regulation allows people to take more control over their lives by managing their own behaviors. This is important to becoming a successful, contributing, and productive family member, student, and community member. For example, your child might learn to self-regulate her attention and actively participate in class by using sensory objects (such as a "fidget" or a "sit disc"). Such strategies may help her become a more successful and engaged student.
- **Teach your child to identify when self-regulation strategies are needed.** Explain that self-regulation skills are always important, but that specific tools for self-regulation may be particularly needed in new, stressful, or difficult situations. For example, if your child becomes anxious in social situations with new people, give her a reminder that this is a time when she typically becomes anxious and that she may benefit from using calming techniques beforehand.
- **Teach your child the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behaviors.** For your child to successfully manage her own behaviors, it is important to be able to distinguish appropriate from inappropriate behaviors. Explain that appropriate behaviors are those that help your child successfully function at home, at school, and in the community, while inappropriate behaviors are those that prevent your child from reaching goals and may negatively impact the safety and success of herself and others. Provide multiple examples of both appropriate (e.g., completing homework on time, playing cooperatively with siblings, asking for help) and inappropriate (e.g., hitting siblings, breaking a toy, being late to class) behaviors.
- **Talk with your child about her behaviors and potential causes of the behaviors.** It is often helpful to identify triggers of problematic behaviors in order to understand, address, and prevent them. Assist your child to identify a specific challenging behavior (e.g., biting a peer), generate potential reasons this behavior occurred (e.g., peer would not share toys or peer would not play the game your child wanted to play), choosing the one that best explains why the behavior occurred, and brainstorming how to address it. For example, if the peer took her toy, discuss alternative behaviors to biting and role-play using the more appropriate behavior.

[8] *Wehmeyer et al. (2007)*

- **Talk with your child about the potential consequences of her actions.** Before your child exhibits a particular behavior, talk with her about the outcomes that may occur because of that behavior. Discuss the ways in which the behavior would affect her and others. For example, if your child wants to go to a friend's house instead of working on a class project due the next day, explain that going may prevent her from completing the project and result in a poor grade. If it is a group project, the grades of other students may also be negatively impacted. Conversely, if your child is practicing every day for an upcoming music concert, explain that this behavior will enable her to be more prepared and contribute positively to the band, orchestra, or choir.
- **Ask your child to regularly reflect on her behaviors.** After your child exhibits a particular behavior, ask her to think about whether it was an appropriate/inappropriate behavior and what choice she will make next time. For example, if your child took a toy away from a friend, your child should indicate this was an inappropriate behavior and generate alternatives for the next time she wants a toy a friend is using (e.g., asking for a turn, waiting until the friend is done, getting help from a teacher).
- **Explain to your child what others will think of her if behaving inappropriately.** Have a discussion with your child about how others may respond to inappropriate behaviors. Part of this discussion could involve pointing out a challenging behavior of someone your child knows (e.g., sibling, cousin, friend) and asking your child what she thinks about that person as a result of the behavior. For example, if her friend threw a ball that hit your child in the face, your child may think that friend is mean. Explain that, just as your child thought the friend mean in the given example, other people may respond similarly to your child if she engages in the same behaviors.
- **Teach your child ways to manage her behavior.** Children need to be explicitly taught ways to regulate their own behaviors. You can start by outlining your own behavioral expectations for your child at home and school. Frame these in a positive manner (e.g., "Use an inside voice" as opposed to "Don't yell"). Then, explicitly teach your child how to meet the behavioral expectations (e.g., demonstrate what an "inside voice" sounds like). If your child's school is implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), you may consider using the same language, behavior expectations, and consequences at home.
- **Use social stories[9] to teach your child about managing behaviors.** Stories that use pictures and words to explain social situations, concepts, or behavior expectations in various settings may be one way to teach children to direct their own behaviors.
- **Explain to your child how to correct a certain behavior.** Rather than just telling your child that a behavior was inappropriate, explain how she could behave differently to produce a more positive outcome. For example, rather than snapping her pencil due to frustration when trying to write her name, your child could have taken a break or asked you for help. Explain that sometimes it also may be necessary to repair damages caused by an inappropriate behavior (e.g., saying "I'm sorry" after your child broke a friend's pencil).
- **Help your child to manage her emotions and behavior in stressful situations.** After teaching your child self-management strategies, she may continue to need some support from you to be able to use these strategies independently, especially in stressful settings. This support may involve role-playing the strategies before entering a difficult situation, providing coaching during real-life situations, or using some of the specific ideas suggested below (e.g., using assistive technology, writing down behavior techniques, using calming strategies).

[9] *Gray (2000)*

- **Use assistive technology to help your child manage difficult behaviors.** Some children, particularly those who do not use words to communicate, may benefit from other ways to manage their behavior. Children can be taught to use assistive technology (e.g., PECS, GoTalk) to identify problematic behaviors (e.g., pressing a button that says "hit" or buttons for "not" and "listen") and choose a solution (e.g., pressing the "I'm sorry" button) for addressing the behavior. The assistive technology device will need to be programmed and its use explicitly taught and practiced.
- **Write down effective behavior techniques to use when a problem occurs.** Your child's independent self-management and problem-solving skills may be strengthened by having a visual aid to use in times of difficulty. For example, you might write or draw out different strategies for negotiating conflicts with siblings (e.g., use your words, remove yourself from the situation, get an adult). You could also teach your child steps of a problem-solving plan and have these steps written or drawn out for your child to use when problems arise.
- **Teach your child calming techniques to manage behavior.** Children are more prone to exhibit inappropriate behaviors when they are experiencing heightened emotions such as anger or frustration. Teaching them ways to manage these emotions and calm their bodies may be particularly helpful. For example, you could teach your child to count to ten, take a deep breath, hug a stuffed animal, talk to an adult, engage in a calming activity (e.g., reading a book), or find a quiet place (e.g., bedroom).
- **Provide your child with a means to communicate when she needs to use a calming strategy.** Some children may need more support from adults to use calming strategies. For example, she may need to be reminded of her available options when she is upset. Therefore, consider teaching your child a signal to let you or others know when she is upset and in need of support. Possible signals might include saying or signing "I need help," or raising her hand at school.
- **Set goals with your child regarding managing her behavior.** By involving your child in setting behavior goals, she may take more ownership for the goal and her behavior. For example, if you use a behavior chart at home, such as a red-yellow-green system, your child could set a goal of staying on green for a specified amount of time (e.g., an hour, morning, all day).
- **Give your child much attention when she behaves appropriately and minimal attention when behaving inappropriately.** Children are often motivated to exhibit behaviors in order to obtain attention from peers and adults. Reactions from peers and adults may reinforce appropriate or inappropriate behavior. Therefore, try to provide your child with a lot of attention (e.g., praise, hug, sticker) when she behaves appropriately and little or no attention when she behaves inappropriately.

> "Self-regulation will always be a challenge, but if somebody's going to be in charge, it might as well be me."
>
> —*Daniel Akst*

- **Give consistent consequences for inappropriate behavior.** It is important to provide your child with fair and consistent consequences. This will help her understand which behaviors are inappropriate and make different choices in the future. For example, if your child hits a sibling when mad, it may be more effective to provide the same consequence each time hitting occurs, instead of getting a time-out one time, getting yelled at another time, or having the behavior ignored a different time.
- **Share your own thought process regarding your behavior.** Take advantage of "teachable moments" by explaining to your child your own process for managing your behavior. For example, if you accidentally use a swear word in front of your child, say, "Using swear words is not a nice way to behave when I am mad and I should not have done that. The next time I am mad, I will take a deep breath or count to ten instead of swearing."

Foster responsibility

6

Responsibility means being accountable for things within one's control. As children grow they should gradually gain responsibility for more aspects of their lives. These responsibilities teach decision-making, self-discipline, and important life lessons that prepare them to be independent in their adult lives[10]. This is true for children with disabilities as well. In addition, individuals with disabilities have shared that their self-esteem and self-worth are enhanced when they have greater control and responsibility in their lives[10]. By teaching your child to be more responsible, he may gain self-confidence, become more independent, and change others' expectations of him[11].

"My philosophy is that not only are you responsible for your life, but doing the best at this moment puts you in the best place for the next moment." —*Oprah Winfrey*

Parent-suggested strategies

- **Talk with your child about the importance of responsibility and organization.** Discuss with your child why it is important to be responsible, the different kinds of responsibilities (e.g., to yourself, to your family, at home, at school), and the reasons why organization is an important skill. For example, you could explain that being organized will help your child know which homework assignments he needs to complete, which materials to bring home to complete the homework, and when the homework is due. Explain that this organization will enable him to be a more responsible student who completes his homework.
- **Create a list of the tasks you need to do each day and have your child do the same.** Each morning, write a list of what you need to get done that day, talking out loud so your child hears your thought process. For example, you might say as you write your list, "Today I really need to do the laundry and call my doctor." Then ask your child, "What do you need to do today?" Assist your child as he creates a list of tasks for the day in written or picture form. This will help him learn how to manage responsibilities and plan his day.
- **Use a chart or other visual aid to help your child keep track of responsibilities.** Use a visual aid to enable your child to see his responsibilities and the tasks he has already accomplished. Post it in a spot your child sees each day. Your child can receive a sticker or other small prize for each task he completes. If a more motivating reward is needed, you can designate the number of stickers he has to earn per week in order to earn a larger prize.
- **Remind your child what he needs to do every day.** Remind your child about important responsibilities such as bringing materials to school or feeding a pet. You can remind your child verbally or by posting a written reminder or visual list in a prominent place. As your child

[10] *Ward (1996)*
[11] *Wehmeyer (2002)*

becomes accustomed to fulfilling these responsibilities, fade back the reminders to see if he has internalized those tasks.

- **Give your child everyday household responsibilities.** Completing chores around the house, such as taking out the garbage or feeding a pet, teaches responsibility and enables him to be a contributing member of the family. He will also learn important daily living skills through these chores.
- **Teach your child that some activities simply must be completed even if they are less enjoyable.** Share with your child that everyone, including yourself, has to do things that may not be enjoyable, such as certain tasks at a job or completing homework. When your child resists completing an undesirable task, try to connect the need to do the task with attaining a short- or long-term goal. If your child does not want to do his homework, remind him that homework is important to doing well in school, and doing well in school is essential to getting a job. Explaining the purpose of undesirable activities may help your child see the need for responsibility throughout all areas of his life.
- **Ensure your child does his homework consistently.** Create an afterschool routine for your child that includes time for homework, and ask your child about his assignments each night. If needed, help your child with the homework and monitor its completion. Being accountable for one's homework is a natural way to develop responsibility.
- **Discuss issues related to living independently, such as paying bills and living within your income.** As your child enters adolescence, begin to bring these issues to his attention. For example, when you pay bills, talk about the importance of paying them on time and budgeting money for them. This may increase his awareness of and preparedness for the responsibilities adults face.
- **Give your child an allowance to teach money management skills.** Allow your child to earn a weekly or monthly allowance, possibly tied to completing household chores. Consider opening a bank account for him. This provides your child with opportunities to learn money management skills, such as budgeting and saving. For example, if your child wants to buy a new computer game or movie, help him find out the cost of the new item and determine how much he needs to save to make the purchase.
- **Have your child take responsibility for making his own appointments.** If appropriate, have your child make his doctor, dentist, therapy, and any other appointments. Teach him how to make these appointments and then role-play conversations to prepare your child for likely situations. This is an important social skill your child will use throughout his life.
- **Bring your child to work with you and give him a task to complete.** If possible, have your child accompany you to work one day and give him an assignment. For example, have your child file papers or deliver messages to colleagues. Your child will see you managing your responsibilities, be exposed to a job site, and contribute to your work place by completing a task.
- **Review with your child what to do in an emergency.** Talk with your child about how to handle emergencies. Teach him when and how to dial 9-1-1 and what to do when there is severe weather. Knowledge of these skills will help your child be more responsible and independent.

Promote independence 7

Independence means having the freedom to make one's own decisions and act as one chooses. Of course, as humans, we are all interdependent and in need of one another. At the same time, research shows that individuals with disabilities who have the autonomy to make their own decisions tend to report having a higher quality of life[12]. By encouraging your child's increasing independence, she will be better prepared to participate in the breadth of activities, events, and relationships of life with less need for additional support.

Parent-suggested strategies

- **Talk with your child about the value of increasing independence.** Discuss what being independent might look like and why developing greater autonomy could lead to more independence in the future. For example, encourage your child to do everyday tasks (e.g., dressing, brushing teeth) on her own. As your child enters adolescence, help her understand how becoming more independent now might assist her in reaching her post-high school goals.
- **Provide opportunities for your child to be as independent as possible at home and in the community.** Look for indicators that she wishes to do something independently and give her the chance to do so. For example, if your child wishes to write a card to someone without guidance, allow her to do so. These "real-life" opportunities can provide rich learning experiences.
- **Reconsider what your child can do on her own.** Your child may actually be able to do more things independently than you initially thought. For example, she may be able to walk to school alone after receiving appropriate instruction and opportunities to practice. Broadening your views of what she can do without intensive support may lead you to discover new ways to nurture her independence.
- **Help your child develop independent routines.** Create a routine for different times in your child's day to increase the predictability of when activities will occur and the expectations associated with each. For example, a morning routine might include getting dressed, brushing teeth, eating breakfast, and getting materials ready for school. She may be able to complete routines more independently if they occur in a similar order each day.
- **Use checklists or visual schedules to increase your child's independence.** Make checklists or schedules for activities your child does on a regular basis and post them in a place she will see each day. You can create checklists of your child's morning, after school, and evening routines that include tasks to complete (e.g., tooth brushing, homework, helping with kitchen cleanup). Such checklists allow your child to independently complete these activities without requiring frequent reminders or extensive support.

[12] *Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1998)*

- **Use scaffolding techniques to encourage independent living skills.** Teach your child independent living skills one step at a time, removing support as she progresses. For example, if you are working with your child on how to do laundry, start by doing the laundry with her and then incrementally expect her to do each step (e.g., separating the clothes by color) independently. Scaffolding may help a child to feel secure and a sense of mastery as she learns a new skill.
- **Allow your child to create her own schedules.** Have your child create a schedule to learn the order and necessary steps for an activity. For example, allow your child to arrange PECS (i.e., Picture Exchange Communication System) cards to establish a schedule for making lunch or going to a restaurant for lunch. By learning to make her own schedules, she may feel a sense of ownership for an activity and better internalize the schedule, thereby becoming less reliant on external supports.
- **Talk with your child about the importance of taking initiative.** Discuss what it means to take initiative and share concrete ways your child can do so in her everyday activities, such as approaching a teacher with a question about an assignment. Taking initiative often involves recognizing a need or want and taking the first step to attain it. By supporting your child to take initiative, she will learn to self-advocate, which is an important part of being more independent.
- **Talk to your child about safety and risk.** Show her how to safely accomplish everyday activities that will be important for greater independence as an adult. For example, teach her how to safely cross a parking lot and how to safely use the Internet. Although these skills may take considerable time to teach, this investment may translate into more opportunities for independence in the future.
- **Support your child's independence by providing support in the background.** When possible, monitor your child's behavior in a less obvious way so that she does not always turn first to you for assistance. In other words, give your child space to act independently. For example, when at a restaurant, let your child get her own drink from the soda fountain while you watch from your seat. This provides your child with the opportunity to complete a task and potentially problem solve on her own.
- **Avoid being overprotective.** Give your child room to grow and learn from her experiences and mistakes. When mistakes are made—and they likely will be—discuss what could happen next time to produce a more positive outcome. For example, allow your child to take a challenging class of interest at school even if there is a chance she may not be successful; or let your child participate in outdoor activities with decreasing amounts of direct support. Even if your child is not initially successful, she will likely learn important lessons through her attempts.

> "The hardest thing I had to learn was not to be too helpful. The first sign my child showed when he needed help with something I would rush in and help or do it for him. I found he developed a lot more independence if I let him try to figure it out himself, or asked him questions to guide him towards getting the answer himself."
>
> *—Parent*

Support self-awareness and self-knowledge

8

Self-awareness and self-knowledge skills refer to accurately identifying one's own strengths and limitations; identifying one's preferences, interests, and abilities; and applying that knowledge to enhance success. For children to successfully apply their inner strengths to everyday behavior, they must have an awareness and knowledge of their own abilities, strengths, and gifts[13].

> "She recognizes her strengths and activities she likes and we try to incorporate them into things she struggles with or doesn't like (reading games on computer math skills while playing board games)."
>
> —*Parent*

Parent-suggested strategies

- **Discuss with your child his strengths, challenges, and preferences**. Ask your child often about his likes, dislikes, and abilities. For example, ask your child questions about what he likes to do and point out the strengths you see your child exhibiting. These discussions may help your child become more aware of his personal preferences and abilities.
- **Provide opportunities for your child to try different activities to learn more about and build upon his strengths and interests.** Allow your child to try a range of activities to discover new areas of interest and enjoyment. Activities could include band, choir, karate, cross country, or any other extracurricular or community activity. Through exposure to different activities, your child may learn about strengths and interests of which he was previously unaware.
- **Talk with your child openly about his disability, the limitations associated with it, and ways to overcome its challenges.** Have candid conversations with your child about his disability and how it may impact his life. For example, if your child has a lot of anxiety in social situations, talk with him about the role his disability plays in contributing to the anxiety, along with strategies to cope with it. Emphasize to your child that his disability may sometimes make certain things harder, but not impossible.
- **Encourage your child to focus on his abilities.** Highlight your child's abilities rather than his limitations. For example, if your child says, "I hate school, I don't know how to do anything there," point out to your child something that he excels at in school, such as physical education or hands-on activities in science. As you encourage your child to focus on his abilities, he may gain more self-confidence.
- **Allow your child to pursue his interests.** Provide your child with opportunities to do things that are of interest to him. For example, if your child is interested in plants, flowers, or bugs, have him help you in the garden and take your child to the local plant nursery. Encouraging your child's interests at home and in the community will help those interests develop further.

[13] *Wehmeyer, Sands, and Doll (1997)*

- **Teach your child at a young age that everyone is different and has different interests and abilities.** Use books or videos to teach your child that everyone is unique. For example, if you watch a movie about a child who plays basketball, talk about how some people are interested in sports while others are interested in beading or animals. By explaining to your child that each person has a unique set of interests and skills that enable people to contribute to the community in their own ways, he may come to accept and appreciate these differences.
- **Talk to your child about who he or she is as an individual.** Have a discussion with your child about his internal and external qualities. For example, remind your child that he is honest and kind, a brother or sister, and a softball player. This way your child may see himself as a complex individual, rather than being defined solely by a disability.
- **Encourage your child to believe that he can reach his potential.** Help your child believe in himself by emphasizing your child's abilities and future possibilities. For example, remind your child that he is capable of being a great friend. Discuss ways to become a good friend and encourage him to apply those ideas. To reach his potential, it is necessary to recognize what is possible and believe that it is attainable.
- **Increase your child's self-esteem by encouraging practice of his strengths.** Provide your child with opportunities to focus on his strengths. For example, if your child is good at jump roping, suggest that he do it every day for five minutes to become even better. Consider having your artistic child submit a drawing to an art fair so other people will see and appreciate his work and talent. By practicing his strengths, your child may become more skilled and self-confident.
- **Read books with your child about self-awareness and self-worth.** Books with a message about self-awareness and self-worth may help your child understand these concepts. For example, *Spork* by Kyo Maclear and *Chrysanthemum* by Kevin Henkes highlight these concepts. After reading *Spork* with your child, talk with your child about what Spork learned about himself and how he came to be an important utensil in the kitchen. Your child may relate to characters in the books, increasing his own self-awareness in the process.
- **Teach your child to share his abilities and needs with others.** Work with your child on talking to others about his skills and areas of difficulty. For example, if your child is on a sports team, teach him how to let the coach know that he will be able to put forth greater effort and perform better if given occasional breaks.
- **Teach your child the difference between a limitation and not wanting to do something.** Show your child that he is still accountable for things despite the limitations associated with his disability. For example, if your child with mobility challenges says that he cannot make his bed when in fact he can, say, "This might be hard, but I know you can do it."

Encourage self-advocacy and leadership 9

Self-advocacy and leadership skills involve knowing and standing up for one's rights, communicating effectively and assertively, and being an effective leader or team member[14]. Self-advocacy skills ensure a child's choices are heard and respected by others. Self-advocacy also allows children and youth to make changes in their lives and get the supports they need to be successful in school and in the community. Leadership skills enable youth to advocate for the needs of others.

> "Help her self-advocate by discussing options, developing a plan, giving the names or resource information needed but allowing her to do the advocating for herself with support."
>
> —*Parent*

Parent-suggested strategies

- **Encourage your child to self-advocate by expressing her wants, needs, and feelings.** Emphasize to your child the importance of self-advocating, and encourage her to do so when possible. Teach her to ask for help when needed. For example, if she feels her teacher is not providing enough support, push your child to communicate with the teacher about this. It is important for your child to know that you want her to stand up for herself and know that she has the ability to express her wants, needs, and feelings. It is also important for your child to understand that in order for her wants and needs to be met throughout life—especially in adolescence and adulthood—she will be expected to stand up for herself.
- **Allow your child to speak for herself.** As much as possible, allow your child to speak for herself, rather than speaking for her. For example, have your child order her own meal at a restaurant. This can be done verbally, with pictures, or using an augmentative device. Try not to interrupt; instead, give your child the chance and needed time to express herself. Allowing your child to speak will support development of social and language skills, as well as the recognition by others that your child is a capable individual.
- **Teach your child to self-advocate.** Teach your child to advocate for herself by practicing different scenarios at home. For example, practice how she can self-advocate with other children by taking away a toy while she is playing with it. Then, coach your child on how to appropriately respond and advocate to get the toy back. Explicitly teaching self-advocacy skills and applying those skills to real-life-scenarios will help your child better advocate for herself.

[14] *Wehmeyer, Sands, and Doll (1997)*

- **Use scaffolding techniques with your child to develop self-advocacy skills.** Teach self-advocacy skills one step at a time, fading support as your child progresses. For example, begin by discussing how to self-advocate, then role-play a scenario focused on self-advocacy, and then prompt your child to self-advocate in a real-life situation. Gradually allow your child to self-advocate independently with minimal support. Giving her a lot of support at the beginning and then gradually decreasing support will help her master self-advocacy skills and gain confidence in her abilities.
- **Encourage your child to stand by her preferences even if they are different from those of others.** Emphasize to your child that it is important to stick with her preferences and choices. For example, if you discover that your child no longer likes a certain movie because of a peer's opinion, tell your child that true friends accept each other for who they are and not what movie they like. Explain to your child that having her own preferences is important.
- **Attend events with your child that provide information about self-advocacy.** Search for events in your area focused on self-advocacy and attend these events with your child. Examples include high school transition fairs, conferences and meetings sponsored by disability organizations, and activities organized by youth leadership groups. Contact your local regional center to inquire about upcoming events. By attending such events, you and your child will have the opportunity to meet others who have expertise about self-advocacy and learn effective advocating strategies.
- **Discuss with your child the importance of being a leader, what it means to be a leader, and how to develop leadership skills.** Talk with your child about why she might want to be a leader and how a leader acts. Explain the difference between being assertive and being bossy, providing specific examples of each type of behavior. Discuss with your child how to develop leadership skills, by volunteering or leading a group project at school. These steps will emphasize to your child the importance of such skills and relay an expectation that she can be a leader.
- **Involve your child in volunteer activities with younger children to build leadership skills.** Facilitate opportunities for your child to volunteer with younger children at a library, day care, or school. Your child will likely develop self-confidence, service, and leadership skills through this experience. Developing these skills in a non-threatening environment may also help her transfer these skills to other settings.
- **Allow your child to be the leader.** Provide your child with opportunities to be a leader at home and elsewhere. For example, have your child lead your family or a group of peers in a game by explaining the rules and deciding who will go first. Encouraging the use of leadership skills on a regular basis may help your child be a more effective leader and build her confidence using these skills.

Support communication 10

Communication is a critical component of everyone's lives. We all have needs, wants, and feelings, and we need a way to express these to others. In the early years of life, children receive assistance and lessons in communication at school and at home. However, many children with disabilities struggle with communication beyond those early years. Recent technological developments, along with creative thinking, have led to many strategies for enhancing the communication of children with disabilities. By supporting your child's communication, he may be better able to practice self-expression and participate more readily in activities that foster self-determination.

Parent-suggested strategies

- **Help your child find appropriate ways to express his emotions.** Talk with your child about different emotions, such as anger, frustration, excitement, and joy. Discuss the kinds of situations that lead to certain emotions and then discuss appropriate ways to express that emotion. For example, create a scenario in which your child does not get to play with a particular toy. Teach your child to say, "I am mad because I didn't get the toy I want" and encourage him to use a strategy to overcome the frustration, such as taking a break for a few minutes and playing in a new setting. Regularly speaking with your child about emotions and how to express them may help him more effectively interact with others.

- **Help your child express his feelings.** Discuss with your child how he feels in different situations, and assist your child in using the appropriate vocabulary to express opinions. For example, if your child seems frustrated because a sibling took his crayons without asking, practice with him what to say the next time something similar happens. Practicing these situations and then coaching your child to use them in real-life situations will help strengthen communication and self-advocacy.
- **Encourage your child to use eye contact and speak clearly when interacting with others.** If your child communicates verbally, prompt him to use eye contact and speak clearly. Encourage your child to practice these skills regularly. There are games and activities you can play with your child to promote making eye contact with others[15].
- **Encourage your child to use email to communicate with adults.** Prompt your child to use email to communicate with adults, especially if he is anxious about speaking with an adult in person. For example, if your child needs to ask the teacher a question, suggest he do it through email, if appropriate. Email allows your child to communicate without some of the anxiety that may be associated with speaking directly to adults.

[15] *www.disorderdirectory.com/articles/activities-to-promote-eye-contact-in-autistic-children.php*

- **Learn alternative ways to communicate if speech is difficult for your child.** Both you and your child may benefit from learning alternative ways to communicate. Sign language, pictures, and assistive technology are all examples of ways you and your child can communicate nonverbally. Pay attention to your child's body language, as this may be another way he communicates preferences and needs, such as needing a break. Learning how to engage with your child in this way may help him better express wants, needs, and thoughts with others.
- **Have your child use Augmentative and Alternative Communication Systems (AACs).** Consider having your child use the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) or other AAC approaches if he is does not communicate verbally. PECS focuses on the initiation component of communication and is taught in six phases[16]. With PECS, your child may be able to communicate his wants and needs using pictures.
- **Teach your child other ways to express wants and needs.** Work with your child on alternative methods to express himself. Have your child use modified sign or voice fluctuation and intonation to express his wants, needs, and feelings. For example, if your child makes a particular sound when he wants something, encourage use of this sound when making any request. If your child knows more than one way to communicate, he then has a choice of which one to use.
- **Meet together as a family to take turns expressing everyone's needs.** Consider having a regular family meeting, during which all members of the family have the opportunity to express their needs. In this forum, your child will see others communicating and it will provide additional opportunities for your child to express his needs in a supportive context.
- **Give your child time to process what is said and give plenty of response time.** Wait for your child to process information and respond, rather than rushing him to reply. For example, if you ask your child, "I'm going to the store. Do you want orange juice or grape juice?" give plenty of time for your child to think about the question and then respond. By allowing your child to take time to respond to the question, you are helping him develop the skills of making choices and self-advocating.
- **Engage your child in conversation by asking open-ended questions.** Ask your child open-ended questions to draw him into a conversation. For example, after your child watches a television show, ask, "What happened on that show?" or "What did you think of that show?" and then add some follow-up questions. Open-ended questions compel your child to give longer answers and actively participate in a conversation, as opposed to simply answering "yes" or "no."

> "I'm a great believer that any tool that enhances communication has profound effects in terms of how people can learn from each other, and how they can achieve the kind of freedoms that they're interested in." —*Bill Gates*

- **Teach your child to ask questions to learn more about situations or issues that are confusing.** Work with your child to ask questions about things he does not understand. For example, if your child is watching a TV show and does not understand what is happening, encourage him to think of what questions to ask in order to gain understanding, such as, "What are the characters' names?" or "Why are the characters laughing?" You could also create pretend situations that may be confusing and role-play questions your child might ask. Encourage your child to take the time needed to ask questions rather than remaining uncertain.

[16] *Sulzer-Azaroff, Hoffman, Horton, Bondy, and Frost (2009)*

Encourage participation 11

Participation in inclusive activities provides children with the opportunity to interact with their peers. Through participation in clubs, groups, or teams, we make new friends, develop social skills, and gain self-awareness about our strengths and interests. For children with disabilities, participation is especially important because, in many cases, it gives them an opportunity to interact with peers without disabilities.

> "We try to stay active, he attends and participates in all activities, modifying when he is overwhelmed or cannot fully participate. The more we do this, the more he impresses us with skills we did not expect to see."
>
> —*Parent*

Parent-suggested strategies

- **Involve your child from an early age in a variety of inclusive community and school activities of interest to her.** Give your child the chance to participate in activities of interest to her alongside peers without disabilities. Such activities may include martial arts, play groups, music classes, or sporting events.
- **Challenge your child to go outside her comfort zone by trying new activities.** Encourage your child to participate in an activity even if that she does not feel initially confident. For example, encourage your child to try a new sport. Challenging your child in this way may help her discover interests and strengths, as well as build confidence.
- **Help your child set goals about her involvement in group activities.** Assist your child in setting goals about her participation in various groups. For example, before going to a family gathering, help your child think of one question to ask her grandmother. If your child has a goal for participation, she may be more purposeful about being an active member in the group.
- **Participate in activities and community events along with your child.** Go with your child to watch youth sports events or plays, or attend a concert together. Your child may be more comfortable at such activities with you there. As your child gets older, encourage greater independence.
- **Be proactive and use creative ways to find activities your child enjoys.** If your child is struggling to find an enjoyable group activity, consider her personal interests when choosing a new one. For example, if your child likes reading, see if there is a reading club available or a group that plays games involving a lot of reading. Incorporating your child's interests may help her be more excited about and engaged in the activity.
- **Ask your child and her teachers about the extracurricular activities and groups available at school.** Ask your child if any extracurricular activities were mentioned on the school announcements or on posters around the school. Speak with your child's teacher or other school staff to find out what extracurricular opportunities exist. Encourage your child to join one or more of these activities.
- **Include your child in family activities.** Find activities in which all members of your family can participate. Outdoor activities, such as a picnic or going to a park, may offer experiences in which all family members can partake. If some activities are especially challenging for your child, consider having her initially participate for a shorter period. Gradually increase her level of participation over time.

- **Encourage your child to participate in activities best suited to her learning style.** Provide opportunities for your child to do activities that are related to her learning style. For example, if your child learns best by doing something, encourage involvement in an activity that involves using her hands, such as crocheting or assembling model kits. Your child may be more engaged if the activity is aligned with her preferred modes of learning.
- **Connect your child to activities with peers sharing similar interests.** Guide your child to find clubs or activities that provide the opportunity to be with peers who share common interests. For example, if your child is interested in computers, help her find a school or community computer club. This will provide opportunities to bond with peers over a shared interest.
- **Encourage your child to join groups at school to learn about leadership.** Encourage your child to join extracurricular groups, such as a photography or art club. Within these groups, your child may have the opportunity to lead a project or help plan an activity. These groups are natural settings in which your child can learn about being a leader.
- **Do activities with your child that require considerable patience.** Help your child become more patient by engaging in activities that require patience, like cooking or painting. Doing enjoyable activities may help your child develop patience and other skills without her even realizing it. Your child may become more tolerant to delays and waiting through participation in these activities.

- **Review the responsibilities associated with an activity before beginning.** Draw your child's attention to the responsibilities involved with a particular activity. For example, before going to the mall, remind her to stay with you and ask before going into a different store. Going over the responsibilities beforehand will better prepare your child for the activity.
- **Have your child participate in a social skills group.** Consider having your child take part in a social skills group. This type of group may help your child develop skills such as initiating conversations, turn-taking, and making friends. Groups can be found through a local Autism Society, Down Syndrome Association, Arc, or similar groups.
- **Encourage your child to volunteer to help others in need.** Encourage your child to give back to her community by volunteering with others. Possible volunteer opportunities include helping at a food pantry or a nursing home. Work with your child and a volunteer coordinator to find opportunities that align with your child's strengths and interests. By volunteering, your child may develop greater self-awareness skills as well as meet new people.

Foster relationships and social connections

12

Through our friendships and peer relationships, we receive (and give) support and intimacy. People who have supportive and lasting relationships tend to feel more connected to their communities and have people available to assist them when challenges eventually arise. Unfortunately, many children and youth with autism and intellectual disabilities tend to have few friendships with peers[17]. To live a truly self-determined life, children with disabilities should have a circle of friends and supportive people who care about them and are available to exchange needed supports.

> "Find 'teaching moments' to point out strategies your child can use to 'fit in.' It takes more than once to teach—WHENEVER there's an opportunity take it! Reinforcement is critical!"
>
> —*Parent*

Parent-suggested strategies

- **Talk with your child about relationships and interpersonal skills.** Talk with your child about the different types of relationships he can have with family members, friends, neighbors, and other community members, as well as the types of interactions considered appropriate with each. For example, you might discuss with him the difference between interacting with a family member versus a teacher or a classmate versus a sibling. Such guidance can help children learn the subtle, but important, differences in the nature of different relationships.
- **Teach your child about the essential qualities of friendships.** Talk with your child about the characteristics of a true friend—such as being kind, caring, and trustworthy. Encourage him to look for these qualities in others and help him develop these characteristics within himself. Point out when your child is (and is not) being a good friend. Converse about the difference between someone who is a friend and someone who is not, as well as whom in your child's life might be considered a friend.
- **Role-play friendship interactions.** Role-play different scenarios that involve interactions with friends. For example, help your child practice asking a friend to join an activity, choosing a game to play, declining an invitation, or managing rejection. Role-playing such situations can help prepare children for real-life scenarios by providing practice, feedback, and a suggested script to use in a given situation. It may also give your child more confidence in social situations.
- **Provide opportunities for your child to develop social skills in non-threatening environments.** Have your child practice new social skills with familiar people, such as family, friends, or neighbors. For example, if your child is learning how to excuse himself from a conversation, encourage practice with a neighbor before doing so at school or in the community. Practicing these skills in safe, comfortable environments allows your child to make mistakes and learn in a more nonjudgmental setting.
- **Provide frequent opportunities for social interaction.** Facilitate experiences in which your child can interact with other people. In addition to having your child spend time with peers, have him attend family events, attend congregational activities, go to the grocery store, go to the post office, or other places important in your life. Providing him with opportunities to interact with a variety of people across settings provides natural practice.

[17] *Carter (2011)*

- **Have your child spend time with peers, including children without disabilities.** Provide opportunities for your child to spend time with other similar-age children. Set up play-dates with other children from your neighborhood, daycare, school, or place of worship. Encourage your child to participate in extracurricular activities after school and in the community. Spending time with peers without disabilities can provide him with further opportunities to develop friendships and social skills. Peers without disabilities can also serve as models for typical interactions, provide support during play activities, or advocate for his inclusion in a classroom or playground activity.
- **Foreshadow social situations with your child.** Tell your child what to expect in upcoming social situations, including who will be present, which activities will occur, and what your child will be expected to do. For example, before your child goes to a birthday party, explain which children and adults will be there, the games that will be played, and any other details your child would benefit from knowing ahead of time. Foreshadowing lets your child know what to expect in a situation that may be unfamiliar, helping him feel less anxious and more prepared.
- **Find natural times to teach social strategies.** Teach your child about social skills "in the moment" when he is interacting with you or others. For example, if you see him having difficulty inviting a peer to swing together at the park, encourage him to say (with words or an augmentative device), "Would you like to swing with me?" Teaching and reinforcing skills in the natural environment often is more effective than teaching those same skills in isolation.
- **Use visuals or books to help your child take turns.** Use pictures or books to teach your child about taking turns when playing games or playing with a toy. For example, before playing a board game, read a short story with your child about a group of children taking turns while they play a game. Pictures that illustrate a skill or activity can help many children learn these often abstract social conventions.
- **Consider using available curricula to teach social skills.** Commercial curricula that explicitly teach social skills are now widely available. Some curricula use evidence-based strategies to explicitly teach social skills and provide activities to use. These resources can be shared with the school staff so everyone working with your child uses a consistent approach. Conversely, if your school is already using a particular social skills curriculum, ask if they will share resources with you so that you can support those same skills with your child at home.

Model important skills and behaviors

13

Modeling is an effective way to show someone else what it looks like to do a particular activity. While it can be effective to use words to explain something, many people find it is easier to understand and remember how to complete a task when verbal explanations are paired with seeing someone actually do the task. Also, when you model behaviors or activities your child observes your actions and may mimic them. This highlights the importance of acting and communicating in the manner you would like your child to mirror.

> "I think as parents we need to 'teach' and lead by example. Any child that sees his/her parents show the above skills themselves has a greater opportunity to themselves develop these abilities."
>
> —*Parent*

Parent-suggested strategies

- **Be a role model for your child by demonstrating self-determination skills yourself.** Show your child that self-determination skills (e.g., choice-making, decision-making, problem-solving) are valued and important by doing them yourself. Be conscientious and purposeful about making decisions and setting goals when your child is around. Make these processes clear and explicit to your child by verbalizing your decision-making or goal-setting process. In other words, model behaviors and communication skills you want your child to use.
- **Model daily living skills for your child.** Help your child learn daily living skills by demonstrating them. For example, model closing the bathroom door and washing your hands with soap and water as necessary parts of using the bathroom. Regularly showing your child these skills may help reinforce their use.
- **Model ways to complete a task.** Show your child how to complete a task, such as washing dishes or putting away toys or other belongings. For example, first have your child watch you wash the dishes as you explain each step you complete. After having your child watch a few times, wash the dishes together. Finally, have your child wash the dishes independently, providing positive and constructive feedback throughout.
- **Model asking others for help.** Show your child ways to appropriately ask others for help. For example, if you need help doing a computer-related task, say out loud, "I'm having a hard time with the computer. I'll ask someone who knows a lot about computers for help." Then ask another family member or a friend for help, making sure your child is present when you do so.
- **Model learning from your mistakes.** Let your child see you make and learn from your mistakes. For example, if you spill food, say, "Oh no, I didn't mean to do that. I better get a paper towel to clean it up. Next time I am carrying my food, I will walk more slowly." Your child will see that mistakes are a natural part of life and that they can serve as opportunities for learning.

- **Model being persistent despite worries of failure.** Show your child the importance of being persistent, particularly in difficult situations. For example, if you are in the process of applying for a job, talk with your child about how you may not get the job, but it is important to keep looking for others. If you do not get the job, continue to apply for other jobs to model persistence.
- **Find role models for your child.** Find other adults or older children your child respects who can act as role models. For example, a neighbor or an individual from your congregation could serve as a role model. These individuals can encourage positive behavior and give recommendations, such as how to handle a challenging situation with friends. It may be particularly beneficial to find a successful individual with a similar disability as your child who is older and can serve as a role model.
- **Model taking risks.** Show your child that it is important to try new or difficult things, even if they seem scary at first. Eliminating all risks also removes many opportunities. For example, if you want to go on a roller coaster but are scared, share these feelings with your child. After you go on the roller coaster, tell your child that you are glad you did it. If you had not gone because you were too scared, you would have missed out on a fun ride.

Provide reinforcement and feedback

14

Providing reinforcement and feedback involves identifying to your child which behaviors are appropriate and which behaviors are inappropriate[18]. Giving positive reinforcement and constructive feedback to your child is a crucial aspect of fostering healthy social-emotional-behavioral development. Through receiving positive reinforcement and feedback, children learn which behaviors are appropriate or inappropriate, and they are more likely to make positive choices.

> "Encouragement is key. Find creative ways to make sure your child can be successful. Never tell them they can't do something."
>
> —*Parent*

Parent-suggested strategies

- **Provide positive reinforcement to your child.** Positive reinforcement involves recognizing your child's appropriate behavior and acknowledging it in an encouraging way. Positive reinforcement is a vehicle for motivating children to perform desired and expected behaviors. You can provide positive reinforcement by using praise, expressive body language (e.g., clapping, high fives), and incentives (e.g., allowance, stickers, free time). When possible, provide positive reinforcement that is very specific to behavior. For example, instead of just giving your child a sticker, say, "You earned a sticker for using your listening ears and putting your toys away the first time I asked you to do it."
- **Provide positive reinforcement consistently.** Positive reinforcement is most effective when it is provided consistently and in a timely manner. For example, if your child recently learned how to say "hello" to people, remember to give praise each time she says "hello" to a new person by saying, "I like how you said 'hello' to Mr. Smith." It is helpful to provide reinforcement soon after appropriate behavior occurs.
- **Give positive feedback.** When your child is working on something challenging or learning a new skill, give positive feedback. For example, instead of pointing out that your child did not clean her place at the dinner table completely, you could say, "I like how you remembered to take your plate and silverware to the sink. Can you bring your cup to the sink now?"
- **Praise your child for asking for help and asking questions.** Tell your child that it is a good thing to ask for help and ask questions when needed. Provide your child with praise when she does so by saying, "Nice job asking your brother to help you tie your shoes."
- **Use visuals to track progress made on goals.** Visuals can be a powerful tool for both you and your child to monitor progress toward reaching a particular goal. A common visual is a sticker chart, as many younger children are motivated to earn stickers. You can involve your child in creating the chart by having her decorate and choose the stickers she wants to earn. Explicitly

[18] *Sigler and Aamidor (2005)*

teach her how to earn a sticker. For example, if her goal is to get dressed by herself every day before school, have a sticker chart with five spaces for each week. Explain that if she puts on a shirt, underwear, pants, socks, and shoes she is "dressed" for the day and will earn a sticker.

- **Provide opportunities for your child to succeed and earn natural rewards.** You can provide opportunities for your child to succeed and earn rewards by setting a goal for her to reach that you know she can achieve and then provide her with a reward for reaching that goal (e.g., playing safely with a sibling for five minutes). Achieving a goal can sometimes be rewarding in and of itself, such as having fun playing with a friend once your child learns how to ask another child to play.
- **Talk to your child instead of yelling.** When your child performs an inappropriate behavior, talk with your child about why the behavior is inappropriate and what she could do differently in the future. For example, instead of saying, "Don't jump on the bed!" you could suggest that your child goes outside and runs around when she has a lot of energy and needs to be physically active.
- **Teach or reinforce skills "in the moment."** Using teachable moments can help generalize your child's skills to real-life situations. For example, if your child forgets to say "thank you" after someone gives her a present, you could remind her to say "thank you" or you could ask, "What do you say now?" or "Is there something you want to tell your friend?"
- **Provide encouragement for choices or actions that were carefully considered.** When your child makes a choice or performs a behavior that was thoughtfully and purposefully planned, provide positive feedback. For example, if your child tells you that she chose to play with the blue truck instead of the red one because red is her brother's favorite color, say, "I like how you thought about your little brother and what he would want to play with when you were choosing your truck."
- **Celebrate progress, both small and large, your child makes.** When your child successfully takes a step toward reaching one of her goals, celebrate it! Show your child you are happy and proud of her for accomplishing each step by smiling and providing positive feedback. For example, if your child is learning how to order food at a restaurant, a first step might be choosing what she wants off of the menu. Once your child masters this step and is able to let you know what she wants to order, give praise and encouragement.
- **Encourage your child to be proud of herself.** Explain to your child what it means to feel proud (i.e., feeling pleased after we have accomplished something new or difficult). For example, when your child learns how to zip her jacket on her own, say, "I am proud of you for learning how to zip your jacket. You should be proud of how hard you worked to learn how to zip your jacket all by yourself."
- **Encourage your child to persevere.** Explain to your child that it is important for her to be persistent and that perseverance will help her reach her goals. For example, your child may want to quit learning to play a musical instrument soon after she starts because it is hard or there is too much to learn. Encourage her to persevere and keep practicing a little bit every day until her confidence grows and she starts to see progress.

- **Reassure your child of her strengths and abilities.** If your child is starting to doubt her own strengths or abilities, remind her of the things she does well. For example, if your child is struggling to learn subtraction, remind her that learning addition was hard too at first, but now she is really good at it and even has fun doing addition problems.
- **Be supportive.** Provide your child with the encouragement and support she needs to be successful in school, at home, and in the community. You can provide support to your child in myriad ways, such as by helping with homework; practicing class presentations, skits, or debates; teaching daily living skills; providing transportation to after-school activities; and arranging play dates. Try to be available when your child needs support.
- **Encourage your child to be more self-determined.** Support your child's self-determination skills by encouraging use of the skills (e.g., decision making, problem solving, self-advocacy, self-regulation) she is learning. For example, if your child is learning how to use public transportation, encourage taking the bus to the mall to meet friends instead of offering to give her a ride.
- **Provide encouragement without being too overbearing.** Providing encouragement can be very helpful to your child. However, as with most things, it is best delivered in moderation. Some children may feel overwhelmed if they perceive you are pushing them too hard to do something. Instead, try letting your child know you are available for support, but emphasize that you will give her space to make independent decisions.
- **Set reasonable rules for your child at an early age.** Foster your child's abilities to understand and follow rules by establishing rules at an early age. Start with a simple rule that your child will be able to follow. Try stating the rule in positive terms, such as "Use walking feet on the stairs," rather than "No running on the stairs."
- **Have an effective and consistent discipline system.** Establishing a consistent discipline system may help your child better manage her own behavior. Similar to how you would set up a positive reward system, explicitly teach your child which behaviors are inappropriate and outline the consequences she will receive for such behaviors. When she engages in one of these behaviors, give the pre-determined consequence and explain why she is receiving the consequence. For example, you could say, "You are losing ten minutes of TV time because you drew with your crayons on the wall instead of your paper."
- **Treat your child the same as you would treat others when disciplining her.** It may be helpful to use the same general discipline system with all of the children in your home. This will help your child understand the rules and consequences associated with inappropriate behaviors. Your children also may feel it is unfair to receive different consequences for the same behavior. At the same time, the consequences may need to be adapted depending on the needs of each child. For example, the consequence for kicking a sibling might be a time-out, but one child may be in time-out for a longer period of time than another child.
- **Set limits your child can readily understand.** When you set limits or rules for your child, do so using language and gestures your child will easily understand. For example, if your child is not allowed to touch the stove, explain that this is because the stove is very hot and she might get burned. You could even demonstrate this to your child by showing how hot a pan becomes when set on a stove burner.
- **Maintain a structured environment.** Many children thrive on consistency and routine. You can provide this to your child by having a structured home environment. This might involve waking up, having dinner, and going to bed at a similar time each day. It may also involve having a schedule of activities to follow when your child comes home from school (e.g., homework time, dinner, play time, time to get ready for bed).

Partner with schools

15

Children spend a substantial amount of time at school where they build academic skills, socialize with peers, and gain independence. Although the same is true for children with disabilities, their educational programs tend to be more individualized rather than based on a set curriculum and schedule. Therefore, it takes greater coordination and communication to ensure their program is understood and followed by everyone. By partnering with your child's teachers and other school staff, you can share important input and expertise about your child and suggest goals related to self determination. A strong relationship with the school can also provide you with support and recommendations on how to strengthen skills and behaviors associated with self-determination at home and elsewhere.

"Parents, teachers, doctors and therapist need to have consistent goals. My son has had a cooperative support system that enabled him to accomplish everything he has tried so far." —*Parent*

Parent-suggested strategies

- **Attend and participate in all Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings.** IEP meetings provide an opportunity for you to discuss aspects of your child's education with staff at his school. Some of these aspects may include developing IEP goals related to self-determination and changing your child's programming and accommodations so that he has more opportunities to develop and practice self-determination skills. Participating in IEP meetings is an important way to partner with the school and advocate for your child.
- **Explain the IEP process to your child.** Talk with your child about the purpose and content of an IEP. Stress that the IEP is a right to which your child is entitled, and that the services written out in an IEP are designed to give him the education and school experiences he deserves. Also talk to your child about the purpose of the IEP meeting. Providing this information will help him understand the significance of preparing for and participating in his own IEP process.
- **Prepare for your child's IEP meeting.** Create a list—with your child's input—of his strengths, weaknesses, interests, and goals. Ask your child what is and is not going well at school, both academically and socially. Bring this list to the meeting so that your child's thoughts are shared even if he is not present. Consider whether to invite someone to the meeting for support or to provide information. If you decide to do so, inform your child's special education teacher or case manager prior to the meeting.
- **Have your child participate in and/or lead his own IEP meetings.** Have your child attend and play an active role in the IEP meeting. Your child can share his strengths, weaknesses, interests, progress on goals, and ideas for new goals. This can be done through his preferred method of communication and presentation, such as orally or through a PowerPoint presentation prepared ahead of time. Your child's participation in his IEP meeting is one way your child can be self-determining and direct his own educational and future plans.
- **Monitor the IEP process to make sure it is completed properly.** Keep all documents related to your child's IEP and check in with your child's teachers and case manager to make sure that the IEP is being followed. This includes making sure your child is receiving appropriate accommodations and modifications in the general education classroom, that your child is not being pulled out of his regular classroom more than is dictated in the IEP, and that school staff are working with your child on his IEP goals.

- **Have your child participate in educational programming that meets his needs.** Educational programming for children receiving special education services can look differently depending on each child's needs. Schools are required to provide educational programming that is appropriate and in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Think about your child's needs and work with the school to have your child participate in the most appropriate educational program.
- **Advocate for inclusive education to ensure your child is integrated with peers without disabilities.** Advocate for your child to be integrated with peers without disabilities throughout the school day. If you feel your child is not receiving the most inclusive education appropriate, speak to your child's case manager, a school administrator, or a member of the IEP team. An inclusive education results in greater access to the general education curriculum and increased social relationships.
- **Ask your child's teacher about skills that can be reinforced at home.** Talk to your child's teacher about what they are working on at school and how you can work on those same skills at home. For example, if your child is learning how to tell time at school, you can practice this at home.
- **Ask for assistance from the school as needed.** School staff can provide excellent ideas on how to reinforce skills related to self-determination beyond the school day. Schools are also great resources for learning about other community programs or services that may benefit your child and help foster self-determination.
- **Utilize the online grade book from school, if available.** If your school district operates an online grade book, regularly check the site to keep yourself informed about your child's progress in school. With some programs, you can check your child's grades, see whether he is turning in homework, and communicate with your child's teachers. This technology provides parents with a way to stay up-to-date with what is happening at school.
- **Maintain consistency between home, school, and community providers through regular communication.** Strive to increase the consistency among all of the people providing services and supports to your child. For example, if your child is working on initiating conversations, focus on this skill at home and have complementary goals at school. Prompt your child to use eye contact and provide positive reinforcement when he does.

Hold high expectations and positive attitudes

16

The attitudes and expectations parents hold for their children can have a profound effect on their social-emotional-academic development and later outcomes[19]. The manner in which parents interact with their children can influence children's self-esteem and level of independence. By being persistent and maintaining high expectations for your child, you may instill confidence and foster greater independence—both of which promote self-determination.

> "Think high—your child may have a disability but he/she is very smart & capable to do a lot more than we give them credit for sometimes."
>
> —*Parent*

Parent-suggested strategies

- **Appreciate your child for who she is as an individual.** All children have varying abilities and unique strengths and interests. Recognize your child's particular attributes and her abilities. One parent explained that as she has come to appreciate her child for who he is, including his complex disability, the parent increasingly enjoys and appreciates their relationship.
- **Focus on your child's abilities and strengths rather than her limitations.** Think about what your child is able to do and how those strengths and abilities can be highlighted and emphasized in all settings. For example, if your child is excellent at telling jokes but has a tendency to dominate conversations, encourage her to tell one joke during a club meeting and then allow other people to have a chance to talk. By focusing on abilities, you, your child, and others may see her as an increasingly valuable member of the family, school, and community, rather than someone with many challenges.
- **Use language focusing on your child instead of her disability.** All people have a number of characteristics that combine to make them an individual. Your child's disability is not her only defining characteristic. Use language to illustrate this. For example, try not to refer to your child by the disability, such as, "I have a disabled child." Instead, when speaking about your child and her disability, name your child first and the disability second: "My child is Simone. She has a disability." This is frequently referred to as person-first language[20]. This seemingly subtle change helps people understand that a disability is an attribute of a person, not her entire identity.
- **Hold high expectations for your child.** By gently and gradually pushing your child to grow and not setting limits on what she can do, you may help your child realize her potential. People tend to strive to achieve what others expect of them. Therefore, if your child has people around her who encourage and expect much, your child may rise to the occasion and achieve more than if expectations were low.

[19] *Carter, Austin, and Trainor (in press)*
[20] *Snow (2010)*

- **Expect your child to be a productive community member.** All people can be contributing members of society. Expect that your child will be a productive member as well. For example, consider responsibilities your child can complete at home and in the community, taking her abilities and gifts into account. Perhaps a child who likes sports and has a tendency to yell loudly can regularly attend sporting events to help cheer the team on.
- **Treat your child the same as other children, including having the same expectations.** Try not to let your child's disability become an excuse. While there may be some variance in expectations according to your child's abilities, strive to treat all children equally. For example, if you expect children without disabilities to clean up before bedtime or to watch only one television program after school, expect this of your child with a disability as well.
- **Set rules for your child at an early age.** Setting fair rules helps children view their environment as predictable, letting them thrive and progress in many areas, including self-determination. For example, if your child has been expected to follow a rule at home that only gentle touches are allowed (i.e., no hitting), she may follow this rule at school and elsewhere.
- **Consider activities that may not seem initially feasible for your child. Dream and think outside of the box!** Despite numerous challenges, it may still be possible for her to do what seems impossible. Try not to limit what may be feasible for your child and family because of a disability. For example, one parent shared that each summer their family goes on weekend camping and boating trips, always including their child with a significant disability who needs life support equipment. These weekends provide enjoyment, increase the family's circle of friends, and broaden their view of what is possible for their child.
- **Emphasize to your child that she can do anything in terms of college, jobs, and long-term goals.** Encourage your child to dream about her future. Setting ambitious goals may motivate your child to learn skills and participate in activities that she may not have otherwise considered. Opportunities that previously seemed unattainable, like attending college or having competitive employment, are becoming increasingly prevalent and feasible for youth and young adults with significant disabilities[21].
- **Be optimistic and do not set unnecessary limits on your child.** Even if your child sets a goal that seems unattainable at the time, be positive and help her take steps to pursue this ambition.
- **Be realistic.** At the same time, parents need to be realistic about what their child will be able to do in order to protect both the child and the parent from repeated disappointment. While it is important to have high expectations and to encourage your child to strive for whatever goals she wishes to pursue, it is also important to find balance between what may and may not be realistic. Children who tend to be hard on themselves when a goal is not reached or those who struggle with anxiety may also benefit from balanced expectations. If you question whether a goal or hope is realistic, perhaps modify it to something that is more attainable at the time.
- **Be persistent as a parent.** Continue to teach your child skills to advocate for your child's needs . Even if your child's progress seems slow or if you are unhappy with the services she is receiving, do your best to persevere. Keep encouraging your child, exploring opportunities for her, and communicating with teachers .
- **Recognize parenting skills you would like to strengthen.** Recognize aspects of parenting that are difficult for you. By acknowledging these challenging aspects, you may learn reasons why they are so difficult as well as effective strategies to manage them. Acknowledge yourself for trying hard and doing the best you can.

[21] *Grigal and Hart (2010)*

Connect with others

17

Every parent needs support, including parents of children with disabilities. Parent connections consist of associations with service providers, schools, and a range of other individuals and organizations. These connections may provide parents with support and ideas, as well as opportunities to educate others about their child. These connections can be a valuable resource for parents to promote self-determination in their child with a disability.

"We continue to educate and seek help in finding ways to meet the needs of our children."

—Parent

"Be an advocate for your child, ask questions, don't take 'no' from anyone."

—Parent

Parent-suggested strategies

- **Talk to others for ideas and assistance.** Therapists, school staff, and other parents who have a child with a disability can provide ideas and suggestions about a variety of topics regarding your child and his disability, including tips on how to promote self-determination. Local chapters of national organizations, such as the Autism Society, Arc, or Down Syndrome Association often facilitate support groups for parents and may offer information about fostering your child's self-determination. The Internet also serves as a way to connect with others. Consider joining listservs, registering for online support groups, or "friending" relevant organizations on Facebook or other social networking sites.
- **Learn what community resources are available for your child.** Find out what groups, activities, or other resources are already available in your community. These resources may provide information on ways to promote self-determination skills and opportunities.
- **Be a persistent advocate for your child.** Advocate for your child's participation in activities and programming that will foster his self-determination. For example, talk with your child's teachers about having him included in group projects with other students to help him develop teamwork and leadership skills. To be an advocate, educate yourself about your child's disability and his needs. In addition, consider learning about the laws that protect the rights of individuals with disabilities. With this knowledge, you will be better equipped to further your child's right to be self-determined.
- **Seek services as early as possible.** Early intervention can make a significant difference in a child's development. Receiving interventions from therapists, other service providers, and the school as early as possible gives your child the chance to develop and strengthen important skills beginning at a much younger age.
- **Educate others about your child.** Talk to your neighbors, friends, and family about your child and his disability. Let others know about his strengths and abilities so that other adults can help him develop self-determination skills. For example, inform your neighbor that your child is really good at making choices. If your neighbor typically gives your child a snack, the neighbor may now offer your child a choice of snacks.

Other strategies

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Through this project, parents shared hundreds of strategies regarding how to promote self-determination. In this final section, we highlight eight more strategies you might want to consider.

- **Read books with your child and have your child read to you, including books about self-determination.** Reading books that emphasize self-determination skills, such as goal setting, may help your child better understand the importance and place of self-determination in her own life. For example, *Roberto the Insect Architect* by Nina Laden highlights goal setting and the success felt from achieving own goals. Books may give your child the opportunity to see how self-determination skills are applied in different ways.
- **Have a schedule and stick to it.** Having a schedule for the day or for part of the day may be helpful to your child and allow her to use self-determination skills. For example, if you have a schedule for what needs to be done each morning before school, your child may be able to perform each task in the schedule without as much assistance.
- **Foreshadow what you are doing.** Tell your child what you are planning to do before you actually do it. For example, if you are going to drive your child to school, and she typically takes the bus, let your child know the night before that the next day's routine will be different. In the morning, remind her of this change. Foreshadowing what is going to happen, particularly when it is a departure from the ordinary, may help relieve your child's anxiety and reduce challenging behaviors.
- **Closely watch your child's behavior to determine what she likes.** Try to pay close attention to your child's body language, the direction of her eye gaze, or other cues to discover her preferences. For example, if your child is listening to fast-paced music and is very animated with lots of body movement, this may suggest she enjoys the music. Watching your child's behavior may be particularly important if she does not communicate verbally. Understanding your child's preferences will help you better plan activities for and support her.
- **Journal about your day with your child.** Together with your child, describe the events of the day in a journal. Consider having her write, draw a picture, or cut pictures from a magazine. This reflection may help her recognize the various skills related to self-determination practiced that day and discuss ways to use these skills in the future.
- **Use a team approach with your child.** Having a team of people supporting your child brings together individuals with different expertise and perspectives. For example, a team may consist of your child, yourself as a parent, other family members, a psychologist, a social worker, a teacher(s), a physician, and an advocate. Communication among all members of the team is important to ensure a cohesive support system.
- **Discuss with your child ways you can support her.** Talk with your child about the support you can offer her. For example, if your child is struggling to solve a problem, encourage her to come to you for suggestions of possible solutions. But remind your child that you will not do everything to solve the problem. Letting your child know ways in which you can support her, including the things that you are not going to do, will let her know what your expectations are and may prompt your child to do things independently.
- **Become involved in your child's interests.** When your child develops an interest, join her in exploring that interest further. For example, watch your child's favorite television show with her, play a board game together, or read the same book and discuss it. Being involved will show your child that her interests are important and worth others' time.

Final thoughts

Providing children with the skills and opportunities to direct their lives in ways that provide personal enjoyment and meaning is an important task of parenting. We hope the ideas and approaches embedded throughout this guide will encourage and equip you in this endeavor. Certainly, self-determination can mean different things in the lives of different people. And so we anticipate that you will take the best of these numerous ideas and make them your own.

To the hundreds of Wisconsin parents who contributed their time and expertise to this project, we express our great appreciation for your thoughtful ideas and our enduring admiration for your commitment to your children.

Resources

Virginia Department of Education's Self-Determination Project
Click here for a site that includes information, tips, lesson plans, and other resources for promoting self-determination among youth with disabilities. You can find activities for promoting choice making, decision making, problem solving, goal setting and attainment, self-regulation, self-advocacy, and self-awareness and knowledge. There is also information on creating PowerPoint presentations for IEP meetings, templates for student involvement in IEPs, self-determination checklists for parents and students, and videos of parents and youth talking about self-determination.
https://php.radford.edu/~imdetermined/

The Berenstain Bears "See, Think, & Do Activity Guide"
Click here for Berenstain Bears "See, Think, & Do Activity Guide" which has activities emphasizing many different elements of self-determination. For example, you can find activities for promoting decision making and problem solving.
www-tc.pbskids.org/berenstainbears/caregiver/Bears_AG_FINAL.pdf

The Youthhood Cybercommunity
Click here for an interactive resource for children and parents with information on self-determination. There are activities for youth on self-awareness, social skills, knowing your rights, and becoming more independent, with accompanying lesson plans and discussions for adults to use with students with disabilities.
www.youthhood.org/

A Life For Me Cybercommunity
Click here for an interactive resource for both children and parents to learn about and promote self-determination. You can find activities for promoting problem solving and self-advocacy.
www.alife4me.com/

The National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities & the Glenn County Office of Education
Click here or here for a guide for having your child lead his/her IEP meeting.
www.nichcy.org/InformationResources/Documents/NICHCY%20PUBS/st1.pdf

www.glenncoe.org/__programs/__special_education/documents/SelfDirected_IEP.pdf

Kids as Self Advocates
Click here for a website with information for children on how to advocate and speak up for their rights. It also has helpful resources on other topics, such as staying safe; education; health; work; sports, recreation, and leisure; dating and relationships; technology; transportation and getting around; disability history and culture; and working with a group.
http://fvkasa.org/resources/index.html

A National Gateway to Self-Determination
Click here for a website with a wealth of information about self-determination, including resources and trainings. You can find a guide for educators about promoting self-determination and search for resources about a variety of topics, such as person-centered planning, technology, community living, and family roles.
www.aucd.org/ngsd/

National Center on Secondary Education and Transition
Click here for an article with tips for families and professionals on promoting self-determination of youth with disabilities.
www.ncset.org/publications/researchtopractice/NCSETResearchBrief_2.1.pdf

Parent Center Network
Click here for information about parent centers, which provide training and assistance to families of children with disabilities, as well as a listing of parent centers throughout the country.
www.parentcenternetwork.org/parentcenters.html

Quality Mall
Click here for resources about person-centered planning, including friendship and social inclusion, self-advocacy, and employment.
www.qualitymall.org

University of Minnesota Institute on Community Integration: IMPACT Newsletter on Parenting Teens and Young Adults with Disabilities
Click here for a feature issue about parenting teens and young adults with disabilities. You can find articles about supporting healthy adolescent development, supporting youths' self-advocacy skills, ways to enhance social inclusion, involving youth in community service activities, and many more topics.
http://ici.umn.edu/products/impact/192/default.html

University of Minnesota Institute on Community Integration: IMPACT Newsletter on Social Inclusion Through Recreation
Click here for a feature issue on social inclusion through recreation for persons with disabilities. You can find articles on encouraging children's friendships through recreation, how characteristics of recreation and play naturally facilitate relationships, and more. http://ici.umn.edu/products/impact/162/default.html

Self-Advocacy Online
Click here for a website designed for self-advocates. Children and young adults with disabilities can find learning modules on topics including "Living a Healthy Life" and "Getting Organized." You can also find other self-advocacy groups in your area.
www.selfadvocacyonline.org

JobTIPS
Click here for a resource about employment for people with disabilities. This website has assessments to help match a person's skills and interests to a job as well as information about finding and keeping a job.
www.do2learn.com/JobTIPS/index.html

National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth
Click here for publications for youth with disabilities about a variety of topics, including disability disclosure, employment, and entrepreneurship. There are also several resources for families, educators, and service providers.
www.ncwd-youth.info/topic

Teaching Self-Determination in Alaskan Schools: A Toolkit for Teachers
Click here for a toolkit about promoting self-determination. There are sections for teachers, parents, other professionals, and youth with disabilities. The website also has several links to other sites about self-determination.
www.selfdeterminationak.org/

Zarrow Center for Learning Enrichment
Click here for a number of resources for educators to promote self-determination in youth with disabilities, including lessons on making decisions; how to get what you need; and goals, objectives, and the future.
www.ou.edu/content/education/centers-and-partnerships/zarrow.html

Waisman Resource Center: Peer Mentoring
Click here for a resource on peer mentoring for students with disabilities.
www.waisman.wisc.edu/wrc/pdf/pubs/PPM.pdf

The Arc
Click here for information about The Arc—a national community-based organization advocating for and serving people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families. Find local chapters, which may offer self-advocacy initiatives, family support, and employment programs.
www.thearc.org/

Autism Society
Click here for information about autism for family members, individuals with ASD, and professionals, as well as resources available in each state.
www.autism-society.org/

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Pathways to Independence

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