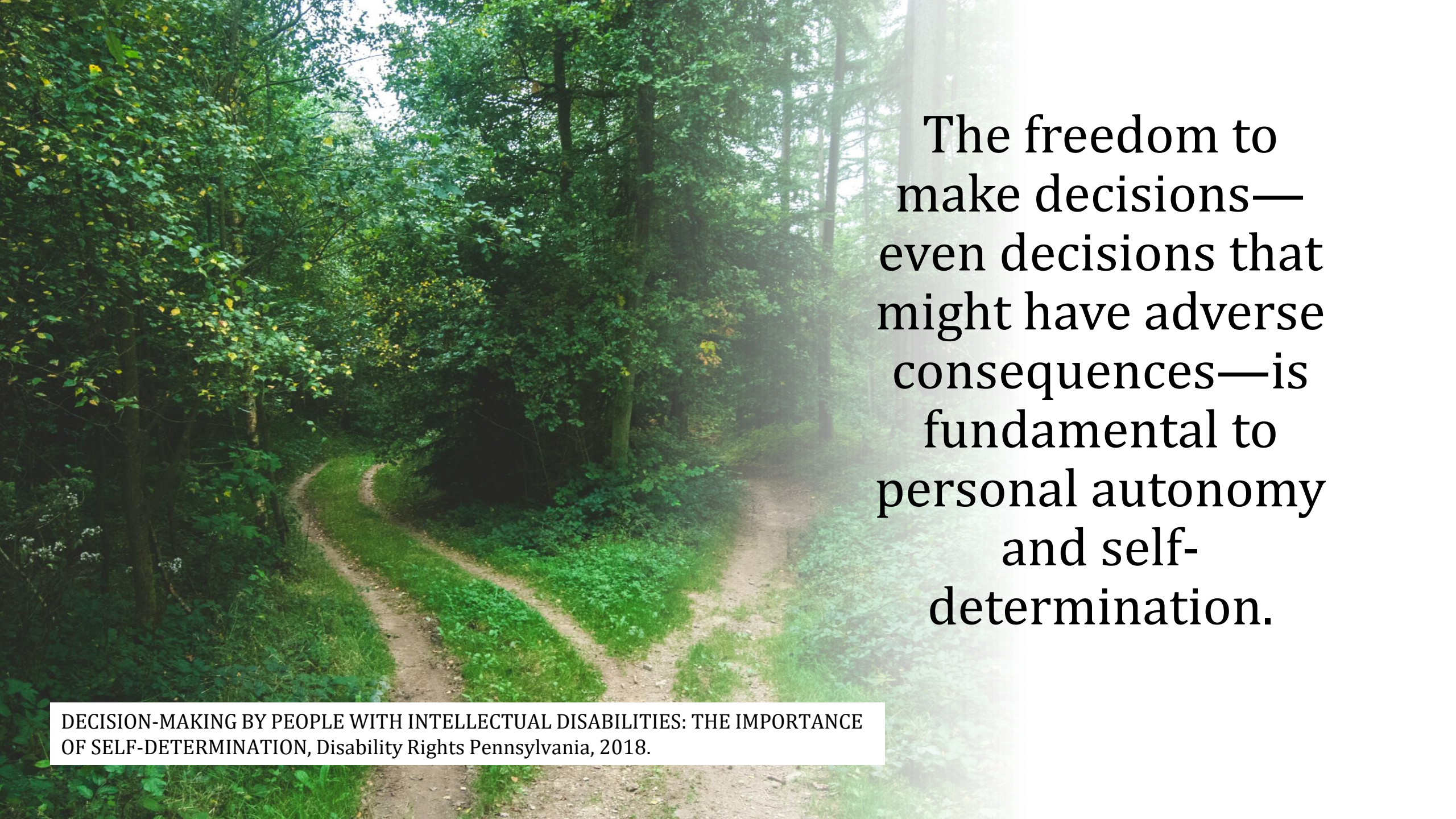
Building Decision Making Skills for Supported Decision-Making

SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES
EDUCATION • EMPOWERMENT • EQUITY

California State Council on Developmental Disabilities



The freedom to make decisions—even decisions that might have adverse consequences—is fundamental to personal autonomy and self-determination.

DECISION-MAKING BY PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES: THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-DETERMINATION, Disability Rights Pennsylvania, 2018.

Not everyone wants to be an independent (or interdependent) decision-maker.

However, for some people with disabilities (PWD), the choice of being their own decision maker may be more difficult than for their neurotypical peers, **because they have never been offered the education and experience to become a decision-maker.**

Skill building in decision making may not be offered because some may view students with intellectual and developmental disabilities as incapable of making the "right" choices.

Part of becoming a decision maker is embracing the perspective that everyone makes mistakes, and no one makes the 'right' decision every time.

Transition Abilities, https://transitionabilities.com/choice-making-in-special-education-encouraging-autonomy/?srsltid=AfmBOoqHJnCZwcQ4W1OhcmWBlF4aWA19FvbPYOQuINt6nun29IQZD0eu

PRESUMING COMPETENCE

The Challenge of Ableism and Low Expectations

Adults often make decisions FOR children/youth/adults with disabilities, and this can lead to learned helplessness.

This can turn into a situation where people with developmental disabilities rely on their parents or caregivers to make decisions for them

Learned helplessness: Believing you have no control, leading to reliance on others for problem-solving.

Presuming competence means starting out with the expectation that everyone CAN learn if provided with accessible tools.

Transition Abilities, https://transitionabilities.com/choice-making-in-special-education-encouraging-autonomy/?srsltid=AfmBOoqHJnCZwcQ4W1OhcmWBlF4aWA19FvbPYOQulNt6nun29lQZD0eu

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

One major obstacle to using Supported Decision Making (SDM) is that people with disabilities (PWD) often lack experience or training as decision makers. This workshop examines some key components of decision-making skills and offers ideas to help PWD strengthen those skills.

Participants will become familiar with the skills necessary to be an effective decision maker.

Participants will learn some suggested ways to develop these skills and embed them in IEPs or IPPs

Decision-making is a learned skill for everyone

- PWD (children/youth/adults) can build those skills at home or at school (and skill-building can be incorporated into Individual Education Plans (IEP) or Individual Program Plans (IPP)).

- This workshop reviews **some** of the components of building decision-making skills and suggests goals/activities for both novice and more advanced decision-makers.

Decision-making is more than settling on a choice. ***It's a process*** of identifying what needs to be done and how it can be achieved, along with reflection on motivations and consequences. When a person has good decision-making skills, they have reasonable expectations about what their actions (or non-actions) will do, and they understand why certain actions are best for their well-being and the concerns of others.

"Why Developing Decision Making Skills is Important",
https://wellspringprevention.org/blog/help-child-develop-decision-making-skills/

Some Basic Steps in the Decision-Making Process (independently, Interdependently or with Support)

1. Identify that there is a decision to be made and what that decision is (and that it is your's to make).
2. Gather information about that decision, both in terms of what you think and feel, and information from other people or online sources.
3. Identify the alternatives about the choices available (which can include new choices you create).
4. Evaluate the choices based on what you value and feel is important, as well as what you think may happen as a result of these choices.
5. Choose the alternative that seems best to you and take action on your choice.
6. Observe the results of your decision, and consider whether you need to make a change.

Some Learned Skills that Can Help with Decision Making

Critical Thinking

Emotional Awareness

Communication

Decision Making Skills

Critical Thinking/Gathering Information:

A decision maker starts by realizing that there is a decision to be made and gathering information to help them make that decision.

Some of the information gathered will be about the choices available and their consequences.

Some data gathering involves checking in with goals, preferences, and emotions, as these are important to making decisions.

People can learn how to gather information (as an IEP or IPP goal) or to get help from others to gather it.

Decision Making Skills

Critical Thinking/Evaluation:

Decision makers analyze and evaluate their choices and the outcomes they think will result, as well as the trustworthiness of the different information they gather.

Critical thinking can be learned through activities like classifying, comparing and contrasting, open-ended questions, and decoding cause-and-effect relationships.

Experience making decisions helps people develop a greater understanding of consequences as well as whether to trust information from different sources.

Decision Making Skills

Emotional Awareness/Intelligence:

Recognizing and managing emotions are essential aspects of decision-making.

Emotions can motivate decisions, and emotions can provide feedback on whether a decision was a good one or not.

Emotions can also sway people's decisions away from their own goals, especially if the decision-maker lacks self-confidence and is influenced by others (people pleasers, peer pressure, or bullying).

People can learn to be aware of their emotions and how feelings may influence their decisions. This may involve learning to recognize different emotions and understanding the link between feelings and choices.

Decision Making Skills

Communication:

Decision makers communicate their decisions and the types of support they may want or need when making decisions.

Decision makers may want to practice asking questions to obtain the information they are interested in before making their decision.

For some people, their communication needs can include learning to ask for help or say no to people who offer to help when they don't want it.

Language and communication skills are common goals for families and schools to work on.

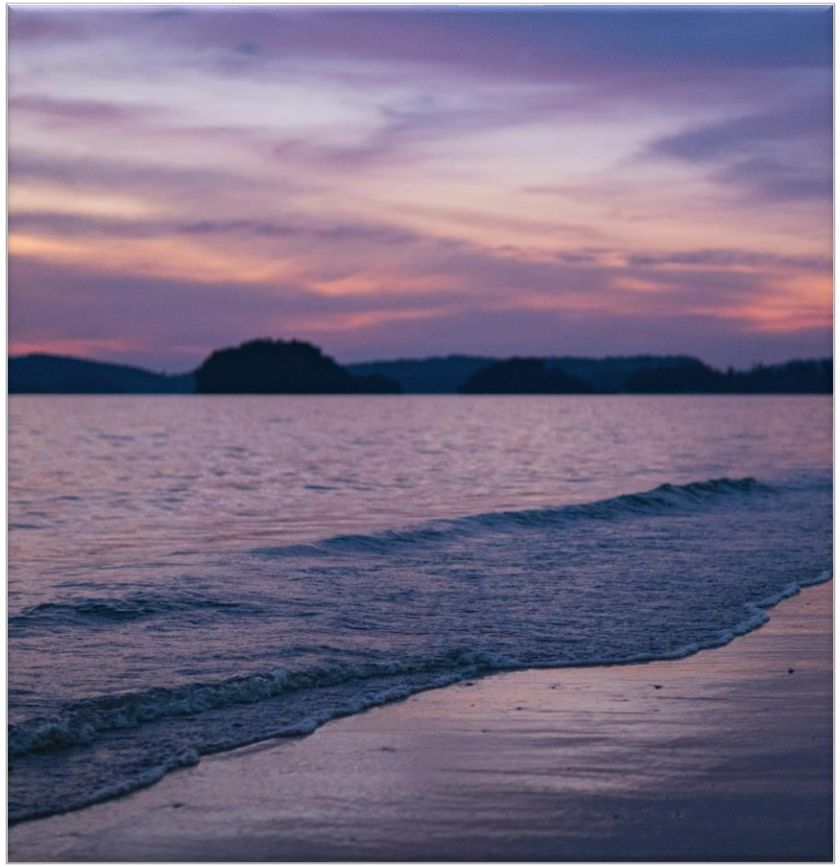
Learning decision making skills

- **Anyone can start working on decision-making skills at any time!!**
- Appropriately tailoring decision-making experiences is one of the best ways to help people build self-determination and self-confidence.
- Progressive learning of decision-making skills can be incorporated into everyday home activities and into Individual Education Plans (IEPs) at school.
- While every person's needs are unique, but this workshop reviews some examples of activities/goals for novice as well as more advanced decision makers.

Novice Decision Makers

Some beginning decision makers may feel uncertain, uncomfortable, or anxious about making their own decisions. Some ideas for learning strategies and supports are:

- Use books and stories (or social stories) to illustrate and discuss the decision -making process, including gathering information, making choices, and the emotional effects of those choices on the decision-maker and others.
- Supporters can model/narrate their decision-making process on a regular basis. This could include others sharing their process as well as acknowledging when they have made mistakes and explaining how they navigated through them.



Ideas for Novice Decision Makers

- **NO/LOW RISK decisions** can be a great starting point for a beginning decision maker.
- **SHORT TERM decisions** offer immediate positive or negative consequences to the beginning decision maker, helping to connect decisions to their consequences.
- **BOUNDED CHOICES** (choices between 2 or 3 predetermined options) can be a place to begin.

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Helping Novice Decision Makers Build Skills

- Offer **GENUINE ALTERNATIVES.** Too often, people with disabilities are offered **a limited choice between compliance and noncompliance**, rather than between the alternatives they consider important or desirable.
- **PROVIDE SCAFFOLDING** for the process.
- **MAKE SPACE** that is appropriate for the decision maker.

Assiting Novice Decision Makers

- **EXPERIENCE MATTERS** because most people learn best from experience, both positive and negative.
- **DEBRIEFING DECISIONS** helps decision makers learn from the process.
- **PROVIDE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT** to the decision maker as they build their skills and confidence.

More Advanced Decision Makers

- Most people learn decision-making by making progressively more important and complex decisions and building their decision-making skills.
- Once a person is comfortable with no/low-risk and short-term choices, the next step could be to move toward decisions that involve more risk and have a longer time frame.

More Advanced Decision Makers

- As with all learning, decision-making should suit the individual's needs, style, and pace.
- Some people are more willing to take risks than others, and some are more cautious. This can affect the types of decisions a person wants to make and how much support they want to have with their decisions.
- The decision maker and their supporters can determine the appropriate level of risk for that individual.

Incremental Steps as a strategy

- Sometimes, big and risky decisions can be broken into a series of smaller ones that are reversible or easily monitored.
- For example, rather than making all decisions about their own health care, a PWD may ask supporters to check in with them regularly and help them monitor and assess how their choices are working.

Managing Risk

- Precautionary measures (that may or may not be removed later) can also reduce risks. For example, the risks of travelling independently can be reduced by allowing a tracker on your mobile device, travelling to familiar places, or travelling with a friend. Again, the decision-maker can later decide whether to remove these precautionary measures.
- Risks can also be reduced by learning to problem solve, or have contingency plans. Decision-makers can work with their team to practice problem solving, and what they should do if a decision does not work out the way that they planned.

Continue to develop decision making skills

Work on	Work on thinking through possible outcomes of decisions and what you might do if decisions don't work.
Learn	Learn which sources of data you can rely on, and those you can't.
Practice	Practice evaluating the urgency of decisions and the level of risk.

Build Emotional Intelligence and Resilience

Emotional regulation supports decision-making skills.

Name and reflect on your emotional response to decisions.

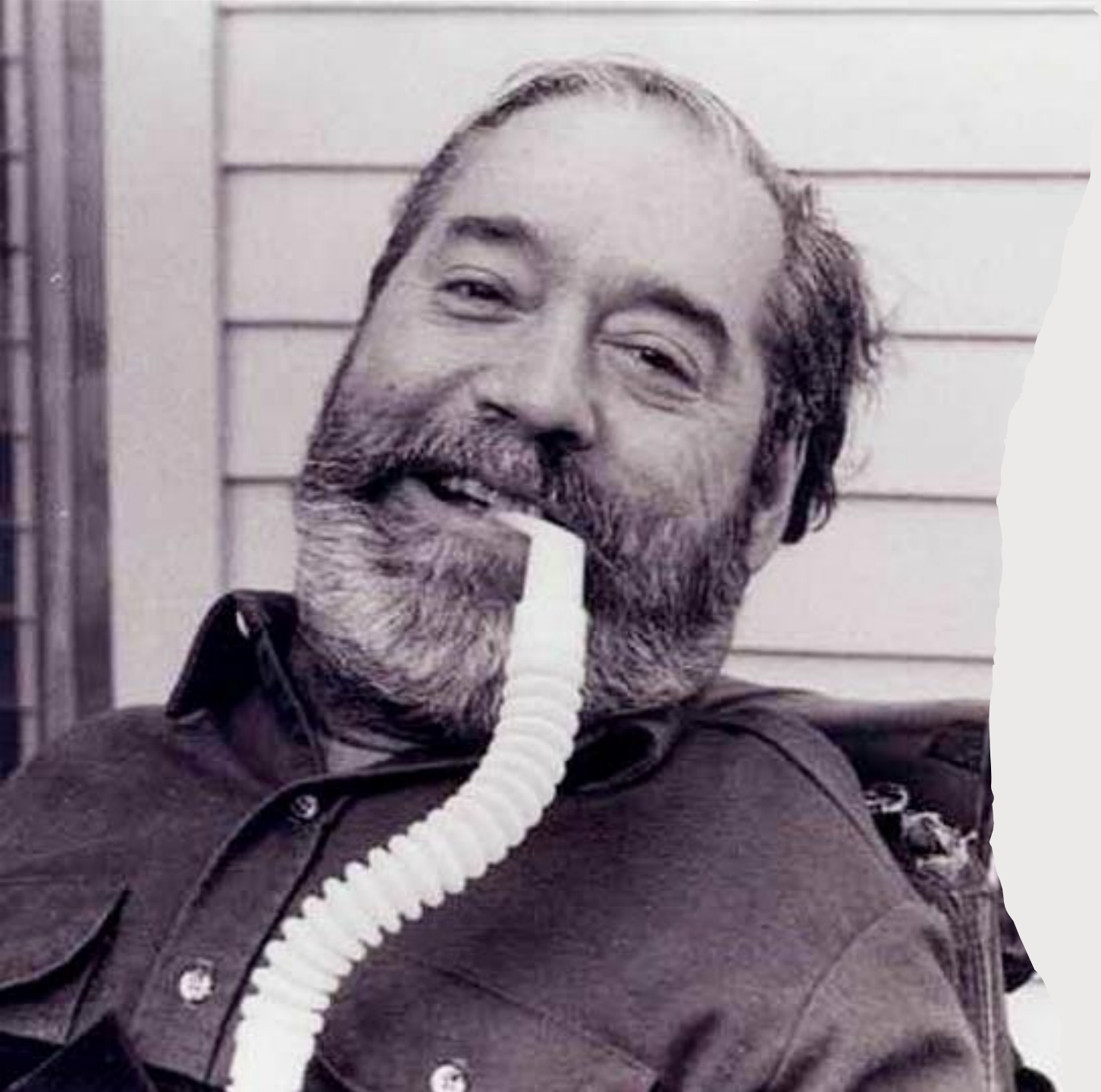
Practice coping skills so decisions don't feel as stressful.

Think about the impact of the decision on emotions of others, and how you want to consider this in your decision making.

Communication

- Practice listening as other people can give you new perspectives and ideas that could improve your decisions.
- Practice Assertiveness to convey your decisions to others (as well as who and what you want help on)

Its never too early and never too late to support someone who wants to make more of their own decisions about their life.

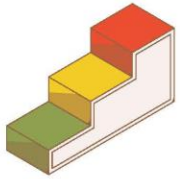


”Independent living is not doing things by yourself; it is being in control of how things are done."

— Ed Roberts, disability rights pioneer and founder of the independent living movement.

DECISION MAKING GOALS FOR THE IEP

Understanding that the choices you make can have both good and bad consequences is an important part of being an adult. Including goals for decision making skills is a valuable step towards readiness



I can understand the steps to effective problem solving.

By the end of the IEP cycle, the student will be able to identify a problem, brainstorm solutions, evaluate options, and reflect on outcomes with ____% accuracy.

I can identify and label my emotions and understand how emotions can influence decision making.

By the end of the IEP cycle, the student will be able to list what emotions impact their decision-making, and identify how that could impact the decision with ____% accuracy.

I can identify areas where I need assistance and seek help.

By the end of the IEP cycle, the student will be able to identify their own strengths, weaknesses, and seek guidance prior to decision making with ____% accuracy.

I can participate in developing a plan to meet personal and academic goals.

By the end of the IEP cycle, the student will make appropriate decisions on a daily basis as measured by self-evaluation and teacher observation.

Learning Standard	Early Elementary	Late Elementary	Middle Jr. High	Early H.S	Late H.S.
B: Apply decision-making skills to deal responsibly with daily academic and social situations.	**3B.1a.** Identify a range of decisions that students make at school.	**3B.2a.** Identify and apply the steps of systematic decision making.	**3B.3a.** Analyze how decision-making skills improve study habits and academic performance.	**3B.4a.** Evaluate personal abilities to gather information, generate alternatives, and anticipate the consequences of decisions.	**3B.5a.** Analyze how present decision making affects college and career choices.
	3B.1b. Make positive choices when interacting with classmates.	**3B.2b.** Generate alternative solutions and evaluate their consequences for a range of academic and social situations.	**3B.3b.** Evaluate strategies for resisting pressures to engage in unsafe or unethical activities.	**3B.4b.** Apply decision-making skills to establish responsible social and work relationships.	**3B.5b.** Evaluate how responsible decision making affects interpersonal and group relationships.

STUDENTS CAN CREATE I STATEMENT GOALS FOR ANY SUBJECT. HERE ARE SOME EXAMPLES:

- Working with my supporters to develop my goals and objectives, I (name of the student) will attend and lead my IEP team meetings.
- With the support of my case manager, I (student name) will review assessments completed and develop needed goals and objectives as evidenced by 100% completion of the teacher created IEP writing rubric.
- Working with supporters, I (name of the student) will identify five people I trust who will help me choose education, employment, and independent living programs I am interested in.
- With the support of my case manager, I (student name) will identify the team who will assist with the selection of education, employment, and independent living programs of interest as identified by the attendance list of the person-centered process completed.
- Working with my teacher and supporters, I (name of student) will develop a study plan to help me improve in social studies by at least one letter grade.
- Working with the general education and special education teacher, I (student name) will develop a study plan to improve my social studies' grade from (present grade) to (goal grade) as evidenced by quarterly progress reports and final average.
- Working with my teacher and parents, I (name of student) will improve my spelling by identifying and playing word games that I like twice a week.
- Working with the teacher and family, I (student name) will identify and utilize various strategies of interest to improve my spelling grade from (present grade) to (goal grade) as evidenced by quarterly progress reports and final average.

Supported Decision Making in Special Education, Connecticut, https://ctsilc.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/CTSILC_SDM_Booklet_2_English.pdf

QUESTIONS ?

California State Council on Developmental Disabilities

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