

autism at-a-glance

April 2021

Autism at-a-Glance
is a publication of the
Center on Secondary
Education for
Students with ASD
(CSESA).



Image Credit: Pixabay.com

Supporting Self-Determination

Autism at-a-Glance is a series of practitioner and family-friendly documents created by the Center on Secondary Education for Students with ASD (CSESA) designed for high school staff members supporting students on the autism spectrum, as well as family members of adolescents with ASD. The purpose of the *Autism at-a-Glance* series is to provide a current summary of topics relevant to adolescents and young adults with ASD as well as practical tips and resources for school and community personnel and family members.

This Autism at-a-Glance was designed to support practitioners and family members in promoting self-determination for adolescents and young adults on the autism spectrum.

Self-determination refers to the ability of individuals to control their own lives, plan and reach their goals, and self-advocate. Self-determination is a critical element in transitioning successfully from adolescence to adulthood. Self-determination skills are used to accomplish specific goals such as going to college, getting a job, living independently, and participating in community activities.

Navigate the links to below to learn more about key self-determination skills that will prepare your young adult for life after high school.

- [Goal setting](#)
- [Self-awareness](#)
- [Choice-making](#)
- [Self-advocacy](#)
- [Problem-solving](#)
- [Self-monitoring](#)
- [Decision-making](#)

Instruction in self-determination is an increasingly important element in the education of adolescents and young adults with autism. Many young adults with autism struggle to navigate the transition into adult roles. Approximately 50-60% of adults with autism lack an appropriate educational program and 76% cannot find gainful employment after exiting high school.



Self-Determination

Supporting the Development of Self-Determination Skills

Families and educators of adolescents and young adults on the spectrum can work together to support the development of self-determination skills and facilitate effective transitions and successful post-secondary outcomes.

It can be challenging for family members and educators of individuals with autism to find the time and resources to provide instruction about self-determination. This resource outlines strategies that families and educators can utilize to aid the acquisition of self-determination skills in adolescents and young adults on the spectrum. In this guide, you will find information about how to create environments where individuals with autism can engage in self-determined behaviors such as self-awareness, problem-solving, decision-making, goal setting and attainment, and self-monitoring to maintain or improve quality of life.

Guidance for Families and Educators

Support in both home and school environments is necessary in order to promote self-determination effectively. Support from families and educators concerning **psychological needs for competence**, **relatedness**, and **autonomy** allow individuals with autism to experience self-determination.

How to Promote Competence

- Model goal setting and problem solving
- Teach and scaffold daily living skills
- Evaluate and praise progress
- Provide choice-making opportunities

How to Promote Autonomy and Relatedness

- Provide information and structure
- Elicit opinions and feedback
- Consider individual preferences and ensure that goals and choice-making opportunities align with interests

Strategies to Target the Development of Key Self-Determination Skills

Instruction in goal setting and attainment can influence causal agency and overall well-being by enabling individuals with autism to meet basic psychological needs and be more equipped to handle impediments. The following table outlines how families and educators can support adolescents and young adults in setting and achieving goals by targeting self-determination skills such as problem-solving, choice-making, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and decision-making.



Three Steps for Goal Setting

Steps	1-Set a Goal	2-Take Action	3-Adjust Goal or Plan
Skill of Focus	Problem solving and goal setting	Goal attainment and self-management	Self-evaluation and decision-making
Role of Educator/ Family Member	Help the individual identify and set a reasonable goal.	Help the individual develop an action plan to achieve the goal.	Help the individual evaluate progress toward the goal.
How to Provide Support	Teach choice-making skills and engage individuals in strengths assessments.	Teach how to self-instruct and how to self-monitor.	Teach how to self-evaluate.

Skill Instruction at Each Stage

Step 1: Setting a Goal	
Self-Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initiate conversations with young adults about their capabilities, feelings, and what motivates them. Encourage activities such as strengths assessments and career interest assessments.
Problem-Solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help young adults talk about the thinking process of generating solutions and analyze the reasons for their choices. Instruct young adults on how to (1) define the problem, (2) identify solutions, (3) implement a solution, and (4) evaluate the effectiveness of the solution.
Choice-Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support young adults in identifying possible goals and selecting from one or more options based on their preferences. Enable young adults to state a goal and identify criteria for achieving the goal.

Step 2: Taking Action	
Self-Instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide prompts to help young adults think about their goals and support them in continuing to focus on their goals. Help young adults select a way to remind themselves what they need to do to meet their goals.
Self-Monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enable young adults to determine a schedule for their action plan and implementing the plan. Instruct young adults on how to record their progress toward their goal, like using a checklist or a goal sheet.
Self-Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support young adults in expressing and explaining their needs while working toward their goals. Help young adults learn about resources available to them at school, home, and in the community and how they can seek resources that will help them achieve their goals.

Step 3: Adjusting Goal or Plan	
Self-Evaluating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage young adults to check their progress toward their goals using their checklist or goal sheet. Support young adults in comparing their progress to the outcome they want to achieve.
Decision-Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enable young adults to decide if their progress is adequate, inadequate, or if the goal has been achieved. Assist young adults in deciding if their goals should change or remain the same.

For more information about helping young adults with autism develop self-determination skills, visit the **Peer-to-Peer** guide and use the guiding questions to support young adults through the goal setting process.



Resources

ASD Transition Toolkit

This resource offers answers to key questions about information about how educators or families can prepare youth with autism for adulthood by supporting self-determination.

Self-Determination Guide

Reference this guide developed by the Kansas University Center on Developmental Disabilities for more information about educational supports for students with autism.

Self-Determined Goals Toolkit

This toolkit was designed to help parents, caregivers, teachers, siblings, service providers, and others who support teens and young adults with autism as they set and pursue self-determined goals.

References

- Chou, Y., Wehmeyer, M. L., Shogren, K. A., Palmer, S. B., & Lee, J. (2017). Autism and self-determination: Factor analysis of two measures of self-determination. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 32*(3), 163-175. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088357615611391>
- Ryan, J. L. G. (2016). *Leading the way to promote self-determination of individuals with autism spectrum disorder* (Order No. 10154341). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1816977526).
- Shogren, K. A., Burke, K. M., Antosh, A., Wehmeyer, M. L., LaPlante, T., Shaw, L. A., & Raley, S. (2018). Impact of the self-determined learning model of instruction on self-determination and goal attainment in adolescents with intellectual disability. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies, 30*(1), 22-34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1044207318792178>
- Shogren, K. A., Raley, S. K., Burke, K. M., & Wehmeyer, M. L. (2019). *The Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction Teacher's Guide*. Lawrence, KS: Kansas University Center on Developmental Disabilities
- Shogren, K. A., Wehmeyer, M. L., Palmer, S. B., Forber-Pratt, A., Little, T. J., & Lopez, S. (2015). Causal agency theory: Reconceptualizing a functional model of self-determination. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities, 50*(3), 251-263.
- Taylor, W. D., Cobigo, V., & Ouellette-Kuntz, H. (2019). A family systems perspective on supporting self-determination in young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities, 32*(5), 1116-1128. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.12601>
- Tomaszewski, B., Kraemer, B., Steinbrenner, J. R., Smith DaWalt, L., Hall, L. J., Hume, K., & Odom, S. (2020). Student, educator, and parent perspectives of Self-Determination in high school students with autism spectrum disorder. *Autism Research, 13*(12), 2164-2176. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.2337>
- Wehmeyer, M. L., & Palmer, S. B. (2003). Adult outcomes for students with cognitive disabilities three-years after high school: The impact of self-determination. *Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities, 38*(2), 131-144. (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003)
- White, K., Flanagan, T. D., & Nadig, A. (2018). Examining the relationship between self-determination and quality of life in young adults with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities, 30*(6), 735-754. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10882-018-9616-y>
- Zuber, W. J., & Webber, C. (2019). Self-advocacy and self-determination of autistic students: A review of the literature. *Advances in Autism, 5*(2), 107-116.



Permission is granted to reprint this *Autism at-a-Glance* if you acknowledge CSESA and the authors of this document. For more information, please visit CSESA at <http://csesa.fpg.unc.edu/> or <https://www.facebook.com/csesa.asd>

The work reported here was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education through Grants R324C120006 and R324A180091 awarded to UNC-Chapel Hill. The opinions expressed represent those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

Suggested citation: Dickerson, L. (2021, April). *Supporting Self-Determination (Autism at-a-Glance Brief)*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, CSESA Development Team.