

Development of Self-Determination in Young Children: Strategies to Promote Children's Self-Determined Action

What Is Self-Determination?

Teacher Taylor scanned their preschool classroom, listening to the different conversations and watching various actions during free play. While other children were busy playing with toys or creating a massive tower with blocks, Dominic was standing in front of a material shelf looking at art supplies. Dominic was a 4-year-old who had joined the class midway through the school year. He had been gaining experience with classroom routines and developing rapport with other children over the course of several weeks. Although he started to participate more in practitioner-led activities such as morning meetings, Dominic still needed Taylor's support to make choices and take action on his choices during free play and other less structured times. For example, Taylor consistently observed Dominic looking at materials without taking the additional step to set them up or ask for help if needed. As Taylor moved toward Dominic, they thought about practicing one of his Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals of making choices based on personal preferences and advocating for himself to develop Dominic's foundational self-determination skills.

Self-determination is a dispositional characteristic, expressed when people act as causal agents in their lives (Shogren et al., 2015). It develops throughout the life course, starting in early childhood. Causal Agency Theory (Shogren et al., 2015) defines three self-determined actions that lead to self-determination, which are (1) volitional action: including making conscious choices based on one's own preferences, (2) agentic action: identifying actions that lead to a specific goal, and (3) action-control beliefs: believing in one's ability to carry out these chosen actions and feel supported in a pursuit of the goal. These actions are also described in plain language as Decide, Act, and Believe (see Figure 1; KU Center on Developmental Disabilities, 2019), and for the purpose of this article, we will use both academic terms and plain language. These self-determined actions can be further broken down into an array of skills and abilities, including choice-making, decision-making, problem-solving, goal-setting and attainment, self-management, self-advocacy and leadership, self-awareness, and self-knowledge (Hagiwara et al., 2021).

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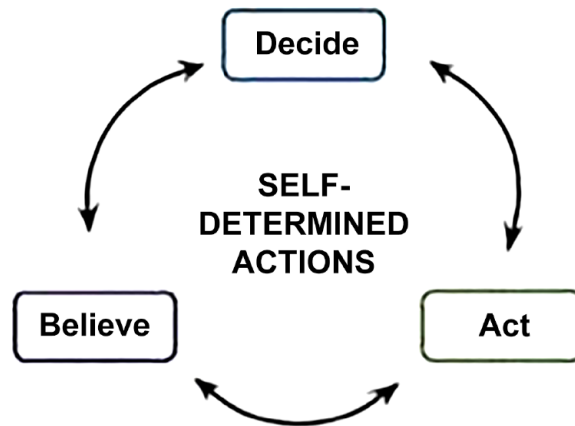
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Figure 1
Self-Determined Actions



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During early childhood, the foundations of self-determination develop, including “age appropriate social problem solving, engagement, self-regulation, rudimentary goal and other aspects of becoming causal agents” (Palmer et al., 2019, p. 2), supporting more complex self-determination skills and abilities in life as adolescence and beyond. These foundations can be strengthened by practitioners and family members who provide opportunities and supports. Consequently, self-determined actions can vary across different ages or developmental stages. For instance, for Decide, young children may choose a book to read during story time with the assistance of a family member or set a goal to put on their shoes independently. For Act, they might engage in problem-solving by seeking help to complete a task or practice self-regulation. For Believe, they could explore their preferences and dislikes or learn to reflect on their behavior under the guidance of a trusted adult. Figure 1 provides an overview of the self-determined action cycle, and Table 1

shows the skills and abilities associated with each action.

The purpose of this article is to provide practitioners with tools to support young children in the classroom and in partnership with families to develop and strengthen the foundations of self-determination skills and abilities. After further defining self-determination, we discuss the benefits of targeting foundational self-determination skills (e.g., choice-making, self-regulation, self-awareness) in early childhood education. Linking to Decide, Act, and Believe, we identify strategies to plan daily activities and annual IEP goals to increase young children’s self-determination in partnership with families.

Supporting the Foundations of Self-Determination in Young Children

Young children develop the foundations of self-determination by engaging daily in opportunities to

Table 1
Self-Determined Action as Defined by Causal Agency Theory Applied to Early Childhood

Self-determined actions	Applied definition in early childhood	Foundational skills
Volitional action (Decide)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making conscious choices for oneself • Indicating likes/dislikes • Setting age-appropriate goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choice-making • Goal setting
Agentic action (Act)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thinking of what you need in order to reach a goal • Brainstorming potential challenges in reaching goals • Asking for help 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-regulation • Goal attainment • Problem-solving • Self-advocacy
Action-control beliefs (Believe)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowing that you can reach your goal with supports • Reflecting on the supports needed to reach goals • Thinking of ways to try differently next time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-awareness • Self-knowledge

learn, practice, and exercise self-determined actions (Decide, Act, and Believe) across various settings. Early childhood offers a crucial context for nurturing these foundational skills and abilities. Supporting these skills can enhance the growth of self-determination as young children gain autonomy (Palmer et al., 2017; Summers et al., 2014), leading to positive outcomes in school and beyond, including an improved quality of life (Erwin et al., 2016; LaChapelle et al., 2005). The early childhood context is particularly critical because “earlier introduction of concepts related to self-determination may prevent overdependence, a low sense of self-efficacy, and external locus of control” (Palmer et al., 2013, p. 39). All people, including young children, are born with the innate capability to become self-determined; even infants engage in self-determined actions like

the foundations of self-advocacy by expressing wants and needs through vocalizations. However, individuals require dedicated and personalized supports and opportunities to engage in self-determined actions throughout their childhood to hone self-determination (Palmer et al., 2013).

Strengthening young children’s foundational self-determination skills is aligned with the Division for Early Childhood’s Recommended Practices for practitioners supporting young children from birth through age 8 (DEC RPs, 2014). For example, DEC RPs include interactions that “promote the child’s problem-solving behavior by observing, interpreting, and scaffolding in response to the child’s growing level of autonomy and self-regulation” (2014, RP INT5, p. 14), to facilitate greater participation and access. This recommended practice includes problem-solving and self-regulation,

which are associated skills of Act. In addition, these self-determination skills and abilities relate to critical IEP goals such as supporting children's problem-solving behaviors (DEC, 2014, RP INT5) or helping children become adaptive, competent, socially connected, and engaged (2014, RP INS2). Practitioners can focus on these skills by collaborating with families to foster self-determination across home and school, applying a culturally responsiveness lens, and recognizing each child's strengths and support needs. The final objective is to create IEP goals promoting children's self-determination and integrating self-determination skills into classroom instruction and daily routines (2014, RP F3, F4, TR2, and INS2).



Self-Determination Development and Family–School Partnerships During Early Childhood

For young children receiving special education services, working with caregivers and other service providers to promote family engagement strengthens the continuity of services and outcomes (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2016). To promote self-determination, practitioners must also recognize that cultural and family backgrounds influence how families prioritize or set goals and how they believe or operationalize self-determination for their child. In other words, contextual factors such as age, support needs, cultural identities, practices, and values can impact how families of young children with disabilities may perceive and exercise self-determination differently (Chu, 2018; Hagiwara et al., 2021). Therefore, it is imperative for early educators to develop a continuity of interventions and strategies teaching and practicing self-determination skills in culturally responsive ways.

Another important aspect that practitioners need to be aware of is that families already support many foundational self-determination skills and abilities at home and in community. For example, children may choose their own outfits in the morning or pajamas in the evening. Creating and sharing activity matrices are an effective method for families and practitioners to be on the same page to coherently support

the development of self-determination and the progress toward IEP goals through routine school activities, while also leveraging strategies already in use at home. Figure 2 shows an example activity matrix that practitioners can utilize in service of this method. While the matrix (Figure 2) highlights opportunities for Dominic throughout all parts of the daily routine, teams who create their own matrix may find they want to only include the best times for the student. Taking data on performance or progress and updating activity matrices may also support adults to stay informed as a team about a child's progress at school systematically and routinely. This also aligns with DEC RP's regarding teaming and collaboration with families (2014, TC1, TC2, F1, F3, and F4). Given that self-determination is influenced by cultural and family backgrounds and values, intentionally creating family-centered IEP goals that promote self-determination may positively impact children's experiences learning and practicing self-determined actions.

As such, it is vital that young children have rich learning experiences and supportive, nurturing adults at school to support



them in acknowledging their choices and valuing differences in others. Shogren et al. (2021) explain that “supports for self-determination must be provided in ways that are meaningful for students, based on their communication preferences and needs” (p. 392). Within an array of environments, young children learn about their identity and preferences and make choices (Decide), self-advocate and self-regulate (Act), and cultivate self-awareness and increase engagement with others and activities (Believe). In the following section, we further explain how practitioners can embed self-determined actions (Decide, Act, and Believe) in daily routines and instruction within inclusive environments.

Supporting the Foundations of Self-Determination in Inclusive Early Childhood Environments

Inclusive learning environments can naturally foster and provide opportunities for self-determination for children with varying abilities to later achieve positive school and adult outcomes (e.g., Burke et al., 2020; Raley et al., 2018). Promoting self-determination skills aligns with the anti-bias education framework in the creation of safe and supportive learning environments where children are supported to construct their identity, build confidence, and honor human diversity (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2019). Approaching self-determination from these perspectives may empower young children to be aware of themselves, their environments, and their abilities to acknowledge that they have agency and develop the foundations to be causal agents—“goal chasers”—in their lives (Shogren et al., 2021).

Figure 2
Dominic's Activity Matrix

Activity:	IEP Goal 1: Decide activities based on personal interests	IEP Goal 2: Act by expressing wants in social situations with peers & familiar adults	IEP Goal 3: Engage in back and forth reflective communication to advocate for wants and needs	Sample Teacher Notes:
Aligned Self-Determination Skill:	Choice- making	Self-knowledge	Goal setting	Remember to engage Dominic in reflection
Circle Time	Choice between story or song	Discuss types of stories and songs	Set goal to be a writer, illustrator, creating own stories	Dominic said he likes the idea of writing stories
Center Time	Art or water play	When/how they like to share materials	Set goal to be a painter, sculptor, potter, art teacher	Dominic said he is interested in painting
Snack Time	Grapes or apples	Texture questions, sensory questions	Discuss career paths towards chef, gardener, baker	Dominic expressed interest in gardening
Outdoor Play	Ride bikes or slide	Riding with friends or with family	Set recreational goal	Dominic expressed he wants to be able to bike up the hill near his home
Bathroom Time	Going now or later	Independently express desire to use restroom during routine activities	Set goal to ask for help when need help with the button or zipper	More support is needed in these areas
Transition Time	Put on jacket or help a friend	Asking and receiving help	Set goal for helping family at home	Dominic said, "felt good to help a friend"
Free Play	Blocks or pretend play	Preferences during building	Set goal for Lego tower	Dominic plans to make super tall tower

Decide

Teacher Taylor and Dominic's family chose Dominic's IEP goal of making choices based on personal preferences as a way to support Dominic's ability to strengthen his participation and engagement in class. They identified times to practice making choices, such as during free play in the classroom and outside on the playground. They also wanted to build on Dominic's interests by having materials prepared to support Dominic's preferences. For example, Dominic

was extremely interested in Sonic the Hedgehog. To support Dominic's choice-making skills, Taylor prompted Dominic by asking him what activities he wanted to do during free play using Sonic. Dominic expressed that he liked to read or draw Sonic, and he chose to read.

Teacher Taylor gives Dominic the opportunity to make a choice (Decide) about his activities during free play. Taylor supports him through offering ideas related to Sonic, which is highly motivating for Dominic. Taylor supports Dominic's

choice-making process by using open-ended questions as prompts and scaffolding ideas related to Sonic. Taylor plans to repeat this strategy at different times of the day for Dominic to practice choosing his activities in different settings.

Self-determination develops and is enhanced as children gain experiences in different environments, materials, and with different individuals (Wehmeyer et al., 2017). Like Teacher Taylor, practitioners can (a) recognize moments when situations requiring self-determination-related skills and abilities arise, (b) be intentional about how they support students through these moments, (c) engage in reflective practice (Heffron & Murch, 2010), and (d) evolve their teaching practices based on prior experiences. Specifically, practitioners might help young children foster Decide by providing structured opportunities for choice-making and honoring individual children's unique preferences and strengths. These strategies align with DEC RPs (2014) related to identifying and expanding on each child's preferences or interests (INS1, INT3) and promoting problem-solving behavior to support their growing autonomy (INT5).

Act

Together, Dominic and Teacher Taylor walked into the book section. They had a few Sonic book options prepared and available to support Dominic's choice-making, and Dominic chose his story, Sonic the Hedgehog, Vol. 1: ¡Consecuencias! (Flynn et al., 2020). Taylor asked Dominic where he wanted to read. Dominic expressed that he would need a quiet and comfortable place

to read. Taylor observed progress in Dominic's communication when he expressed his need for a quiet place to read, demonstrating the success in working together with Dominic's family to encourage him to more effectively express his needs. Dominic looked around for options to sit and selected the bean bag chair in the reading nook. After he chose his story and preferred place to read, Dominic opened the book, and together they started reading.

In this example, Teacher Taylor asks Dominic to communicate his preferences by choosing a story. Dominic is encouraged to cultivate awareness of himself and his interests, to practice making choices. In the process, Dominic also identified his needs related to where to read, and through making choices and expressing his needs, he practiced self-advocacy. IEP goals for making choices and expressing needs allowed Dominic to practice these skills with varied, individualized supports and opportunities. Practitioners might need to present two or three options for action based on the child's goal or preferences and help the child make a choice which actions they want to take. The DEC RPs (2014) underscore the importance of interactions that promote problem-solving behavior and instruction that supports adaptive, competent, and engaged learning (INT5, INS2, and INS4). Following these practices, practitioners can create high expectations and empower young children to make choices and take action with confidence.

Believe

Soon after Dominic finished reading, he and Teacher Taylor talked

about making choices on the playground. This supported Dominic's IEP goal to practice making choices across settings. Dominic looked excited, so Taylor brainstormed about options with him, and he chose to ride a bike alongside a peer he often seeks out in the classroom. Afterwards, Taylor reinforced their belief in Dominic's ability to make choices based on his preferences, explicitly discussing how these routine activities, like outdoor play or free play, are opportunities to foster Dominic's self-determination skills. Taylor asked Dominic how he felt about making choices and telling his choices to them. Dominic said, "good!" Then, they thought about how else Dominic might make choices at school to increase opportunities to practice and further solidify his skills, leading to higher self-confidence and greater understanding of how Dominic's goals and actions align.

Teacher Taylor promoted Dominic's self-determination skills and abilities by supporting him to cultivate awareness of his environment (i.e., playground) and to act as a causal agent by advocating for activities which matter to Dominic. Teacher Taylor also guided Dominic in reflective practice (Believe; Heffron & Murch, 2010) to help him make connections between his goals (Decide) and actions (Act). This is crucial for young children as they are developing self-determination and is a simple way for practitioners to shift established classroom practices to be more student-centered. Practitioners might support Believe by asking young children reflective guiding questions, such as "what did we do to solve the problem?" As practitioners support children's belief in themselves and their abilities to achieve goals, they

can also model the idea of Believe by helping children reflect on the outcomes of their decisions and actions.

How to Write IEP Goals in Ways That Promote the Development of Self-Determination

When writing IEP goals based on students' unique strengths and support needs, one can consider ways to enhance the foundations of self-determination. The first step is to write goals that reflect Decide, Act, or Believe and their associated foundational skills and abilities (e.g., making choices, problem-solving, self-advocacy). For example, consider Dominic's IEP goals (shown below in Column 2 of Table 2). To provide access to the general education curriculum, Dominic's first IEP goal was written in alignment with a Teaching Strategies GOLD Standard (Heroman & Tabors, 2010), which requires students to demonstrate knowledge about themselves. Taylor reflected the cycle of Decide, Act, and Believe best aligned with the goal of self-knowledge. As indicating likes and dislikes is a form of choice-making, and Dominic's family wanted Dominic to communicate his wants and needs more assertively, Taylor and Dominic's family wrote his IEP goal to decide on activities based on personal interests.

Next, Teacher Taylor considered what skills and abilities could be focused on now with less difficulty, and they decided that choice-making and self-awareness could be easily embedded (see Column 3 in Table 2). Then, Taylor engaged Dominic in reflective practice after each activity because it is important to support the development of self-determination in early childhood. Taylor encouraged the cycle of Decide, Act, and Believe

Table 2**Early Childhood IEP Goals Aligned With Teaching Strategies GOLD Standards and Self-Determination Instructional Strategies**

Teaching strategies GOLD standard	Early childhood IEP goal in plain language	Self-determination instructional strategy	Adults' guiding phrase
Cognitive 11. Demonstrates positive approaches to learning	Student will make choices on an activity during center time based on personal interests.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask about likes and dislikes to support self-knowledge • Allow students to make choices and set goals based on their likes and dislikes • Ask open-ended questions to support goal setting • Offer many opportunities to make choices 	<p>What do you like about ____? What do you not like about ____?</p> <p>How do you want to make choices?</p>
Social Emotional 3. Participates cooperatively and constructively in group situations	Student will communicate wants in social situations with peers (e.g., "I want a turn.").	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relate the simple strategies of expressing wants to child's daily goal-attainment about their experience during outdoor play • Promote self-advocacy by modeling positive ways to express wants and needs • Support problem-solving by modeling how to ask for help 	<p>If you choose to____, how would you do it?</p> <p>What other options do you have?</p> <p>What might make it hard when you try to ____?</p> <p>What can you do without help? When will you need help? Who can you ask?</p> <p>What would you say when asking for help?</p>
Language 9. Uses language to express thoughts and needs	Student will engage in reflective communication to check their progress toward making choices and expressing needs and wants.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a conversation to reflect on supports (AAC board or classroom PECS) and modify a list of supports as needed to increase their self-knowledge • Reflecting on their progress toward goals to increase self-awareness • Be joyful and celebrate their work and accomplishments 	<p>How do you feel when ____?</p> <p>Why do you think that you feel that way?</p> <p>What did you accomplish? What went well?</p> <p>What could you do differently next time?</p> <p>You put so much effort into ____!</p> <p>How did that feel?</p> <p>How can we celebrate?</p>

by asking Dominic some reflective questions (see Column 4 for guiding phrases to promote self-determined actions in young children through reflection). Asking intentional questions and honoring student responses can help children develop belief in themselves, leading to an increase in awareness of IEP goals.

By following these simple steps (first aligning the IEP goal with Decide, Act, or Believe; next planning activities that highlight self-determination-related skills; finally engaging in reflection), Taylor can support Dominic's emerging self-determination. By promoting the development of self-determination within young children's IEP goals,

practitioners can provide many learning opportunities for children to enhance self-determination skills. Using the ongoing cycle of Decide, Act, and Believe, children can practice self-determination in different contexts and environments. Rows 2 and 3 in Table 2 show more examples of developmentally appropriate IEP goals that promote unique self-determination skills.

Conclusion

Dominic's family was encouraged by Dominic's progress making choices and expressing his needs in class. Checking in with Teacher Taylor at

Table 3
Blank Activity Matrix for Practitioners

Activity:	IEP Goal 1:	IEP Goal 2:	IEP Goal 3:	Teacher notes
Aligned Self-Determination Skill				
Circle Time				
Center Time				
Snack Time				
Outdoor Play				
Bathroom Time				
Transition Time				
Free Play				

school one morning, Dominic's family shared that he seemed more engaged at home. They felt that Dominic was more vocal and assertive in sharing what he wanted, and they were encouraging this throughout mealtimes and other routine activities as well. Proudly, they explained that Dominic seemed more confident and self-aware. He also seemed to advocate for himself more, which was an important family goal. Taylor affirmed that they were also noticing more changes at school, as recently as yesterday on the playground. Even before he went outside, Dominic was clearly excited and determined to ride the tricycle. He rode around with a few friends, and there was a noticeable difference in his demeanor and self-determined actions compared to earlier in the school year.

The need for self-determined individuals who feel empowered to advocate for their own rights and values is imperative, and early childhood is a critical time to start supporting this. Teacher Taylor and Dominic's family shared the belief that foundational self-determination skills would support Dominic both at home and at school. They encouraged

his choice-making and advocacy and found this as critical to enhance Dominic's participation in class. Wehmeyer and Palmer (2000) advise educators to consider that without establishing a strong foundation of self-determination in early childhood, "children will not be prepared to assume greater control over their lives when the time comes to do so" (p. 465). Like Teacher Taylor, practitioners can benefit from incorporating self-determination in their daily routines and instruction to empower students, communicate strong expectations, and foster beliefs about children's abilities to achieve their goals. Practitioners may partner with families to support all young children to develop their self-determination, while cultivating meaningful relationships with students driven by their preferences, choices, needs, and family and cultural values and practices. Young children need supports and opportunities to learn from their choices and actions and apply lessons learned into similar situations in the future. As they get older, they also need to learn how to generalize their skills across settings.

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