

'Self-Determination' Why is it Important for Youth and Young Adults with Disabilities?

Purpose of Summary

The **purpose of this summary** is to:

- consider the meaning of "self-determination";
- present findings of studies identifying the importance of self-determination to significant outcomes for youth and young adults with disabilities; and
- make recommendations to enhance service delivery and for future research in this area.

Understanding Self-Determination

Wehmeyer (2006) suggests self-determination is **having the power and will to make choices in one's life in order to maintain or improve one's quality of life (QOL)**. Self-determination has been described by Wehmeyer (1999) as consisting of **four essential characteristics**:

- **autonomy** (acting independently);
- **self-regulation** (controlling one's behaviour);
- **psychological empowerment** (feeling competent); and,
- **self-realization** (understanding one's self).

"**Interdependence**" (Stewart et al., 2009) or "connectedness with others" (Anderson, Chen, & Carter, 2000; Patrick, Raymond, Canevello, & Lonsbary, 2007) has been identified as being important to the development of self-

determination, acknowledging **everyone needs social supports and networks** to succeed throughout life. Self-determination, then, can be seen as **emerging as children and youth connect with and are supported by others in multiple contexts to learn new skills and develop attitudes** that enable them to fulfill their desires and meet their own goals to the best of their abilities.

Self-Determination and Outcomes

A good body of literature now exists that examines the importance of self-determination to the lives of transition-aged youth and young adults with disabilities (see Chambers et al., 2007).

Evaluations of **both special education and rehabilitation programs** to promote self-determination skills for youth and young adults with disabilities have **reported positive increases** (e.g., Evans, McDougall, & Baldwin, 2006; Powers, Turner, & Ellison, 2001; Zhang, 2001).

Growing evidence suggests that self-determination is a significant factor in improving post high school success for youth and young adults with disabilities. For example, research has found self-determination to be **positively related to both employment and independence in managing personal finances** for individuals with learning and developmental disabilities, one and three years after high school graduation (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003; Wehmeyer & Schwartz,

1997). Moreover, self-determination has been **linked to retention success in college** for students with disabilities (Jameson, 2007).

As Wehmeyer and Schalock (2001) explain, people who are self-determined cause things to change to accomplish a specific end, such as obtaining employment or independent living; and this process of agency supports **optimization of a person's QOL**. Indeed, cross-sectional studies have found a positive relationship between self-determination and overall QOL for persons with disabilities (Lachapelle et al., 2005; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998).

A longitudinal study by McDougall and colleagues (2009) examined the relationship between self-determination and various sub-domains of QOL over a one year period for youth and young adults with multiple disabilities enrolled in a transition program. **Self-determination** was found to be **positively associated with two QOL sub-domains:** personal development and personal fulfillment, but not with interpersonal relations, leisure and recreation, or overall QOL. Whereas satisfaction with personal development and fulfillment arises primarily from within an individual, satisfaction with relationships and social participation is more dependent on "connectedness with others." Indeed, in this study, youth reported they would have liked more opportunities to interact socially with peers.

It is important to remember that **satisfaction with overall life quality** does not stem from simply having a job or being self-reliant, but from **involvement in a meaningful occupation and active citizenship** (Stewart et al., 2009). A **balance** between support for people's autonomy/competence and support for people's need to be meaningfully connected with others is essential to overall QOL (Anderson et al., 2000).

Recommendations for Service Delivery

- Research clearly indicates the importance of supporting youth and young adults with disabilities to acquire self-determination skills and apply them as they transition from high school to post high school life. However, it is becoming increasingly realized that the **acquisition of self-determination should be promoted throughout childhood and adolescence** (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003; Stewart et al., 2009). Children can then gain skill and ability over time, rather than expecting that autonomy will be achieved once a particular milestone is met (Gall, Kingsnorth, & Healy, 2007).
- **Family support** plays a major role in the development of youths' self-determination. Families would benefit from education about how to introduce and support the development of autonomy and responsibility at earlier stages in their child's life. **Easy-to-read resources and ongoing support** for their child's community participation with peers and other adults as they grow older would also be of benefit to families (Evans et al., 2006, Gall et al., 2007).
- Transition programs would do best to **attend to the multiple contexts** within which youth may need to function on their own as well as interact with others, including home, continuing education, work, recreational settings, and larger systems, **such as the health and legal systems** (Eisenman, 2007; Evans et al., 2006, Gall et al., 2007).
- Education and rehabilitation transition programs that seek to support youth and young adults with disabilities could

be enhanced by the knowledge that self-determination affects QOL, and may have a differential effect on various QOL sub-domains (e.g., personal development, social participation). Therefore, services need to be designed to **provide opportunities for youth and young adults to apply their emerging self-determination in ways that will best enhance all aspects of their lives** (McDougall et al., 2009).

Recommendations for Future Research

- **Qualitative studies** provide a systematic means of listening to those persons who need to be heard (Stewart et al., 2009). For example, qualitative work could focus closely on youths' emerging sense of spirituality, values, beliefs, and personal worldviews to understand the significance of these factors to the development of self-determination and QOL.
- Cross-sectional research indicates both **personal** (e.g., individual capacity) and **environmental factors** (e.g., living in community-based settings) **contribute to self-determination** (Chambers et al., 2007). Shogren and colleagues (2007) have examined longitudinally the impact of personal and environmental factors on self-determination of youth with learning disabilities. **Longitudinal studies** are needed to ascertain the relative contribution of personal and environmental factors to self-determination for those with physical and other disabilities.
- **Approaches for fostering self-determination** in youth and young adults with disabilities **should be evaluated** on an ongoing basis for their effectiveness.

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For more information, contact:

Janette McDougall, PhD

Thames Valley Children's Centre

779 Base Line Road East, London ON, N6C 5Y6

Phone: 519.685.8700 ext 53377

Email:janette.mcdougall@tvcc.on.ca

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