



I'm Determined

Focusing on Self-Advocacy Skills, Starting at the Elementary Level

By Lisa Holland

Every parent dreams of their child growing up to be happy, successful and independent. A dilemma that many face is how to help make this dream a reality. This is especially true for parents of students with disabilities. Knowing how to help their children obtain the future that parents envision for them is challenging, yet exceedingly critical. Research shows that children who develop skills related to self-determination (choice-making, decision-making, problem-solving, self-awareness, self-advocacy and goal-setting) are more likely to meet with success in school and in their adult lives. These skills allow individuals greater "voice" or ability to participate in decisions that impact their lives, thus allowing persons with disabilities greater influence over their own quality of life.

I'm Determined Project

I'm Determined, a Project developed and sponsored through The Virginia Department of Education Training and Technical Assistance Centers (VDOE T/TACs), focuses on providing direct instruction, models and opportunities for students to practice self-determination skills beginning at the elementary level and continuing throughout their educational experiences. Students involved in the project gain an understanding of their strengths and needs; learn how to set and achieve goals; and become skilled at identifying supports they require. The I'm Determined Project's goals also include the development of leadership skills; the expansion of support networks through person-centered planning; the improvement of attendance and graduation rates; and the reduction in the number of discipline referrals for students with disabilities.

Efforts are being made at local and state levels to implement this project. Materials are being developed for use by students, schools and families. Initial school sites for the project include Appomattox County, Chesterfield County, Dickenson County, Franklin County, Montgomery County, Prince Edward County, Roanoke County and Rockingham County. Additional sites will be added in the fall of 2008.

How Parents Can Support Self-Determined Behaviors

Parents play an integral part in the future of their children and have a great deal of influence over the development of skills related to self-determination. Children need to learn and practice these skills in school, at home, and in the community. At home parents can:

- help their child identify their strengths and interests by developing a picture collage or scrapbook;
- allow their child to make choices about clothing, social activities and other daily activities;
- provide opportunities for their child to use their talents;
- help their child understand the consequences of choices;
- teach and model problem solving through family meetings;
- help their child identify caring adult mentors in his/her extended family, church, and community;
- listen to their child;
- support their child in participating in community activities;
- give their child responsibilities within the home;
- build their child's your knowledge about abilities and disabilities;
- along with your child, identify role models with disabilities;
- read children's literature with their child that includes characters with disabilities; and
- encourage and help their child participate in their Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

Participation in the IEP Process

One of the most powerful ways for students to learn about and practice self-determination skills is by increasing their involvement in the development of their IEP. The benefits from such participation are numerous and well documented in professional literature. When students increase their participation in the development of their IEP, they have the opportunity to:

- practice self-advocacy skills;
- build self-esteem and self-confidence;
- feel invested in their education by being given the opportunity to provide input and identify the goals they want to achieve;
- build social and conversational skills;
- develop a better understanding of their abilities and disabilities;
- gain information about their rights as a person with a disability;
- allow for positive interactions with adults;
- develop leadership skills;
- practice skills related to the Virginia Standards of Learning (use of effective oral communication skills and decoding and comprehension skills, writing in context, and utilizing a variety of media and formats to communicate).

Students of all ages and disabilities can be involved in and even lead their own IEP meetings. Levels of participation will vary and can include ways to participate before, during, and after the actual IEP meeting. Parents can support this participation by:

- discussing with their child the importance of their participation;
- making plans with their child and their child's teacher about how their child will participate;
- encouraging their child to make a list of their strengths, likes, challenges and needs;
- encouraging their child to identify their short-term and long-term goals for his/her future;
- role playing and practicing what their child will say before the meeting;
- helping their child prepare personal invitations to the meeting;
- helping their child prepare a PowerPoint or student booklet about themselves; and
- attending the IEP Meeting to support and praise their child's participation.

Self-Determination Youth Summit

In order to further encourage the development of critical skills related to leading a self-determined life, the I'm Determined Project sponsored the first annual Self-Determination Youth Summit. The statewide Summit, which was held as part of the 2008 Virginia Transition Forum, brought together 35 youth from Virginia and Delaware. The Summit goals included helping attendees develop an understanding and comfort level of their own disability label and the disability labels of others by addressing myths and stereotypes and creating a network of youth leaders to advocate for disability and youth issues. During the Summit, youth and adults shared

information concerning leadership and problem-solving skills. After the Summit, attendees were encouraged to build their involvement in other youth leadership groups, activities and conferences.

The next Self-Determination Youth Summit will be held in March 2009 in conjunction with the Virginia Transition Forum. The Forum is scheduled to be hosted in Norfolk, Va. Applications for participation are being accepted from across the state and will be available at the Virginia Transition Forum's website www.virginiatransitionforum.org. ■

With undergraduate and graduate degrees in special education, Lisa Holland taught for nineteen years before joining the Virginia Department of Education Training and Technical Assistance Center at Radford University in 2001. She is currently the coordinator for the I'm Determined Project. Lisa's interest and primary areas of focus are self-determination, instructional strategies and inclusive education.

Additional Information and Resources

Additional information about the I'm Determined Project can be obtained by contacting

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or by connecting with one of Virginia Department of Education Training and Technical Assistance Centers (www.ttaonline.org).

Additional information may be found at the following websites:

www.self-determination.com
www.uncc.edu/sdsp/home.asp
www.nconsd.org
www.studentledieps.org