

Supported Decision Making: An Introduction

Taking the Lead: Self-Determination

We all feel good when we're in charge of our lives. When you make decisions and take actions to shape your life, it's called *self-determination*. When you're *self-determined* you make decisions about what happens in your own life instead of other people making those decisions for you, you make choices instead of someone else telling you what to do.

It feels good to be self-determined, doesn't it? It's also good for you. For years, studies have shown that when people with disabilities are more self-determined, they have better lives: they're more likely to be healthy, employed, independent, safe, and an active part of their communities.

How Self-Determination and Supported Decision- Making Relate

Being self-determined doesn't mean you never need help. We all need help, every day. Asking for help is very important and ok! Think about it: We ask friends, families, and co-workers for ideas and advice all the time. When we do that – and everybody does that – we're using *Supported Decision Making*. It's simple, really: they support you and you decide. *That's* Supported Decision Making (SDM).

SDM can help you manage your health, money, relationships, and all other important parts of your life. Anytime you want help to understand your choices, think about the best option, and make a decision, you can have people you know and trust help you. Here are some ways to do that:

- Have a family member go to the doctor with you and use a body chart to explain your health
- Ask a fellow student to come to IEP meetings with you and talk about what is important to you at school
- Have someone you trust help you set up your bank account and manage your money each week
- Get a family friend to help you look for apartments and read the lease

Making Your Own Supported Decision Making Plan

Even though *everyone* needs help sometimes, not everyone needs the *same type of help* or needs help in the same way or at the same time. Think about how you like to learn, who you like to help you, and when you like to have someone to talk to and provide assistance. That is the start of your SDM Plan.

Get Ideas on Paper

The first thing you should do is **think about where and when** you want to use Supported Decision Making. Remember, this is about *you*, not anyone else. So, think about times when you had help figuring things out, or when you wish you did have help. Next, **think about people you know who you want to help you**. You may think of someone who you want to help you with all of your decisions or someone who you want to help you with just one thing. It is a good idea to choose people who know you and know about the area you want help with to make decisions. For example, a family member who is a nurse may be a great helper with medical decisions. **Third, think about how you want help**. Do you want people to come with you, or to brainstorm questions before important appointments, or to meet with you in person to talk through big choices? There are many ways to stay in touch with the people who help you, use the ways that are comfortable for you.

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Talk to Your Team

Once you have what you want written down, talk to the people you put on your list. Let them know what you want them to help you with, how you want them to do it, and ask if they can support you. When people agree, they become part of your Supported Decision Making Team. In the future, you may decide to take someone off your team and put a new person on and that is okay. Decide how you want to share information with your SDM team. Do you want to meet in person and share food, meet on Zoom or facetime, or have a private Facebook group? You can do anything you like so everyone can talk and help.

Write Down Your Plan

Now it is time to make a Supported Decision Making Plan describing the help you want, when you want it, and who you want to help you. If you put the plan in writing, which is a good idea, you can give it to your doctors, banks, and others so they know who will be helping you and when. You can also share the plan with your family and friends so they can work together to give you the help you want.

You don't have to use a specific form when you write a Supported Decision Making Plan. You can create a Plan that works best for you. There are resources below to help you get ideas on paper, learn about Supported Decision Making, make your plan, and ask questions.

Supported Decision Making Resources	Where to Find It
The Arc of Northern Virginia's Toolkit with SDM handouts, webinars, examples of 100 ways to use SDM, SDM videos and webinars, and more	https://thearcofnova.org/sdm/
Asking any SDM questions	https://thearcofnova.org/answers/
"Supported Decision Making" book by Jonathan Martinis and Peter Blanck	https://tinyurl.com/SDM-book
"Setting the Wheels in Motion" article by Suzanne Francisco	https://tinyurl.com/SDM-Wheels
Jenny Hatch Justice Project info on start of SDM in VA, SDM data	http://www.jennyhatchjusticeproject.org
National Resource Center for SDM's stories, videos, agreements, and research	http://www.supporteddecisionmaking.org/
"When Do I Want Support" SDM tool	https://tinyurl.com/SDM-ACLU
Center for Public Representation's SDM forms and stories	https://supporteddecisions.org/