

Self Advocacy and Self Determination in the IEP

Self determination is the expectation that adults can make decisions and direct their own lives. Self advocacy is the ability to advocate for what we need from other people. All of us take many years to develop self determination and self advocacy skills through lots of trials and errors. In order to direct our own lives we need a vision of what we want to be and where we want to live, as well as the necessary skills.

The type of skills we need include:

- Goal setting and attainment
- Making decisions and choices
- Problem-solving
- Self-regulation
- Self-advocacy
- Self awareness

Students with disabilities have far less opportunities to develop and use these skills. It must be discouraging to have little say in your life and to always be discussed in terms of the disability or behaviour and told what to do. Parents and professionals can become so focussed on the special needs that youth are seen as perpetual children, instead of people who are developing into young adults.

Students with physical disabilities have many challenges to overcome as they face barriers in communication, movement and mobility. It is critically important that they are supported to develop the skills they will need as an adult to be able to decide about and direct their own lives.

One of the tools that can be used to help students develop self advocacy and self determination skills is the Individual Education Plan (IEP). The IEP can include an Alternative Program that focuses on the ability to self advocate. As the

IEP is reviewed regularly skill development can be broken into small steps, appropriate to the student, with a goal to improve and use the skills.

For example, a student may need to learn to communicate their needs and choices using Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). It may be as limited as yes and no options, or selecting from a number of choices. For another student it may be communicating to a teacher the accommodations they require to participate in class. For both the IEP can be used to identify the learning expectation and how achievement of the goal will be measured.

Another approach is to actively involve the student in development and review of the IEP. This can begin informally with the parent and/or teacher asking the student about their personal goals, or what is helpful. Gradually the student can become more involved with the IEP until they are a team member working on the development of annual goals and identification of strategies that help them to learn.

This summer the Office of the Provincial Advocate released a report: *We have something to say, Young people and their families speak out about special needs and change*. Check out the [we-have-something-to-say-report-en](#) to find out what youth with special needs think are the challenges they face and some ideas for solutions.

For ideas on measurable Individual Education Plan learning expectations related to self advocacy and self determination check out the [A Day in Your Shoes](#) website.