



Information Bites...

Bite sized chunks of information for families that include a member with a disability

Nurturing Self-Determination

Self-Determination

An important quality to nurture in your child is called “self-determination”. Children who develop this quality have a sense of control over their lives and can set goals and work to attain them. Self-determination is important for all children, but researchers have found that children with disabilities who also have high levels of self-determination are more likely to be:

- employed, with greater job benefits than their less self-determined peers
- satisfied with their lives
- living independently, or with support, outside of their family homes

Here are some suggestions on how to nurture self-determination in your child:

1. As early as possible, provide choices and encourage expression of preferences.

Naturally occurring (and important) opportunities for providing choices include: deciding what to wear, what and when to eat, and choosing to engage in a variety of leisure activities. These opportunities help ensure that children learn to develop and express their likes, dislikes, interests, and strengths—giving themselves and others a much stronger picture of *who* the child is and what matters to them.

Another important aspect of choice—allow young people to decide the kind and amount of help he or she wants (or doesn't want), and who will provide help. Make sure those choices are respected.

2. Guide children towards solving their own problems and making their own choices / decisions.

Is your daughter suffering an attack of nerves over going to that sleepover? Is there a playground bully that ruins recess? Does the traffic in the halls of the high school make your teen feel like he's playing bumper cars without the car? What options, safety nets, or escape routes are available? Talk with your child or student. Brainstorm together, lay out all the possibilities. To the extent he or she can, let the *child* decide on the plan, the back-up plan, and the back-up, back-up plan, knowing he or she can count on you to step in, if needed.

3. Ensure that each child has maximum opportunities and ways to communicate.

Even children with limited verbal skills can express choices by pointing; eye gaze; head nod/shake; vocalizations; facial expression; picture, symbol, or photo cards; communication boards; or augmentative communication devices.

4. Strike a balance between being protective and supporting risk-taking.

Perhaps one of the more difficult things for a parent to do is to allow a child to take risks, especially when one of the risks may be hurt feelings. Has your child ever been on a sleepover? To a birthday bowling party? Has he or she tried out for the school play? Gone to a wilderness camp? Every time our children venture out into the world, without mom or dad, we worry about their physical and emotional well-being.

More often than not, when we say we're "afraid that they're just not ready," the reality is that *we* are the ones who are afraid and not ready. And, of course, we filter our vision through the lens of a parent, who wants so very much for children to be successful—at the sleepover or in the school play.

What is easy to forget is that, often, kids do just fine when the grown-ups get out of the way. It's as true for children who have disabilities as for those who do not. There is incredible power in shared peer experiences. Not peer pressure, peer *power*. So, learn to let go a little and push your child out into the world, even though it may be a little scary—okay, a lot! As children get older, lessen the amount that you are directly involved in their activities and play the role of cheerleader.

5. Help children and youth think about their actions and responses to situations and find ways to improve.

Does the teasing go on one second too long and result in a meltdown? Do anxiety and fear about completing an assignment result in paralysis, procrastination, and failure to complete it? If you can help kids *anticipate, think ahead, plan, and practice* a different way of responding...imagine the possibilities for changing behavior!

It can take a long time, but if your child masters this skill, not only will he or she have amazing self-esteem and be self-determined, but when faced with things beyond anyone's control (i.e., life), he or she will be so much better prepared to dig down—not be a victim—and take charge, making the right choices on how to respond.



Yellowknife Association for Community Living - Family Project

4908 - 49th Street, Box 981, Yellowknife, NT X1A 2N7

Phone: (867) 766-4295 Fax: (867) 669-7826 E-mail: inclusion@ykacl.ca Website: www.ykacl.ca

Thanks to National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (nichcy.org).

YKACL's "Information Bites" is funded by the Government of Canada's Social Development Partnerships Program - Disability component.