



# A National Gateway to Self-Determination

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## 10 Steps to Independence: Promoting Self-Determination in the Home



Written by:

***Michael L. Wehmeyer, Ph.D.***

Kansas University Center on Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD) at the University of Kansas

***Sharon Davis, Ph.D.***

The Arc of the United States, Silver Spring, MD. (Retired)

***Susan B. Palmer, Ph.D.***

Kansas University Center on Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD) at the University of Kansas

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### UCEDD Leadership Consortium

**Carl F. Calkins, Ph.D., Co-PI**

University of Missouri Kansas City  
Institute for Human Development (UCEDD)

**Michael Wehmeyer, Ph.D., Co-PI**

Kansas University Center on Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD)  
at the University of Kansas

**Andy Bacon, Ph.D.**

Westchester Institute for Human Development (UCEDD)  
at New York Medical College

**Tamar Heller, Ph.D.**

University of Illinois Chicago  
Dept of Disability and Human Development (UCEDD)

**Hill Walker, Ph.D.**

University of Oregon  
Center on Human Development (UCEDD)

## The National Gateway to Self-Determination

The National Gateway to Self-Determination (SD) is a consortium of University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (Missouri, Kansas, Oregon, New York, Illinois) in partnership with a National Self-Determination Alliance (including self-advocates, families, and numerous national partners). The overall goal of this project is ***“to establish a sustainable, evidence-based training system that enhances self-determination training programs that lead to quality of life outcomes for individuals with developmental disabilities throughout the lifespan.”***

There are a number of important beliefs upon which this SD initiative is founded. They include:

- SD is best considered in the context of a ***social-ecological framework***
- Development of SD is a ***lifelong process***
- Scaling-up SD training activities must occur within an ***evidence-driven*** framework
- The development of SD is a means to obtaining an ***improved quality of life***
- People with developmental disabilities ***must be equal partners***

For more resources on self-determination, please visit the National Gateway to Self-Determination website: [www.aucd.org/ngsd](http://www.aucd.org/ngsd).

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## About the Authors

Michael L. Wehmeyer, Ph.D., is Professor of Special Education; Director, Kansas University Center on Developmental Disabilities; and Senior Scientist and Associate Director, Beach Center on Disability, all at the University of Kansas. Dr. Wehmeyer’s research interests include self-determination, access to the general education curriculum for students with severe disabilities, and technology use by people with intellectual disability.

Sharon Davis, Ph.D., now retired, is the former Director of Research and Program Services at The Arc of the United States. She also worked with the Council for Exceptional Children’s staff previous to working at The Arc of the United States.

Susan B. Palmer, Ph.D. is a Research Professor at the University of Kansas, affiliated with the Beach Center on Disability, the Kansas University Center on Developmental Disabilities, and the Department of Special Education. Dr. Palmer’s research interests include self-determination and access to the general education curriculum for students of all ages and abilities.

## 10 Steps to Independence

It happens in almost every family: the final outcome of parenting. One day, your children leave. As they go, you hope that your son or daughter has the skills and the abilities to make it. The road leading to this moment is sometimes rocky. It may be marked by adolescent hijinks which look, from the parent's point of view, like rebellion or downright hardheadedness. However, those trying times are necessary steps toward independence. Adolescents, especially those who have a disability, need to learn to make choices and decisions.

The road leading to a successful transition from childhood to adulthood begins much earlier than the teenage years. It starts when children learn about themselves, their strengths and weaknesses and, in doing so, begin to value themselves. It ends when, as adults, these same children can take control over choices and decisions which impact their lives and take responsibility for their actions. This is called self-determination.

For children with intellectual and developmental disabilities, families and teachers may need to take extra responsibility to be sure that this process occurs. Children learn many of the attitudes and abilities leading to self-determination by watching their families. Children with disabilities must be taught these lessons. Here are 10 ways that families can play a critical role in teaching their son or daughter to be self-determined:

**1** Walk the tightrope between protection and independence. Allow your son or daughter to explore his or her world. This may mean biting your lip and watching from the kitchen window when your child first meets the neighbor's kids, instead of running out to supervise. While there are obvious limits to this, all parents have to "let go" and this is never easy. **EXPLORATION**

**2** Children need to learn that what they say or do is important and can have an influence on others. This involves allowing risk-taking and exploration. Encourage your child to ask questions and express opinions. Involvement in family discussions and decision-making sessions is one way of providing this opportunity to learn. **SELF-EXPRESSION**

**3** Self-worth and self-confidence are critical factors in the development of self-determination. Model your own sense of positive self-esteem to your child. Tell your child that he is important by spending time with him. Again, involve him in family activities and in family decisions. **SELF-ESTEEM**

**4** Don't run away from your child's questions about differences related to her disability. That doesn't mean, however, to focus on the negative side of the condition. Stress that everyone is individual, encourage your child's unique abilities while helping him or her accept unavoidable limitations. **EMPHASIZE ABILITIES**

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- 5 Recognize the process of reaching goals, don't just emphasize outcomes. **GOAL PROCESS**  
Children need to learn to work toward goals. For older children, encourage skills like organization and goal-setting by modeling these behaviors. Make lists or hang a marker board in the laundry room which shows the daily schedule for each family member. Talk about the steps you are going to use to complete a task and involve them in tasks leading to family goals, such as planning for a vacation.
- 6 Schedule opportunities for interactions with children of different ages and backgrounds. This could be in day care centers, schools, churches and in the neighborhood. Start early in finding chances for your son or daughter to participate in activities that help all children realize that everyone is unique. **INTERACTIONS**
- 7 Set realistic but ambitious expectations. The adage that our goals should extend just beyond our reach is true here. Take an active role in your child's educational experience. Be familiar with his or her reading ability and identify books that provide enough challenge to move to the next reading level. Be sure you don't just force activities which lead to frustration, but don't assume that all of the progress should occur at school. **GOALS**
- 8 Allow your child to take responsibility for his own actions... successes and failures! Provide valid reasons for doing things, instead of simply saying, "Because I said so!" Providing explanations provides the opportunity for the child to make an activity his own. **RESPONSIBILITY**
- 9 Don't leave choice-making opportunities to chance. Take every opportunity to allow your child to make choices; what she wears, what is served for dinner, or where the family goes for vacation. And, although this is not always practical or possible, make sure that these choice opportunities are meaningful. For example, for most children choosing between broccoli and cauliflower is not a choice! Also, when offering choices, make sure that the child's decision is honored. **CHOICE**
- 10 Provide honest, positive feedback. Focus on the behavior or task that needs to be changed. Don't make your child feel like a failure. For example, if your son or daughter attempts to complete a school activity, say a math sheet, but is unable to do so, phrase the feedback so that he or she knows that the failure was specific to the worksheet and not to him or her. We all learn from our mistakes, but only if they are structured so that they do not lead us to believe that the problem is within us. **CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK**

There is no more important environment in which the child with intellectual disabilities learns to become self-determined than the home. A child who learns from his or her parents that he or she has worth will become a self-determined adult. By being allowed the opportunities to make choices and decisions, to explore and take calculated risks and to learn from experiences of success and failure, your child will develop the abilities and attitudes necessary to reach his or her potential.