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From Theory to Practice
A Contextual Framework for Understanding Self-Determination in Early Childhood Environments

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Acquiring the skills and behaviors associated with self-determination is an important priority for young children with and without disabilities because these skills provide a foundation across the child's life span. These skills play an essential part in creating a high quality of life for a child as well as consistent opportunities to interact with the world in an active, meaningful, and highly personalized way. This article discusses the importance of self-determination for young children, and provides a framework for looking at self-determination across routines in a variety of early childhood settings. This framework is based on the idea that self-determination is a dynamic and contextually based concept. A self-monitoring set of questions is presented that can assist practitioners and families in examining contextual and multiple factors that can impact self-determination across early childhood environments. The questions are framed within three areas: (a) the child's current skills relevant to self-determination, (b) the adult's style and behavior, and (c) the immediate learning environment. **Key words:** *choices, disabilities, early childhood, self-determination, young children*

WEHMEYER AND PALMER (2000) suggest that a person's behavior is self-determined if the person acted autonomously, initiated, and responded to events in a psychologically empowered and self-realizing manner, and if the behavior is self-regulated. It is a term that has been used increasingly in the developmental disability literature. Wehmeyer (1998a) identifies a 1972 chapter by Nirje as the first use of the term within the disability literature. Since then we have seen a growing body of literature dedicated to defining the term (Brown & Gothelf, 1996; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Wehmeyer, 1998a; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2000), confirming its importance as a goal for individuals with even the most severe disabilities (Brown & Gothelf, 1996; Guess, Benson, Siegel-Causey, 1985; Gothelf & Brown, 1998), and studying the positive impact of self-determination on personal development (Bannerman, Sheldon, Sherman, & Harchik, 1990; Wehmeyer, 1998b), skill acquisition (Bambara, Ager, & Koger, 1994; Carter, 2001; Cooper & Browder, 1998), and the reduction of challenging behaviors (Carr et al., 2002; Carter, 2001; Dyer, Dunlap, & Winterling, 1990; Durand, 1990; Koegel, Koegel, & Dunlap, 1996; Reichle & Wacker, 1993).

Carr et al. (2002), in describing the evolving philosophy and practice of Positive Behavior Supports (PBS), underscore the importance of quality of life in defining outcome success. They suggest that two of the multiple dimensions of quality of life are personal satisfaction (such as self-confidence, and happiness), and self-determination, which includes personal control, choice of living arrangements, and independence.

This body of literature, however, has focused mainly on adolescents, young adults, and

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adults. If self-determination has been identified as a critical outcome for individuals with severe disabilities as they transition into adulthood, then it is also critical that opportunities to learn skills related to exerting control be made available early in life, and that we begin to focus more on how it applies to younger individuals with disabilities, and how to facilitate, in age-appropriate ways, its development (Brotherson, Cook, Cunconan-Lahr, & Wehmeyer, 1995; Brown & Cohen, 1996; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2000).

SELF-DETERMINATION AND YOUNG CHILDREN

The roots of the self-determination concept are not new or unfamiliar in early childhood. The term, self-determination, however, is not found generally in the early childhood literature even though the key ideas and practices have been grounded deeply and accepted widely in early childhood education for years (Brown & Cohen, 1996). Self-determination, as defined by Turnbull and Turnbull (2001b) is "the means for experiencing quality of life consistent with one's own values, preferences, strengths and needs" (p. 58). While infants, toddlers, and preschoolers will not necessarily have a set of clearly defined values and beliefs, they will likely have preferences for what brings them comfort, joy, pleasure, and security.

Key developmental milestones in early childhood reflect many of the same behavioral characteristics associated with self-determination. For example, babies can regulate their own behavior and indicate preferences in early infancy while children over three can engage in simple problem solving (Greenspan, 1992). Additionally, Erikson (1963) theorized that developing a sense of autonomy is a critical period for children between 19 months and 3 years in creating a sense of self. Likewise, the initiative stage (i.e., planning and initiating own activities) in Erikson's theory is important for children to make connections about their ability to impact the world around them. Doll, Sands, Wehmeyer, and Palmer (1996) provided a thoughtful framework for understanding the emergence of self-determined behaviors in children and youth. They described the following abilities related to development of self-determination in children 2 to 5 years: self-awareness and self-knowledge, self-evaluation and attributions of efficacy, choice making and decision-making, meta-representation, and goal setting and attainment.

Recommended practice in early childhood education also acknowledges the importance of self-determination in building a healthy self-concept. Respecting toddlers' preferences for familiar objects, foods, and people and providing opportunities for preschoolers to plan, carry out, and reflect on their own activities are essential ingredients that represent solid early childhood practice (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). As young children make choices, indicate preferences, problem solve, plan, and initiate, they are making sense of the world around them in a way that can ultimately produce feelings of competence, confidence, and empowerment.

The Uniqueness of Early Childhood

Because early childhood is recognized as a distinct and critical developmental period, it is important to identify some factors that are unique to the discussion of young children and self-determination. First, the life of a young child is closely intertwined with his or her family's quality of life. Families are the first and most important source of stability in a very young child's life and will likely be primarily responsible for making decisions for and about their own child. A high quality of life for the family will typically result in enhanced positive outcomes for the child. A family's pursuit of quality of life is (a) shaped by their personal values, (b) embedded in daily experiences, routines, and relationships, and (c) should change across the lifespan (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001b). Thus, families must be recognized as equal partners in all stages of the decision-making process during educational planning for their children with disabilities.

Second, since families are such a vital force in their child's life, it is essential to determine the value that families place on autonomy and

independence for their children. In order to ensure that families' priorities, values, and beliefs are respected and accurately reflected in educational planning, practitioners and families must work in partnership to determine the importance and relevance of self-determination in families' lives. There may be discrepancies between the underlying values that guide many educational practices and goals for children with disabilities in this country and the values embraced by culturally diverse families (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Kalyanpur, Harry, & Skrtic, 2000; Park, Turnbull, & Park, 2001; Turnbull, Blue-Banning, Turbiville & Park, 1999). Because many educational practices and outcomes are based on mainstream societal norms and assumptions, they are often not consistent with the values and beliefs embraced by people of culturally and linguistically diverse populations.

This disparity is particularly evident in relation to the topic of self-determination. Turnbull and Turnbull (1998) suggested that the concept of self-determination is grounded in the value system of middle- and upper-middle class Anglo-American professionals and families. Having control over one's life and making personal choices might not be considered a desired or welcomed goal for all family members, and may be even less significant for a family member with a disability (Harry, 1998; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001b; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2000). Harry (1998) also suggested that independence is not just defined as living away from home, even for typically developing siblings, and may not be an outcome that some families intentionally work toward. Self-determination, particularly in early childhood, is a personal and culturally determined value that is not necessarily considered important in the eyes of all families of children with disabilities.

The importance of family-professional partnerships in educational planning for young children with disabilities has been well documented in the literature and mandated by federal legislation. Determining families' values, priorities and beliefs is essential to educational planning. In order to get started, a solid family-professional partnership must be in place. There are many recommendations detailing how professionals can facilitate positive cross-cultural relationships with families (see, for example**,** Bevin-Brown, 2001; Dennis & Giangreco, 1996; Lynch & Hanson, 1998; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001a).

As discussed previously, because self-determination is personally and culturally-determined, it is important to identify with the family the level of importance, if any, that they place on self-determination in their lives. The Posture of Cultural Reciprocity (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999) is a strategy that brings together families and professionals to dialogue about specific cultural values, beliefs, and practices. Specific steps in this process might include (a) identifying values embedded in the concept of self-determination, (b) finding out whether family recognizes these assumptions, and, if not, what their view acknowledges, (c) recognizing and giving explicit respect to any differences in ideas about self-determination.

A final example of why the early years present a unique circumstance relates to the issue of communication. Very young children (and some individuals with disabilities) may not have highly developed or sophisticated communication strategies. Adults, therefore, often assume a challenging task of interpreting children's communicative attempts. Effective communication is dependent on the skills of both the sender and the receiver in a communicative interchange, so when one communication partner has limited ability to communicate clear messages, the interaction partner must try to discover the intent of the communication (Brown, Gothelf, Guess, & Lehr, 1998). This is certainly the case with young children, and even more of a challenge when the young child has a severe cognitive or language disability. Families, advocates, and practitioners are put in the position of making judgments about and interpreting the child's behavior for communicative intent. However, the meaning that is assigned to a child's behavior is influenced by their own personal preferences and experiences, prior knowledge and history of the child, and personal perceptions of what contributes to quality of life. These variables may put adults

in danger of suppressing, overlooking, or changing the child's true message (Brown et al., 1998).

The Limited Focus on Young Children with Disabilities

The topic of self-determination and young children with disabilities has not been widely discussed despite the ever-expanding knowledge base on self-determination in relation to older children and adults. As Brown and Cohen (1996) point out, skills and behaviors such as choice-making and initiative-taking, which are often associated with self-determination in older children, have only recently been addressed by programs serving young children with disabilities. Wehmeyer and Palmer (2000) suggest that while "There are valid societal and developmental reasons young children are not seen as "self-determined" (p. 466), this does not deny the importance of children with and without disabilities learning and developing the skills and attitudes that they will need to become self-determined individuals in the future. The limited but growing knowledge base on self-determination and young children with disabilities includes families, youngsters, and their home environments (Brotherson, Cook, & Weigel-Garrey, 2000; Cook, Brotherson, Weigel-Garrey, & Mize, 1996), the acquisition and development of self-determination in young children (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2000), and the relationship of certain practices and their influence on self-determination and young children (Brown & Cohen, 1996; Erwin & Brown, 2000).

While the knowledge base on self-determination and early childhood is only now beginning to expand, there are traditional areas of child development that have been studied that are relevant to discussions on self-determination. For example, *engagement*, which has been identified as a critical component related to self-determination, has received much attention within the past decade (Malmskog & McDonnell, 1999; McCormick, Noonan & Heck, 1998; McGee, Daly, Izeman, Mann & Risely, 1991; McWilliam & Bailey, 1992; McWilliam & Bailey, 1995). Engagement is generally known as the time that children interact with the environment, people, and materials in an active, developmentally and contextually appropriate way (Dunst, Mahoney & Buchan, 1996; McCormick et al., 1998; McWilliam & Bailey, 1992).

The importance of engagement has been recognized as an essential outcome for young children with and without disabilities (Odom & Bailey, 2000; Odom & McLean, 1996; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). For example, Greenspan and Wieder (1999) identify engagement as one of six core functional developmental components that can be used to help predict progress in intervention for young children with severe disabilities of relating and communicating. Selecting preferences, asserting independence, solving problems, making choices, and taking the initiative are all skills that can influence engagement in young children. Recent research suggests that children are more likely to engage with adults and activities when the adults were more responsive, non-directive, and child-centered (McCormick et al., 1998). Supporting children's active and meaningful engagement in the world is perhaps one of the most important tasks related to the development of self-determination.

Other key skills that can influence the development of self-determination, particularly for children in inclusive environments, include persistence and social competence (Brown & Cohen, 1996; Guralnick, 2000), and communication skills, including assistive technology and alternative communication strategies (Noonan & McCormick, 1993; Romski, Sevcik, & Forrest, 2000). These are just examples of the multiple and complex set of factors which support young children to be self-determined in the world in which they live.

The Dynamic Nature of Self-Determination

As our understanding of the concept of self-determination continues to evolve, so will we begin to recognize its richness and complexity. Self-determination is not a static characteristic. A child is not viewed as either self-determined or not self-determined. A teacher does not either fully promote self-determina-

tion or fully prohibit self-determination. Rather, self-determination is dynamic in nature. Because of the continual changes that occur throughout the day, opportunities for self-determination, as well as obstacles to self-determination, will necessarily change throughout the day (Erwin & Brown, 2000).

In an effort to better understand self-determination in early childhood settings, Brown and Erwin (1999) conducted a pilot study involving triads of children in two inclusive preschool settings. Each triad consisted of a child with significant disabilities, a child nominated by the teacher as "shy," and a child nominated by the teacher as "outgoing." Based on existing literature, a protocol was developed to record the children and teacher's behavior, the context for which self-determination was either fostered or deterred, and how this changed across time.

Video-taped observations during free play across a three-month period revealed that overall teachers used more directives than choices. Further, the children identified as "shy" exhibited less self-initiating behavior, were most compliant, and also received more directives from their teachers (versus choice opportunities) than their peers who were outgoing and their peers with disabilities.

Based on data emerging from this pilot investigation, Erwin and Brown (2000) described several interacting variables that contribute to engagement in self-determined behavior. First, *contextual variables* change continually throughout the varying daily routines, such as the numbers of adults and children in an environment, the setting, the types of activities and materials that are present, and instructional formats within educational settings (e.g., large group, small group, one-to-one). Each of these variables will affect the child's opportunities to engage in self-determined behavior. Secondly, *others' reactions* to a child's acts of self-determination also may either support self-determining behavior (e.g., "I see you want to stop coloring now; you put all your crayons back on the shelf where they belong") or attempt to prevent it (e.g., "It is not time to play with blocks; it is time to color with your friends"). Indeed, the adult's willingness to support such child-driven initiatives will likely change across the day as the context changes. And finally, many *child characteristics* will impact a child's ability to express self-determined behavior (e.g., communication skills, mobility skills), as well as affect others' expectations of self-determined behavior.

The complexity of promoting self-determination and the need for instruction to respond to dynamic contextual variables impacting the developing of self-determination underscores the need for an evaluation process sensitive to the changing environment and the unique priorities of young children.

Practical Applications for Use Across Early Childhood Settings

In order for practitioners and families to systematically facilitate self-determined behaviors in young children consistently across a variety of environments (e.g., home, school, child care center, community) and multiple routines (e.g., snack time in the classroom; mealtime at home), it is first necessary to assess opportunities for self-determination across natural environments. Assessing current practice can be instrumental in identifying key obstacles or facilitators of self-determination, and also for determining new opportunities for supporting self-determination.

Toward that end, a set of self-monitoring questions was designed to assist practitioners and families in assessing practices and to identify new opportunities for promoting self-determination in young children with and without disabilities during naturally occurring routines. The intent behind these questions is to provide a simple and efficient way to raise awareness about and reflect upon daily opportunities and obstacles for promoting self-determination in young children. This does not mean that self-determination is the sole priority when facilitating learning experiences or that every activity has to include an endless menu of choices for the child. Rather, the self-monitoring questions provide a unique opportunity to contextually examine multiple factors that can impact self-determination in early childhood settings (see Table 1).

Table 1. Questions to Support Self-Determination Across Early Childhood Routines (using pre-school routines as an example)

	Pre-School Routines				
Reflective Questions	**Arrival**	**Center time**	**Morning meeting**	**Music and dance**	**Snack time**
DOES CHILD…					
…communicate preferences?					
…request a break?					
…terminate an activity appropriately?					
…move about freely when he wants to?					
…demonstrate to others her skills, interests, and talents?					
…express in an appropriate way anger, frustration, protest?					
DOES ADULT…					
… seek to understand challenging behavior as communication?					
…provide breaks for child when he/she appears to need one?					
…allow child to complete activity at his or her own pace?					
…give opportunities for child to problem-solve?					
…give opportunities for child to move about freely when he/she wants to?					
…honor the family's culture, beliefs, and values?					
…give more directives than choices?					
…support child's attempts to do things in a different way than I had planned?					
Does the Environment…					
… provide an array of accessible materials from which a child can choose?					
…provide a rich variety of culturally diverse and developmentally appropriate literacy-based symbols (e.g., Braille, pictures, etc.)?					
…provide a variety of alternate spaces in which a child can choose to participate?					
…exhibit visual displays, projects, posters that reflect child's preferences and interests?					

Identifying Opportunities Across Natural Environments for Self-Determination

The questions posed in Table 1 address three distinct areas that contribute to the promotion and enhancement of self-determination, including (a) the child's current skills relevant to self-determination, (b) the practitioner's or family member's style and behavior, and (c) the immediate learning environment. The questions posed in Table 1 were designed to provide an adult with flexibility to apply them in a variety of settings and within various routines. The questions can be used in home environments (e.g., during dressing or play time routines), as well as at school (e.g., during center or story time), or in the community (e.g., at the playground or doctor's office).

Reasons for the presence or absence of opportunities to promote or enhance self-determination opportunities will likely vary across children and across routines. The questions were designed to enable practitioners and families to reflect upon an individual child**.** Ideally, to reflect the dynamic nature of self-determination**,** these questions should be answered specifically as they relate to the different components of the entire daily routine, whether the routine is at school, at home, or in the community.

As self-determination is contextually based, the questions allow reflection on a variety of specific contexts during the day. It may be, for example, that more opportunities exist for promoting or expressing self-determination during storytelling and dance activities as opposed to other routines during the day, such as naptime or in the bathroom. These questions can provide specific information about when or where both obstacles to and facilitators of self-determination are occurring and use this information as a guide for re-arranging, if desired, certain components of the environment and identifying additional target behaviors for children related to self-determination.

Suggestions to Analyze Opportunities for Self-Determination

Once the set of questions has been answered, practitioners and families will want to reflect upon their responses. The first set of questions focuses on a specific child and some of the skills associated with self-determination**.** If, for example, the child's expressive language skills are severely limited (e.g., nonsymbolic; use of disruptive behavior as a means of communication), supporting self-determination will be challenging. *However, it is precisely for this reason that it is critical that self-determination be identified as a priority***.** If the child does not possess a consistent or reliable form of communication to appropriately indicate what he wants or needs, the child's attempts at controlling his or her environment and expressing self-determination will likely go unnoticed. Or if the child has learned to communicate through inappropriate or disruptive behaviors, it is likely the behavior will become the focus of attention, rather than the communicative attempt of the behavior.

Further, these issues may occur at particular times of the day, and not at others. Contextually analyzing these situations across the day (e.g., through the use of functional behavior assessment strategies), provides important information for intervention. For example, it may be noted that a particular child has difficulty requesting a break or terminating an activity in an appropriate way during two specific daily routines, and not during others. The adult must then try to determine why this might be occurring at those times and not others. The goal would become twofold. First, the adult should teach the child to use a word, picture, sign or another mode for communicating her desire to terminate the activity (based upon child's communication skills) during those specific routines. Second, an analysis should be conducted to determine what specific challenges the child might have with the two routines, and make any necessary curriculum changes (e.g., make the task

easier; use a "buddy" to model the activity). Understanding why the appropriate communication form was not occurring at these times will inform the teaching intervention. The questions presented in Table 1 can assist practitioners along with family members in first identifying if the child has an appropriate and consistent way to initiate self-determined acts (e.g., terminate activities, communicate preferences). Once this information is gathered, practitioners can begin to teach children basic and necessary skills that will enable them to be more self-determined throughout the day.

The presence of motor disabilities may also impact the child's ability to promote or enhance self-determination. For example, if a child is not independently mobile and has no way to indicate that he would like to move to a different area of the room or a different activity, there will be many missed opportunities for promoting self-determination. Teaching this child an effective way to communicate to others the desire to move would be a high priority.

The second section of the questionnaire examines the practitioners' or the family member's behavior. It is often difficult to objectively assess one's own behavior, and these reflective questions are designed to prompt such objectivity. These questions are linked to core values about young children and their families (i.e., providing opportunities for children to problem solve, including family's contributions and input). While some practitioners may identify their practices as learner-driven and democratic, these questions prompt practitioners to examine closely whether their day-to-day practices are actually supporting or inhibiting opportunities for self-determination.

The contextual nature of promoting and expressing self-determination once again is evident in that the teachers' or family member's behavior may be different during some times of the day than others. It is important to stress that the goal of every interaction and activity is not necessarily to increase the opportunity for promoting self-determination. Indeed in some circumstances, the adult may purposely and thoughtfully attempt to prohibit self-determined behavior and reward compliance (e.g., crossing the street). However, a more informed and intentional decision can be made if one has objective data.

The final section of the questionnaire examines the overall learning environment. Remembering the dynamic nature of promoting or expressing self-determination, the adult must examine the learning environment within the context of the changing activities and expectations. For example, in many activities across the day it would be easy to support self-determination by "providing an array of accessible materials from which a child can choose," as noted in Table 1. This may be appropriate in the classroom environment during center time, morning meeting, art, and lunch. However, it may also be the case that one area of the room has been designated as a quiet, distraction-free area where some children participate in "listening to stories on tape" or "nap time." This may be an area where the teacher has purposely limited the materials accessible to children. At home, a parent may decide that their bedroom is "off-limits" to food and play materials, but arrange other areas of home that have a greater selection of activities and materials.

This set of questions offers a practical and efficient way of identifying opportunities and obstacles associated with promoting and enhancing self-determination in young children. Practitioners and families are prompted to reflect upon critical questions which assist them in: (a) determining a specific child's opportunities for and skills related to expressing self-determination, (b) assessing their own practices, and (c) exploring the context and environment where young children with and without disabilities generally learn.

CONCLUSION

Acquiring the skills and behaviors associated with self-determination is an important priority for young children with and without disabilities because the skills acquired are ones that provide a foundation for the child's entire life span. These skills play an essential

part in creating a high quality of life for a child as well as consistent opportunities to interact with the world in an active, meaningful and highly personalized way. The role of the practitioner, in partnership with the family, is crucial to guide young children to achieve this high quality of life that is built on everyday choices, preferences, and priorities determined by the children themselves. The complex dynamic and contextual nature of expressing self-determination underscores the need for an evaluation process sensitive to the changing environment and the unique priorities of young children**.**

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