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SUPPORTED DECISION MAKING AND TRANSITION SERVICES





“What are you going to do after High School?”

Every year, high school students are asked this question. For most students, it’s a chance to think about and look forward to college applications, job internships, adulthood, and independence. But for some students with disabilities, a question like this can be frustrating, even frightening and remind them of how hard it can be to identify services and funding streams, all while wondering whether they can be independent.¹

Unfortunately, parents of students with disabilities are often told to get guardianship or conservatorship by people and professionals they trust.² In some cases guardianship or conservatorship can be a good thing but in most cases guardianship and conservatorship aren’t the only answer. In fact, if students with disabilities can make decisions, either independently or when they get help, guardianship and conservatorship can have a “significant negative impact on their physical and mental health.” There are other options that can help people with disabilities make their own decisions and lead their best, most independent lives.³

In this brochure, we’ll tell you about an option called Supported Decision Making (SDM) that can help students with disabilities make their own decisions, live as independently as they can, and avoid unnecessary guardianships and conservatorships. We’ll also show you ways you can request and receive SDM supports and services through Special Education Transition Services.

Supported Decision Making: What is It?

Supported Decision Making (SDM) is getting help when you need it, from people you choose, so you can make your own decisions⁴. That's how we all make decisions.

EVERYONE.

Think about what you do when you have to make a tough choice, or a decision about something you don't know a lot about, or just want to "talk it out." You may ask a friend for advice or a professional for information, or you may have "go-to" people you talk to about specific things. They help you "think through" the issues and discuss the "pros and cons" of your choices. That way, you can understand your options and you choose the one that's best for you. When you do that, you're using SDM. People give you support, so you can decide. That's it. People with disabilities use SDM, too!



Supported Decision Making can Help Students with Disabilities Have Better Adult Lives

When people use SDM, they make their own decisions and can have more control over their lives – more self-determination⁵. That’s important because years and years of studies show that when people with disabilities have more self-determination, they have better lives: they are more likely to be independent, employed, and safer⁶. For example, a recent study found that young adults with disabilities who used SDM were more independent and self-confident, got better at making decisions, and made better decisions⁷.

It’s the same for students with disabilities: those who have more self-determination are more likely to do better in school and more likely to live independently and work after they leave school⁸. That’s why researchers and scholars have called self-determination “the ultimate goal” of Special Education programs⁹ and have said that schools should help students learn to make their own decisions and advocate for themselves.¹⁰

So, SDM and Special Education programs should go together, to help students with disabilities “reap the benefits” of self-determination as adults, including “independence, employment, and community integration.”¹¹

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Transition Services: What Are They?

Transition Services help students receiving Special Education prepare for life after high school. The student's Planning and Placement Team (PPT) must include a statement of their transition service needs in their Individualized Education Program (IEP) that will be in effect when the student turns 14 (or earlier if the PPT determines it is appropriate). The statement must include goals that:

- Are based on the student's needs and consider their strengths, preferences and interests;
- Help the student move from school to post-school life, including their future education, training, employment, independent living skills, and community participation; and
- Include education and other supports like community experiences, linking with adult services, and helping the student develop adult living objectives and daily living skills.¹²

In other words, Transition Services should help students identify the goals they need to lead their most independent and productive lives and the supports they need to reach them. Unfortunately, teachers and school personnel often recommend that parents get guardianship or conservatorship during this time.¹³ This can be harmful because in most guardianships and conservatorships, the Court gives the guardian or conservator the power to make all health, personal, and financial decisions for the person —which severely limits or removes their self-determination.¹⁴

To avoid unnecessary guardianships and conservatorships, schools, students, and parents should work together to develop Transition Services that help students prepare for and achieve “independent living,” “adult living objectives,” and “adult daily living skills.”

Think about it: What's more important for “independent living” than being able to choose where and how you live? What's a more important “adult daily living skill” than decision-making? What's a more important “adult living objective” than managing your life? In other words, decision-making and self-determination are the key to successful Transition Services.¹⁵ That's why students with disabilities and schools should include SDM as a part of their Transition Services from the very beginning.

In June of 2023, Connecticut passed a new law saying that schools must give students and their parents information about SDM. The law says that by July 2024, the Department of Education must develop a guide for students receiving Special Education who are 14 or older and their parents. Among other things, the guide must include information about “alternatives to guardianship and conservatorship, including Supported Decision Making.”¹⁶

We think this law is a great start and will help students and their parents learn about and use SDM. However, we still recommend that you ask your school about SDM and request SDM services and supports. Here are some ways you can do that.



In June of 2023, Connecticut passed a new law saying that schools must give students and their parents information about SDM.

Work with the Planning and Placement Team, Request Evaluations, Use “I” Statements

In our brochure, on SDM and Special Education Programs, we discuss ways students and parents can request SDM services from their schools. We recommend that you review that brochure and follow those steps – including requesting evaluations, using the Student-Led IEP, and creating “I” Statement IEP goals.

In particular, “I” Statement goals can help students build self-determination and SDM skills while they develop their Transition goals.

HERE ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF TRANSITION “I” STATEMENTS:

POSTSECONDARY OUTCOME GOAL FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING

Upon exiting high school, I (name of the student) will use Supported Decision Making to live more independently.

ANNUAL GOAL FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING

With the support of my PPT, I (name of student) will decide on strategies and supports to assist me with daily living skills, as assessed by success in completing the Independent Living Skills Checklist.

POSSIBLE OBJECTIVE

With the support of my PPT, I, (name of the student) will identify an agency or program that will help me live independently, as evidenced by 100% completion of the independent Living Skills Checklist by the end of the year.

POSSIBLE OBJECTIVE

With support from my school counselor and/or transition coordinator, I, (name of the student), will identify jobs I am interested in and locate possible employment, as indicated by the 100% completion of the Skills interest survey by the 2nd Semester.

POSSIBLE OBJECTIVE

During the school year, I, (name of the student) will work with my teacher to learn how to develop a budget and manage money, as indicated by 100% completion of the Money Management Checklist by the end of the year.

SAMPLE GOAL

With support from the school nurse, I, (name of student) will identify needs and/or learn how to access support for personal hygiene, Activities of Daily Living (ADLs) and Health as assessed by completion of the health plan or Personal Health Maintenance Checklist.

“I” Statement goals like these make students take action and work with supporters to choose and use their Transition Services. In that way, they’ll practice SDM and increase their self-determination while they create their Transition goals and identify the supports they need to reach them.



Take the Lead

Students should take the lead in discussing their “strengths, preferences, and interests,” with their PPT, including what they are interested in doing after high school. That will help them develop Transition goals and supports that match their interests. Students should also work with their teams to monitor their progress and adjust their goals and supports as needed.

SDM is a key part of this process. Parents, teachers, and educational professionals should encourage students to talk about their abilities and needs. The PPT members should also give students information about programs, supports, and services that can help them reach their goals. Students can then use this support to choose Transition goals and services that match their “strengths, preferences, and interests.”

In other words, the team supports the student, and the student uses that support to make decisions — that’s the “definition of Supported Decision Making.”¹⁷ Using SDM this way can also help students be more successful in and outside of school. Research shows that students who develop their own Transition goals and plans to meet them, with support from the members of their PPT are more likely to meet or exceed their goals and their teachers’ expectations.¹⁸

Work with a Supported Decision Making Team

Students should identify and work with a network of people, professionals, and agencies to help them develop Transition goals and choose the supports and partners they need to reach them. Agencies and organizations that may be helpful include:

- The Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS), the Vocational Rehabilitation program of the Department of Aging and Disability Services. This program provides information and services to help people with disabilities prepare for find work. They also help to support the person at their job. You can learn more about BRS at: www.portal.ct.gov/rehabilitationservices/services-we-offer?language=en_US



- Independent Living Centers. These programs provide, peer support, education, advocacy, training, counseling, and other services to help people with disabilities live as independently as possible. You can find your local Center at: www.ctsilc.org/centers-for-independent-living.
- Community Work Incentive Coordinators. This program provides information, supports and services to help people with disabilities get and keep jobs while also keeping their Medicaid, SSI, SSDI, and other public benefits. You can learn more at: www.portal.ct.gov/AgingandDisability/Content-Pages/Programs/Benefits-Counseling
- Agencies that provide information and other services to people with disabilities, including the Council on Developmental Disabilities (www.portal.ct.gov/ctcdd) the University of Connecticut Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, Education, Research, and Service (www.uconnuccdd.org) and Disability Rights Connecticut (www.disrightsct.org).

Students should work with these and other resources to identify programs and opportunities that will help them develop education, employment, and independent living skills. Then, they should invite the people and professionals they work with to be a part of their PPT.

At the PPT meeting, each member should provide the student and team with information about the specific supports it provides. Then, using this information and other support from the PPT, the student should choose transition goals and the supports they need to reach them.¹⁹ Research shows that when students, agencies, and PPT members collaborate in this way, students are more likely to meet their goals.²⁰

Create a Supported Decision Making Agreement

Finally, students should create educational SDM Agreements when they turn 18 to identify the people, professionals, and agencies that they want to work with to develop their Transition goals and supports.

Schools may tell parents that after their child turns 18, they cannot attend PPT meetings unless they get guardianship or conservatorship. **THAT IS NOT TRUE.**

Students receiving Special Education do gain the legal right to make their own decisions when they turn 18 – the same way everyone else does. However, they can still invite anyone they want to come to their PPT meetings and support them. Therefore, when students turn 18, they can create SDM Agreements to tell their school who they want to come to their meetings, see their records, and help them develop their goals and supports.

When District of Columbia Public School (DCPS) students turn 18, they are given the chance to sign a SDM Agreement. You can review DCPS' Agreement form here: https://supporteddecisionmaking.org/resource_library/sdm-model-agreements/. DCPS' Agreement lets students identify the people who “make up their educational support network,” the areas where they want support, and the support they want. The student and supporters then sign the plan and work together to develop the student's Transition goals and supports, with the student being the final decision-maker.²¹

You can create an educational SDM Agreement by adapting DCPS's form or creating your own form and presenting it to the PPT. This will ensure that students have people at their PPT meetings who will help them use SDM to understand the process, identify options, and choose goals and supports that match their “strengths, preferences, aid interests.”

SDM AGREEMENT SAMPLE

ACLU/QUALITY TRUST SAMPLE SUPPORTED DECISION-MAKING AGREEMENT

Supported Decision-Making Agreement

This agreement must be read out loud or otherwise communicated to all parties to the agreement in the presence of a notary. The form of communication shall be appropriate to the needs and preferences of the person with a disability.

My name is: _____.

Today's date is: _____

I want to have people I trust help me make decisions. The people who will help me are called **supporters**. I can say what kind of help my supporters will give me. If I want supporters to help me make choices about money, I will sign a different agreement, called "Supported Decision-Making Agreement for Finances."

Supporters

My supporter(s) are:

Supporter #1

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone Number: _____

Email address: _____

I want this person to help me with:

(check as many boxes as you want)

- Making choices about food, clothing, and where I live
- Making choices about my health
- Making choices about how I spend my time
- Making choices about where I work



We Can Help!

While some people may need guardians or conservators, we think the National Guardianship Association's position makes sense: you should at least try SDM.

Wherever you are on your SDM journey, whether you're just gathering information or you're ready to write a plan, we can answer your questions or connect you with people and organizations that may be able to help. Feel free to contact us at: info@ctsilc.org or visit ctsilc.org

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This brochure was adapted, with permission, from material published by the Missouri Developmental Disabilities Council. www.moddc.org

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The preparation of this booklet was financed under an agreement with the Connecticut Council on Developmental Disabilities.



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