



Self-Determination & Dignity of Risk

Overview

Self-determination is the right all people have to make personal decisions, set their own goals, and decide how to work towards their goals.⁹ This is a right people with developmental disabilities have but they are not always treated this way. The Developmental Disabilities Act (2000) states that disability does not diminish the right to live independently, and people with developmental disabilities should have access to services, supports, and assistance that promote self-determination.⁷

Along with the right to self-determination, there is another concept called dignity of risk. **Dignity of risk** means being able to make choices that could have negative consequences and getting to experience those consequences.⁶ These negative consequences include: getting physically injured, getting lost trying to navigate public transportation, getting your heart broken at the end of a romantic relationship, and so many other human experiences. It is natural to want to protect people we care about; however, taking away a person's opportunity to experience and learn from their choices can limit their potential for independence. Therefore, it is important to respect an individual's right to self-determination as well as their dignity of risk.

Barriers

Self-determination and dignity of risk play an important part in living an independent life. This impacts people with disabilities on personal and community levels. These rights play a role in all areas of their lives such as healthcare, education, and employment.² Research shows that people

with greater self-determination report a higher quality of life and more positive independent living and employment outcomes.⁴

Identifying barriers is one step in beginning to promote self-determination. A common barrier that limits self-determination and dignity of risk is when others make decisions for people with disabilities because of their desire to protect them. This desire to protect is well-intentioned but often stems from the misconception that people with disabilities do not have the ability or skills to make their own decisions.⁵ One individual expressed that people make assumptions about what he can and cannot do before getting to know him, and in addition to others' attitude his own self-doubt can also be a barrier.⁴ Other barriers include communication barriers and limiting environments, such as lack of public transportation.⁴

Ways to Promote Self-Determination

The same way that there are multiple barriers to self-determination, there are also many ways to promote self-determination. It is essential to recognize that people with disabilities should be central in the process of making decisions that will affect their lives. They have the right to self-determination in their personal lives, regardless of guardianship status, and should also be included in all levels of decision-making.² This includes decisions with societal impacts, such as creating and revising policies, procedures, and.² By involving people with disabilities in this process, we can work to eliminate limiting environments.

One way to promote self-determination in people with developmental disabilities is to use

person-centered planning. This planning approach puts the individual at the center of decision-making and acknowledges that they are the expert of their.⁸ Person-centered planning also identifies the individual's strengths, goals, needs, as well as their preferences and addresses cultural considerations.¹ Its strengths-based approach can help reduce self-doubt and develop a positive self-awareness and attitude, which are important for being self-determined.⁴ Using person-centered planning can help to avoid making decisions for people with developmental disabilities out of desire to protect them and helps fight the misconception that they do not have the skills to make decisions.

Another way to promote self-determination is being aware of communication barriers and addressing them. Depending on the communication barrier, different supports should be considered. This can include using everyday language, pictures and symbols, adaptive communication devices or other assistive technology.^{2,3} For people to work towards and achieve their goals, they need to be able to express what their goals are. People with developmental disabilities can communicate their wants and needs and listening to them is part of making sure their right to self-determination is not limited.

Resources

For more information on person-centered planning and how to use it, you can visit [Utah Parent Center](#) where you can find a resource book and six-step process.

You can also find resources from the [National Gateway to Self-Determination](#) to learn more about self-determination and can find a practice guide with recommendations.

Contributors

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