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Supported Decision-Making

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Introduction

When we think of students with more significant disabilities, we often think of what others can do for them including decision-making. Despite educators' efforts to increase skills of independence and resiliency, there is still a need to recognize students' autonomy in making decisions concerning their independence, community interactions, and agency partnerships. A growing movement, promoted both nationally and internationally, aims to include people with significant disabilities in making their own decisions. Supported Decision-Making endeavors to provide people with disabilities with enough support to make independent decisions based on their interests, needs, and desires.

What is Supported Decision-Making?

Supported Decision-Making (SDM) "empowers individuals with cognitive challenges by ensuring that they are the ultimate decision-maker but are provided...the assistance they need to make decisions for themselves" (Kohn, Blumenthal & Campbell, 2013, 1111). SDM initially began as an alternative to guardianship as part of the disability rights movement in Canada during the 1990s. It is now recognized as an inclusive practice that honors the person by supporting their desires and outcomes for independence. Several states across the United States recognize SDM legislatively. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) noted in 2006 that Supported Decision-Making as a method allows people with disabilities to be directly involved in determining their own life-altering decisions (United Nations, 2006).

While utilized broadly across many fields including the courts, psychology, and health fields and as an alternative to guardianships, at its core it is a philosophy of inclusion and an extension of self-determination (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Lassmann & Forber-Pratt, 2017). The intent of SDM is to honor the person by including them in the decision-making process and respecting their voice. SDM builds on disability-centered practices such as person-centered planning and self-determination, yet it is focused more specifically on identifying and implementing supports needed for decision-making (Shogren et al., 2017). Agreements

outlining the support are either formal or informal arrangements between the person with the disability and the supports they choose. Supports could include casual conversations with friends, meetings with a designated supporter, or a personal board of advisors (Dinerstein, 2012).

Virginia even has its own famous case involving SDM. In 2013, Jenny Hatch, then a resident of Newport News, successfully contested a guardianship request that would have removed her rights to vote, live where she wanted, and hold the job she desired. Jenny's attorneys successfully argued she was perfectly capable of making her own decisions provided she had support. Hatch is now a disability rights champion, and her story is the basis of the Jenny Hatch Justice Project (Welcome to the Jenny Hatch Justice Project, 2014).

What are the benefits of Supported Decision-Making?

While there is not a great deal of empirical evidence supporting Supported Decision-Making (Shogren et al., 2017), there are certainly benefits inherent anytime a person engages in this type of process. The process itself provides flexibility and a continuum of supports with the level of need dictating the amount of support. The process also builds partnerships between and among the person with the disability and those who support them. None of us make all of our decisions on our own. We consult experts, conduct research, and mull the pros and cons of the decision. SDM facilitates this type of collaboration by identifying the needed supports and collaborators.

Perhaps most importantly, when people are given the opportunity for optimal participation in their own planning the potential exists for greater self-determination and autonomy (Shogren et al., 2017). With greater self-determination and autonomy the participant reaps a greater likelihood of a multitude of benefits including:

- a higher quality of life
- positive postsecondary outcomes
- higher wages
- greater financial independence
- greater advances in their employment
- post-high school success in employment and independent living (Test et al., 2009; Wehmeyer and Palmer, 2003)

What can educators do to support SDM?

The realities of SDM are frequently first addressed when school-aged students reach the age of majority. Virginia law presumes that all students are capable of making their own decision upon reaching the age of 18 years of age. Unless otherwise determined, these adult students assume the rights and responsibilities previously held by their parents, family members, or guardian. Although IEP teams are required to inform students and their families of this transfer of rights, discussions seldom occur about how to prepare students to assume the responsibility to make educational decisions. Too often, schools do not adequately prepare students to make a multitude of life decisions. This lack of preparation, combined with low

expectations from families, often leads to assumptions the individual is not capable of assuming or sharing in the decision-making process. Educators should teach and encourage all students to use their voice in making decisions. This is particularly true for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, as they are most likely to have guardians appointed for them. The simple suggestions listed below are designed to help classroom teachers teach Supported Decision-Making.

1. Present students with choices and honor their decisions. This can begin with simple decisions regarding preferred foods and activities.

2. Begin encouraging the child's meaningful participation in their IEP meetings as soon as possible. This can and should begin in early elementary school.

3. Teach children to recognize the difference between "personal choice" and "best interest". Ask students to distinguish between their preference and the healthier choice.

4. Teach children how to problem solve. Use a simple model and make sure you practice and model the process often.

5. Encourage both interdependence and the greatest level of independence. Too often, we view competency for decision-making as an absolute. In other words, a person is or is not capable of making decisions for themselves. Supported Decision-Making supplements the independent skills of an individual with the supports and advice of others.

Leaders in special education must advocate for changes that will improve the lives of the children. Disability rights education is critical to the future of students with disabilities. Follow the four steps listed below to increase your Supported Decision-Making expertise and your ability to help families and students make informed decisions about this issue.

1. Share Virginia Intercommunity Transition Council's **Supported Decision Making Fact Sheet**. This publication includes (a) questions to consider when identifying your child's ability to make decisions and manage key areas of their life; (b) descriptions of some options within the spectrum of decision-making; and (c) resources for additional information.

2. Review Maine's **Supported Decision-Making Guide for People with Disabilities and Their Supporters** to learn about this state's efforts to help people with disabilities make their own decisions and consequently support alternatives to traditional guardianship options.

3. Build your professional knowledge regarding *current* educational research in this area by reading **Refining the Supported Decision-Making Inventory** (Shogren et al, 2020).

4. Stay abreast of Virginia's legislative shared decision-making efforts. Visit **Virginia's Legislative Information System** to review proposed bills and track progress toward these efforts.

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