

Supported Decision-Making

Do you always make decisions on your own? Or do you consult with others to help you review all the information and seek out experts for advice? Often we need support in making complex decisions. Some, including people with disabilities, need more support but still want to be as involved as possible. Supported Decision-Making or SDM aims to provide people with disabilities with enough support to make decisions based on their interests, needs, and desires.

Why is Supported Decision-Making Important?

Frequently, families of children with more significant disabilities only hear about what their children can't do. However, when children reach the Age of Majority (18 years old), they are legally responsible for making all their own decisions. Some families hear about guardianship and think this is the best way to protect their children. Yet, while guardianship might be a good fit for some families, it also limits what people can do and is very difficult to reverse. SDM becomes an important process in providing support for people with disabilities without taking away their voice and independence.

Decision-Making Spectrum

There is a spectrum of options when it comes to decision-making. At one end of the spectrum, a person makes their own decisions, and at the other end, someone else makes decisions for a person. Let's look at the different options for decision-making.

Autonomous Decision-Making

A person does their own research and makes autonomous decisions. They might ask questions or seek advice, but they make their decisions independently.

Supporting Decision-Making

A person needs help to get started with the decision-making process. They might request suggestions of where to find information or who to speak to for advice on a topic. They generally understand the decision-making process, have learned some skills to enhance their decision-making, and can work through the process with minimal support.

Supported Decision-Making

A person needs more assistance to make a decision. They may need someone who can research their options and provide them with recommendations. Supported Decision-Making could also involve alternatives to guardianship.

Substitute Decision-Making

Guardianships and conservatorships are examples of substitute decision-making. Someone is appointed to make financial, medical, personal, and other important decisions once a person has been determined to be incompetent.

Tips for Utilizing Supported Decision-Making

Uncover the Person's Strengths, Interests, and Desires

It is difficult to know how to support someone's decision making if you don't know who they are or what they want! Tools to uncover strengths and interests include surveys, interviews, person-centered planning, and plain, old-fashioned listening. Remember if words and behavior are in conflict, listen to the behavior!

Teach Decision-Making Skills across the Life Span

To prepare for more complicated decisions, teach and help the person practice decision-making throughout their life span.

Use Relationship Mapping

Identify who is important to the person through a process called relationship mapping. This helps to determine who supports the person already, and who might be able to further support them with decision-making. Categories could include family, friends, paid support, and others such as school connections, church, and neighbors.

Research Alternatives to Guardianship

There are various alternative to guardianship. Identify the support that the person with a disability needs to determine the best option to assist in SDM.

- Medical: Advanced Directives, Living Will, Medical Directive, Power of Attorney
- Durable Power of Attorney for financial decisions
- Authorized representative payee
- Limited or joint bank accounts
- Trust funds or Special Needs Trusts
- Able Now accounts

Conclusion

SDM ensures that people with disabilities who need assistance with decision-making can be meaningfully involved in governing their lives. Successful Supported Decision-Making requires communication among and between individuals needing help and those who support them. This recommendation, along with the outlined tips, provides guidance in supporting those with barriers to decision-making while allowing for autonomy and independence to the greatest extent possible.