

SELF-DETERMINATION

I've been asked, "What is Self-Determination"? Self-Determination means many things to many people. There are as many explanations as there are people. Self-Determination is for everyone, no matter who you are; whether you have a disability or not. It is quite simply, the freedom to live free.

Self-Determination is all about governing your own life - to live where you want to live; spend time with whoever you choose to befriend or socialize with; to join clubs, associations and groups that you believe in or are interested in. Self-Determination is the freedom to go anywhere when you want to go; the freedom to be in the community and be a fully-respected member of that community. It may be as simple as wearing what you want to wear or eating what you want to eat – or not eating what you don't want to eat! Self-Determination can also mean saying, "no" to something that you don't want! Self-Determination is freedom to work where and in what field or area you want to – and working towards that goal whether through self-employment and/or establishing a micro-business or setting up a plan to continue your education towards a goal – or with accommodations and adaptations to make a dream or desire come true.

Self-Determination is the recognition that everyone has value and talents and interests that make up who a person is as an individual. Everyone contributes to their community in some way, shape or form. Perhaps Self-Determination in its most basic form implies that we are all indeed "connected". I like that. We need to appreciate each other more! I believe that Self-Determination requires us to answer the question, "What is the Human Spirit?" , and celebrate the answer that comes back to us.

Sometimes it is easiest to explain a "new process" by example and there are many wonderful success stories to be found and read. Being self-determined means just that....acting on your own; being your own advocate to express who you are as a person and what you want to do with your life (and who you want in your life or not) – and even this can be ever-changing.

If a young child develops an interest in cooking, art, music (and the list goes on and on), parents and the school district usually embrace such an interest or talent or a "leaning towards"....and build upon this, offering up opportunities for a child to do well and continue on in further exploration. The word here is "opportunity". Along with opportunity, is offering the tools necessary to help a child progress in one or many areas of interest, i.e. to grow and expand upon their knowledge, confidence and self-esteem.

For those with disabilities, the IEP (Individual Education Plan) or PCP (Person-Centered Planning) is an important tool of Self-Determination, which can create a "path" to be followed in helping a child or adult do what they really want to do, as they express their likes/dislikes, interests, dreams and goals. Nothing is as unpleasant as others telling someone how to think and how to live. There is a lack of motivation and it is counter-productive and "miserable" when others decide for you, what you should like or want. Remember, that we're all unique individuals!

As a parent of a child that is severely, multiply-impaired, I may think or want my child to live with me in my home until I die – but I must continually think about what is in his best interest – which is to thoughtfully consider what HE wants and give him the tools and a means to express that all the time, and continually present him with options and opportunities to try new things. I acknowledge and support my child's right to self-determination. It's not about me; it's about him.

Self-Determination means hope where perhaps none existed before, along with the realization of dreams come true. We value and help each other to achieve what was once thought unattainable. Self-Determination is the creation of possibilities and opportunities happening, and bringing those into our circle that have helped us and are joyful in our accomplishments.

- Mary

"I am a Parent/advocate (51) of 3 children (2 adults) with disabilities who lives in southeastern Michigan. I've been advocating in some form or another and doing IEP's for over 20 years. My youngest son is severely, multiply-disabled and from whom I've learned the most. I love making contact with others to discuss innovative ideas; the entire creative process, and thinking "outside-the-box". I now serve those with disabilities within and outside my community as our local Regional Interagency Consumer Committee's Public Policy Coordinator. I am a member of our ISD's Parent Advisory Committee. I support and am a participant of our county's first independent parent support group for parents of children with disabilities. In other words...I'm just a mom who really cares!" Mary