

# DADD Express

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## Teachers' Corner

### Supported Decision-Making as an Everyday Classroom Practice



Charles B. Walters, PhD

*Center for Transition and Career Innovation at the University of Maryland College Park*

When students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) exit high school, there are many complexities for them to navigate alongside their families and caregivers. One such complexity is how they will make important decisions about their life. Such decisions range from those made on a daily basis like who they will spend time with to those made less frequently like where they will live or what they will do for work.

Historically, many families and supporters of people with IDD have been encouraged to rely on mechanisms like guardianship that seek to limit risk and harm in their lives. Guardianship, also known as conservatorship in some states, refers to a formal court process for appointing a person to make some or all decisions on behalf of a person that has been deemed "incapacitated" (Blanck & Martinis, 2015). Not only is there little evidence to suggest guardianship keeps adults with disabilities safer, such arrangements are highly restrictive and a poor fit for the actual support needs and preferences of many people at their age (Blanck & Martinis, 2015; Martinis et al., 2024).

#### Supported Decision-Making

Increasingly, people are turning to less restrictive ways of navigating the complexities of adult life, like supported decision-making (SDM). SDM "refers to an arrangement between two or more persons where one person agrees to receive varying kinds of assistance to make decisions from one or more supporters" (Institute on Community Inclusion, n.d.). For many adults with IDD, SDM provides a way of ensuring they have the support they need to navigate the complexities of their lives without removing their right to make important decisions. Education

professionals at every level can help by ensuring that the learning environments they create for students reflect the ideals of SDM. To do so, it may be helpful to reflect on how we think of independence for the students we serve.

In education we are often focused on whether a student is able to complete a task on their own. For instance, does a student tie their shoes independently? Such assessments can be helpful when applied to discrete, age appropriate tasks. The answer to the question is a simple "yes" or "no," and our goal as educators is often to work towards a day when such an assessment yields a consistent "yes." When applied to people or complex situations, however, such assessments are often problematic. Consider, for instance, the following questions about a student's independence:

- Can they make decisions about personal safety independently?
- Are they independent?
- Will they be an independent adult?

Judgements about the degree to which a student makes independent safety decisions, is independent, or will be independent often rely on subjective determinations rather than measurable observations. These claims often say more about the expectations of the person making them than anything else.

Rather than focus on a false binary of independence, there are ways of thinking about our practice with students that can help create environments where everyone can thrive. All educators can:

- presume competence rather than set up conditions for students to prove it,
- value interdependence as an aim that fits most people far better than ideals about one's independence,
- maintain high expectations for all students, and
- celebrate risk and failure as necessary conditions for growth.

By reframing our perspective of what independence may look like for students, we can incorporate practical routines in our classrooms and schools that challenge common attitudinal barriers and affirm student voices.

#### What Supported Decision-Making Looks Like in Classrooms

While SDM is a term that typically refers to the support one obtains to make and communicate adult decisions, it is a term

with broad applications across the lifespan for students with IDD. In my research, I've learned that many educators feel under prepared, under trained, and at risk for "getting it wrong" when it comes to helping students with IDD and their families to navigate using SDM (Plotner & Walters, 2021; Walters et al., 2022; Walters et al., 2023). Fortunately, in my research, I've also learned a lot about what we can do in education to affirm

SDM as a practice (Walters et al., 2024; Walters et al., 2025; Walters & Plotner, 2023).

Making decisions with support is something that all people can do. Educators can be an important part of providing foundational opportunities for students to learn and practice making decisions at any age. Table 1 outlines some education practices, ways of understanding them, and suggestions for putting them into action.

**Table 1. Supported Decision-Making Education Practices**

Practice	Description	Action Steps
Give choices	Building in frequent opportunities for both structured choices and free choices provides students with an environment where they can learn to choose. When students are given meaningful opportunities to choose in the classroom, it shows in both their interest and their task completion (Reutebuch et al., 2015; Tounsi et al., 2022). When experts around the country on SDM were asked how educators could prevent the use of undue and overbroad guardianship, one of the most agreed upon recommendations was to give students opportunities to make choices from the earliest possible ages (Walters & Plotner, 2023).	Build in student choice wherever possible and use prompts to highlight those choices. For instance: "Do you want to read with a partner or use the tablet?" "What would you like to read about?"
Create room to express and explain preferences	Part of creating an environment that supports student choice is creating an environment where students can explore the preferences that inform their choices. When students express and explain their preferences, it helps them build self-awareness (Shogren & Wehmeyer, 2020).	Embed simple reflection prompts such as "I chose this because..." into daily instruction to empower students to recognize their own preferences and their ability to affect change around them.
Support students to identify and use sources of support	Identifying and tapping into trusted people when making decisions is a skill that students can and should be explicitly taught. A fundamental aspect of being self-determined is actively directing one's support to help them achieve goals, rather than passively receiving help (Shogren et al., 2015).	Provide formal and informal opportunities for students to identify available supports (such as peers, staff, or technology), choose when to access them, and articulate their own support needs (Flanagan & Bumble, 2022).
Reflect on decisions together	When students take time to reflect on what worked, what didn't, and what they might do differently in their decision-making, they're rebuilding self-awareness and self-confidence. Facilitating brief, collaborative reflections after academic or social choices can help students understand the connection between their actions and outcomes, reinforcing that their decisions matter and can be adjusted over time to support their goals (Burke et al., 2019).	Provide students with a place to reflect on decisions and help them to normalize and understand that risk and failure are simply aspects of pursuing a life that reflects their preferences, interests, and goals (Bumble et al., 2022).
Provide opportunities for setting and evaluating goals	Setting goals and evaluating progress towards those goals are skills that every educator can teach and provide frequent opportunities to practice. When students learn to set personal goals, plan actions, and evaluate their progress, they show measurable gains in self-determination, academic achievement, and post-school readiness (Burke et al., 2019; Raley et al., 2020; Shogren et al., 2015).	Integrate goal-setting routines into everyday instruction by using simple formats such as "My goal is...," "One step I will take today is...," and "What I will try next is...". As you do, support students to regularly monitor their progress and adjust their plans as part of classroom practice. Packages such as the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) can help provide a more explicit, research-backed framework for supporting students in this way.

## In Closing

Many resources have been created to help professionals understand the complex legal, practical, and ethical issues related to supporting the decision-making of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) as they age. If you are new to these topics, some excellent primer resources on supported decision-making (SDM) and alternatives to guardianship have been gathered by the Guardianship Alternatives and Transfer-of-Rights (GATOR) project (<https://gator.communityinclusion.org/>) and the Center on Youth Voice, Youth Choice (<https://youth-voice.org/>). You don't need to be an expert on this topic to meaningfully support student self-direction, choice, and autonomy.

When educators provide students with opportunities to make choices, express their preferences, seek and direct support, reflect on their decisions, and set meaningful goals, they are actively helping to create environments that foster student autonomy and dignity. These practices do not require a new curriculum or specialized credentials; they require a shift toward honoring student voice, embracing interdependence, and viewing mistakes as part of learning rather than something to be avoided. By integrating SDM into daily routines, teachers can play a critical role in disrupting long-standing assumptions about disability and independence and in nurturing students' confidence to lead their own lives. ■

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