

Decide, Act, Believe: Teaching Self-Determination Skills

By Kaitlyn Millen, Carrie Lou Bloom, and Karrie A. Shogren

Some of the most critical soft skills (i.e., nontechnical, interpersonal skills that impact personal performance in an environment such as school or the workplace) that students must acquire as they mature are the skills to act or cause things to happen in their lives. Providing instruction to increase these skills—all part of self-determination—has been found to predict better in-school and post-school outcomes (Mazzotti et al., 2016). When students have opportunities and supports to “decide, act, and believe”—as we define the abilities that lead to self-determined action—they can act as causal agents and work toward achieving outcomes they value (Shogren et al., 2015; see Figure 1).

Self-determination enables students to identify goals and then act to realize those goals based on their own abilities and preferences. Self-determination becomes critical as students approach transition to adult life. As students prepare for their postsecondary program or the workplace, how they initiate and adjust behaviors becomes critical.

In Class: Instruction and Assessment

Skills can be targeted and addressed in the classroom through The Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction developed by Shogren et al. (2019) at the Kansas University Center on Developmental Disabilities. This model supports teachers as they work with their students on skills that are part of self-determination. It enables goals to be set and actions to be initiated to achieve those goals (Shogren et al., 2019). The model promotes self-determination

Photos and illustrations courtesy of Kaitlyn Millen, Carrie Lou Bloom, and Karrie A. Shogren

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Figure 1. Self-Determined Action Framework



- I use my strengths and areas of need to identify goals.
- I choose goals based on my vision for my future.



- I work to solve problems as I move toward my goals.
- I think about different pathways to get around barriers to my goals.



- I feel empowered to take action toward my goals.
- I know I can do things and be supported as I work toward my goals.



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through allowing students to develop skills in the categories of “decide, act, and believe.” Here are the categories and the skills that may be taught through each:

- **Decide:**
 - Choice making
 - Decision making
 - Problem solving
 - Goal setting
- **Act:**
 - Goal attainment
 - Self-monitoring
 - Self-advocacy
 - Problem solving
- **Believe:**
 - Self-awareness
 - Self-knowledge

Developing and assessing these skills can be done through the Individualized Education Program (IEP). Teachers and students can create IEP goals and objectives that focus on

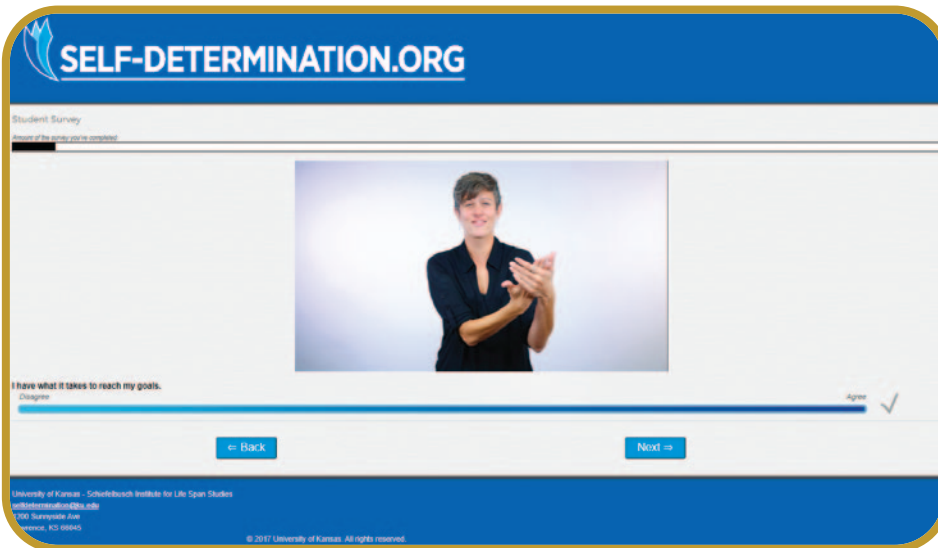
developing these skills and reflect on how these skills will be assessed. The IEP can also engage students in identifying and monitoring their progress toward goals that are meaningful to them.

Taking Inventory: Understanding Skills and Abilities

Teachers may find the Self-Determination Inventory: Student Report (Shogren et al., 2020), an online measure of self-determination, helpful. Through a collaboration between the National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes and the Kansas University Center on Developmental Disabilities, this inventory has been translated into American Sign Language (ASL). An ASL video is provided at the introduction of the measure, for each survey item, and for demographic questions. At the end, an ASL video explains the report and its results. (See Figure 2.)

The inventory takes approximately 10-15 minutes to complete and may be used to identify strengths and areas of need related to self-determination skills. Designed for people with

Figure 2. Screenshot of the American Sign Language Self-Determination Inventory: Student Report



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abilities become more crucial than ever. In emergency periods, safety measures—including the use of masks, social distancing, and videoconferencing—can introduce significant barriers for deaf and hard of hearing people, requiring that they be skilled in identifying and responding to their own needs. Teaching self-determination skills can transform teaching to allow students to decide, act, and believe in themselves as the casual agents of action in their own lives.

Below: A group of teenagers test out early versions of Deafverse, an online choose-your-own-adventure game, to strengthen self-determination skills.

and without disabilities from ages 13-22, the inventory asks users to respond with the degree to which they agree or disagree with statements such as “I know what it takes to reach my goals” and “I make choices that are important to me.” After they finish, a report is provided that breaks down self-determination strengths and needs, including ways to practice and use more self-determination abilities.

Day by Day: Promoting Self-Determination

Professionals and families can create daily opportunities that support students in building self-determination skills and abilities (Wehmeyer et al., 2007). The table on page 55—Decide, Act, Believe: Teaching Skills in Self-Determination, Pre-K through Graduation—shows ways to build these skills through each stage of a student’s life: early childhood, elementary school, middle school, high school, and postsecondary.

The Council for Exceptional Children (2018) updated the national standards for teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students to include teaching and assessing students’ self-determination skills. As educational and work environments shift, self-determination



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Self-Determination Resources



- **Deafverse (www.deafverse.com):** Deafverse is an online game, accessible in ASL, designed for deaf and hard of hearing students to develop self-determination abilities. The activities provide opportunities for students to think about their strengths, needs, preferences, and goals.



- **Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (<https://selfdetermination.ku.edu>):** An evidence-based intervention (Burke et al., 2020), this learning model fosters student development of self-determination through setting goals, developing action plans, and evaluating progress.

DECIDE, ACT, BELIEVE: Teaching Skills in Self-Determination, Pre-K through Graduation

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Teachers and families can use the following to help build self-determination skills through each stage of a student's life.

Life Stage	Skill Focus	Teaching Idea
Early childhood	Problem solving	Modeling: If a child loses a hearing aid, ask the child what should be done and demonstrate the process of taking steps to look for it.
	Choice making	Allow children to choose their own clothing or select a video—and support their choices.
Elementary school	Self-advocacy	Encourage children to role play ways to ensure they are included if left out of (hearing) conversations.
Middle school	Self-monitoring	Have students monitor their progress by charting test scores and discussing the scores with their teachers.
	Self-awareness	Have adolescents identify and address barriers to understanding in classes, such as too much background noise.
High school	Goal setting and goal attainment	Support student exploration of careers—identifying a career that is of interest, researching the requirements for that career, creating a plan, and taking actions toward achieving a career goal.
Postsecondary setting	Self-advocacy and self-awareness	Support young adults in requesting interpreters for a specific event and be prepared to support their self-advocacy if their request is not accommodated.

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