



## A Model for Parent-Teacher Collaboration to Promote Self-Determination in Young Children With Disabilities

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*Young's mother says she wishes Young could be more independent. She wishes he had friends to play with, and that she had more time to take care of his younger brother and do some things for herself. She wishes Young were less dependent on her. She wonders if her son will be able to get a job when he becomes an adult. Will he be able to live independently and what can she do to help him?*

Promoting self-determination has been a primary focus of transition services for students with disabilities for over a decade (Wehmeyer, Field, Doren, Jones, & Mason, 2004). However, educators of

younger children have had limited resources in this area (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2000), even in the face of parental desires for more independence for their children (Doss & Hatcher, 1996). Although the degree to which very young children with disabilities can be fully self-determined varies, the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that lead to self-determination develop through learning across multiple content or subject areas and across time, starting at an early age (Doll, Sands, Wehmeyer, & Palmer, 1996). If we want children with disabilities to become self-determined adolescents, we need to promote this outcome beginning with early education. Considering the importance of family-professional partnerships to positive outcomes for young children with disabilities (Turnbull &

Turnbull, 2001), efforts to promote self-determination are more likely to be successful when there is collaboration between parents and teachers.

This article introduces the Self-Determined Learning Model of Support (SDLMS), which parents can use to promote self-determination in young children. SDLMS also offers teachers the opportunity to build a collaborative partnership with parents. Our scenario involving Young and his mother illustrates the process of implementing and using SDLMS.

### What is Self-Determination?

Wehmeyer (1996) defines self-determination as "acting as the primary causal agent in one's life and making choices and decisions regarding one's quality of

## Tips for Parents

- Encourage children to make choices, set priorities, and make decisions about everyday activities such as what to wear, what foods to eat during snacks, after-school activities, etc.
- Illustrate that choices have results or consequences that need to be considered. For example, "If I choose a candy bar at every snack, I will not be eating in a healthy way," or "If I choose the same shirt to wear daily, it will be dirty most days."
- Help children to identify interests, strengths, and needs. For students with severe disabilities, infer preferences or interests based on observation of their behavior, and consider a wide range of communication efforts including verbal, gesture, computer, and micro-switch technology as a means to determine preferences (Hughes, Pitkin, & Lorden, 1998).
- Explain to children that a goal is something that you want to achieve, and that barriers are things that may get in the way of achieving goals. Encourage the child to assess whether he or she needs to learn something new, change something in the environment, or both to surmount the barriers.
- Use the questions in the model (see Figure 1) to support the process of logical problem-solving. As children become more familiar with the process, parents can let children lead problem-solving discussions.
- Place students at the center of goal setting, action planning, and progress monitoring activities, even if children require extensive support to complete the activities. Let the child decide on a schedule and action plan, as well as monitor his or her own progress.
- Support a child's need to rethink a goal, if progress is slow or minimal. Encourage adjusting or reworking the action plan, if the child wants to pursue the goal.
- At the end of the process, be sure to ask how the child felt about the goal and what he or she learned.

life free from undue external influence or interference" (p. 24). An educational focus on promoting self-determination emerged as a means to enable young people with disabilities to achieve positive outcomes as adults. Research has shown that students with disabilities who leave school as self-determined young people achieve more positive outcomes as adults than do their peers who are not self-determined (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). Students benefit in a variety of areas, including improved involvement in educational planning and self-advocacy skills, enhanced capacities in inclusive settings, and a more positive quality of life (Lee & Wehmeyer, 2004; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). However, Doll and colleagues (1996) note that "limited opportunities to practice skills necessary for self-determination at early ages" can impede the development of self-determined behaviors in adolescence (p. 68). Therefore, interventions to promote self-determination should begin with young children.

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### **How Does the Family Influence Self-Determination?**

Cook, Brotherson, Weigel-Garrey, and Mize (1996) note that the home offers children the earliest opportunity to make choices, exercise control, and exhibit competence. Traditionally, the home has been the primary setting in which children learn to solve problems and make decisions, typically by watching their parents and other valued adults (Wehmeyer, Morningstar, & Husted, 1999). Practically speaking, the home is where most people learn to set and attain goals, make decisions, and express preferences (see box, "Tips for Parents"). But educators need to focus on the same issues.

## Tips for Teachers

- Introduce parents to self-determined adults who have disabilities similar to those of their children (Powers et al., 1996).
- Encourage high expectations for children at school and at home.
- Understand that parents may feel a conflict between encouraging self-determination (and greater independence) and keeping their children safe (Powers et al., 1996).
- Help parents identify strategies to promote self-determination, such as using SDLMS and offering choices and decision-making opportunities.
- Respect family values, cultural background, input and ideas, and expectations for self-determination (Powers et al., 1996; Warger, 2001).
- Provide parents with opportunities to examine their beliefs about self-determination and cultural values for their children (Luft, 2001).

Many parents want their children to become more self-determined, so teachers must consider this when working with children with disabilities (see box, "Tips for Teachers").

### **What is SDLMS?**

The Self-Determined Learning Model of Support (SDLMS; Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2002) is an adapted version of the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI), a teaching model designed to enable students to become more self-determined by becoming self-regulated problem-solvers (Mithaug, Wehmeyer, Agran, Martin, & Palmer, 1998; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, et al., 2000). SDLMS uses the same process as SDLMI, but is more appropriate for parents to implement at home. Furthermore, SDLMS is designed to enable *children* to direct the goal setting, action planning, and goal implementation processes.

SDLMS comprises three phases, each of which leads the child through a

traditional problem-solving process: (a) identify the problem, (b) identify potential solutions to the problem, (c) identify barriers to solving the problem, and (d) identify consequences to each solution. The solution to the "problem" in each phase leads to the next phase.

SDLMS offers parents a unique opportunity to support and encourage a child's self-determination. The model provides a framework wherein children learn to self-regulate problem solving: to set a goal, design a plan to achieve that goal, and implement and track progress toward the goal. The general process embedded in the model is equally applicable for use by parents at home and by teachers in an educational context. If a teacher is using SDLMI in the classroom, parents working on a complementary process at home both reinforce what is being taught at school and also encourage generalization across settings and content areas. Furthermore, the model is equally appropriate for children with and without disabilities across a wide range of goal content areas, from academic content areas to family decision making. Because SDLMS can be used by the entire family, not just the student with the disability, implementing the model could enhance the quality of life for the entire family.

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### **How Does a Family Implement SDLMS?**

To illustrate how teachers can support and encourage families to implement SDLMS at home, we relate one family's experience with the model and the specific questions, objectives, and supports that constitute the process.

Young is an 8-year-old boy with Down syndrome; his brother, Min, is 6. Young does not have many friends in his neighborhood and spends most of

his time after school with his mother, Joo. Min, who began elementary school this year, requires more of Joo's time; Min's teacher wants parents to supervise their children's homework. However, Joo struggles to care for both boys on her own, and Young interferes when she helps Min with homework. Joo is concerned that Young will be dependent on her throughout his life, if she does not begin teaching him more independence now.

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*If a teacher is using SDLMI in the classroom, parents working on a complementary process at home . . . reinforce what is being taught at school.*

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Young can read simple words or short sentences, but has problems with word recognition and fluency. Ms. Jones, Young's third-grade teacher, tells Joo that Young imitates the behavior of other children and likes to attract attention in the classroom, especially during reading class, perhaps to avoid his work. Ms. Jones relates how she uses SDLMI to support Young's goals at school, and recommends that Joo consider also implementing the model at home, as a way to encourage Young's self-determination. Together, they identify two goals: assisting Young in developing social relationships, and improving his reading skills. Ms. Jones explains that SDLMS model questions can be rephrased or simplified to help Young understand them better, as long as Joo retains the essential meaning and the order of the questions within each phase.

Figure 1 shows how the SDLMS was implemented at home to complement Young's school-based reading improvement goals, as well as to give Joo more time with Min by enabling Young to promote his independent learning. The discussion below describes the concurrent SDLMS implementation of his social-skills goal.

### **Phase 1: Set a Goal (What is my goal?)**

Joo introduced Young to the idea of setting a goal for an after-school social activity with friends. After listening to Joo's suggestions of playing baseball with friends, watching a video with friends, or doing art projects with a friend, Young chose "playing basketball with friends." Joo simplified the model questions so Young would understand them, and wrote down his answers.

### **Phase 2: Take Action (What is my plan?)**

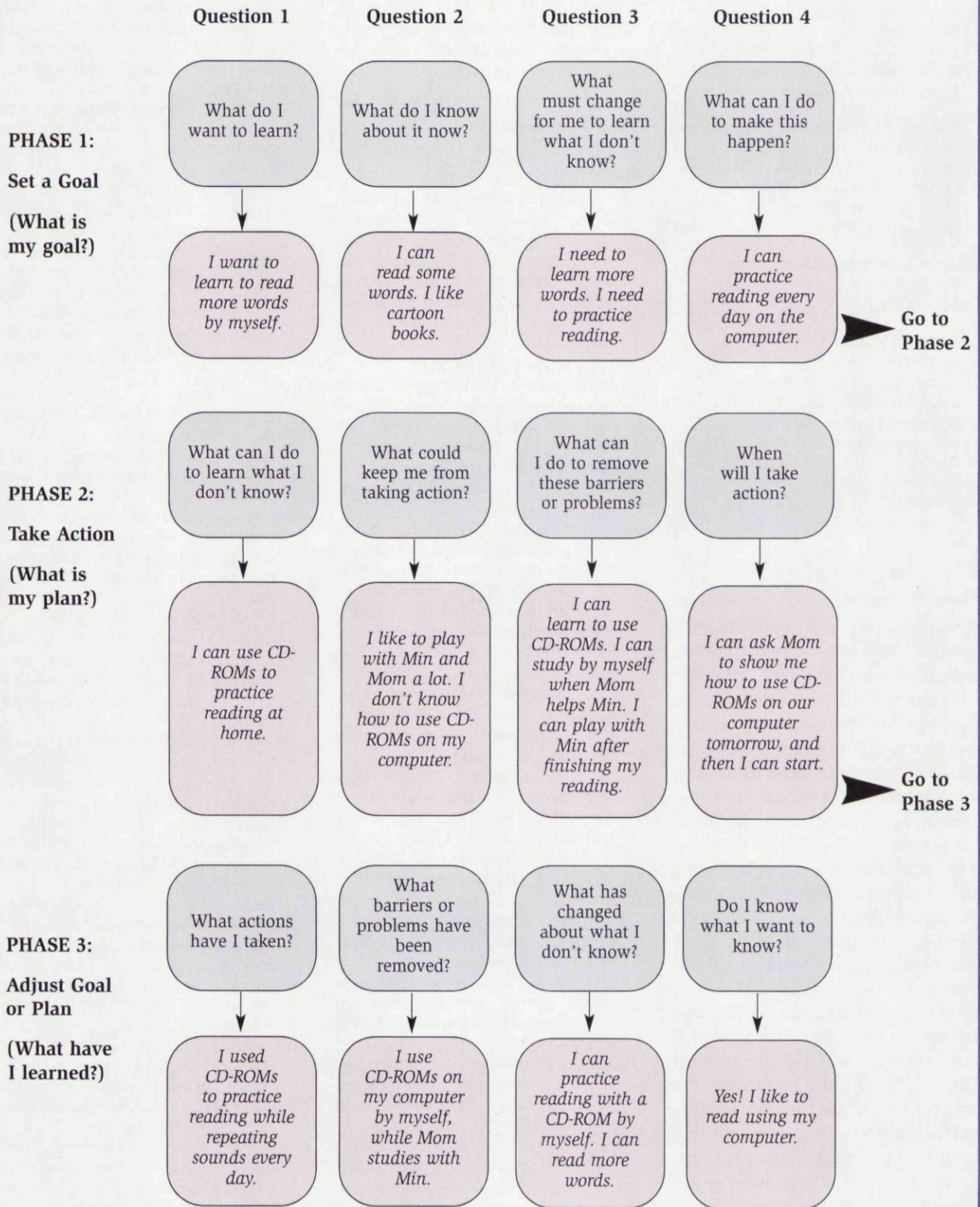
Young and Joo established a plan for Young to spend time playing basketball daily. They identified his main obstacles as a lack of friends with whom to play basketball, and his ignorance of the game's rules and skills. To surmount these obstacles, Young and Joo decided to invite a neighborhood friend to play basketball, and that Young should practice by himself every day. Joo used a calendar to help Young record the number of minutes he practiced shooting the basketball and the name of the child who came to play to encourage Young's self-monitoring of his goal and to visually track his progress.

### **Phase 3: Adjust Goal or Plan (What have I learned?)**

When Ms. Jones met with Joo again 3 months later, she asked how the action plan worked for pursuing Young's goal. Joo and Young had used the questions in Phase 3 of the model to assess how well his goal of playing basketball with friends was working. After Young became better at playing basketball with a friend at home, Ms. Jones encouraged him to join an after-school basketball club so he could generalize his social skills while pursuing his favorite activity.

Several positive outcomes for both Young and Joo emerged in this process: (a) Young now plays and practices basketball with a friend, (b) he practices reading independently with CD-ROMs, (c) Joo is able to work with Min, spend time alone, and spend time with other adults once a week while Young plays basketball and watches CD-ROMs.

**Figure 1. The Self-Determined Learning Model of Support (SDLMS)**



## Additional Resources

Self-Determined Learning Model for Early Elementary Students: The Parent's Guide: <http://www.beachcenter.org/books/default.asp?intResourceID=726&act=detail&type=General%20Topic&id=10>

"A self-determination for youth with disabilities: A family education curriculum," by Abery, B., Eggebeen, A., Rudrud, L., et al. (1994). The Institute on Community Integration (UAP)

Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE): [www.finenetwork.org](http://www.finenetwork.org)

Parent/Professional Collaboration (Frequently Asked Questions), National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET): <http://www.ncset.org/topics/family/faqs.asp?topic=29>

Beach Center on Disability: [www.beachcenter.org](http://www.beachcenter.org)

## Final Thoughts

Research shows that enhanced self-determination contributes to positive individual quality-of-life outcomes (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). Given that individual quality of life is believed to affect family quality of life (Park et al., 2003), promoting self-determination in young children with disabilities may affect not only the children's quality of life, but also quality of life for their families. The success of implementing SDLMS at home improved Young's quality of life (enhancing his emotional well-being, interpersonal relationships, and social inclusion); Young's improved quality of life in turn enhanced the quality of life for his family by creating time for Joo to care for Min, have personal time, and enjoy her friends. In addition, SDLMS allowed Young to pursue better achievement in his reading goal by enabling him to practice his reading at home under collaboration between home and school. The complementary use of SDLMI in the classroom and SDLMS at home affords children with disabilities a better opportunity to build a capacity for self-determination and

generalize what they are learning. SDLMS offers the additional benefit of enabling teachers to strengthen their partnerships with families and collaborate to support the problem-solving and goal-setting skills associated with self-determination.

For further information see box "Additional Resources."

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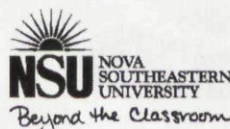


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