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Tools for Inclusion

family and consumer series

Making Dreams a Reality: Using Personal Networks to Achieve Goals as You Prepare to Leave High School

by Jaimie Ciulla Timmons, Mairead Moloney, Danielle Dreilinger, and Jennifer Schuster

Introduction

Getting ready to leave high school can be both exciting and stressful. Young adults with disabilities need to figure out what their interests are and develop goals for the future. Decisions need to be made about where the young adult might live, what kind of job they might have, or where they may continue their education. New life options create opportunities for more decision-making. Although young adults with disabilities may become more independent during this time, the support and encouragement of others remains crucial for success.

The Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) interviewed high school students with disabilities and their parents/guardians. ICI asked these families about their plans for the future and how others may have influenced their decisions. In addition, both students and their parents were asked to tell ICI about important decisions they have made as a family, and who they depend on when there is a problem and support may be needed.

Three stories

Many of the students and parents who participated in ICI's study described how they used and depended upon their **personal networks**—both formal and informal—to figure out what they need and want, and help them discover, reach for, and achieve their personal goals. In addition, these personal networks helped to develop **self-determination** in the young adult. The three stories that follow illustrate ways that students used personal networks to help them achieve their goals, and sometimes, how they could be better used to make their goals a reality. These examples also illustrate how **personal network members helped to develop self-determination**.

(The stories that follow are based on conversations with the students and their parents. Please note that names have been changed to protect their privacy.)

What is self-determination?

People who have self-determination know what they want and how to get it. They know a lot about themselves and have a clear vision for the future. Self-determined people can make decisions for themselves, and know what they have to do to achieve their goals. They feel independent and in control of their life plans. A self-determined person does not need to know all the answers, but they know that there are a variety of options in life that are available for them. They understand their own strengths and weaknesses, try to solve problems, and make their own choices. Self-determination is related to self-esteem and confidence because in order to pursue your goals, you need to feel that you can do it! In addition, self-determined people know how to find help when they need it. This help usually comes from their **personal network.**

What is a personal network?

A personal network is basically everyone that a person knows. This includes both **formal** and **informal** network members. Formal network members are professionals such as school counselors or teachers. Informal network members are people close to you, like your friends, family members, and others you may have met in social organizations, sports teams, religious organizations, or even in your neighborhood.

How can a personal network help to develop self-determination?

Personal networks can guide the self-determined person as they solve problems and support them when important decisions are made. People from the personal network help teach new skills as goals are achieved. The self-determined person learns to plan and coordinate their lives with help from these important people. Members from the personal network provide more and more opportunities for the self-determined individual to make decisions and learn new skills on their own.

Story 1:

I found what I needed to move forward.

Heather, a recent high school graduate with physical and special health care needs, expected to have a full-time job, live with her boyfriend, and someday have kids of her own. She felt very strongly about the value of work, as she said, "I want to work 100%. I want to work for my money." Heather's mother, however, was concerned that a full-time job would have a negative effect on Heather's Social Security benefits.

Despite her mother's concerns, Heather was determined to go forward. Throughout high school, Heather's personal network exposed her to a variety of employment opportunities. When she was looking for a summer job, a family friend who worked in landscaping helped her find a job in the business. In addition, her brother introduced her to the auto body field by letting her work on his car. This led Heather to take classes in auto body at school to gain more experience. These experiences gave Heather the knowledge to develop work and career goals. Heather gathered the support she needed from her boyfriend and brother who went with her as she collected job applications, helped her fill them out, and provided encouragement. Heather's brother advocated on her behalf to their mother. "He's the one that's fighting with my mother telling her that I should work." Heather also applied for jobs independently and used school personnel to help her uncover the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) as an additional resource. She set up an appointment with a VR counselor on her own. All these activities led her to find a job in a field that matched her interests.

Important points:

- Heather's network gives her opportunities to discover her preferences by exposing her to a variety of work experiences.
- Heather chooses to work. Her self-determination is evident in her strong desire to work despite her mother's concern.
- Heather demonstrates self-determination not only by independently finding VR as a resource, but by gathering support from her boyfriend and brother.
- Heather makes substitutions for gaps in her personal network. Because she feels her mother was not supportive, she finds other people (her brother, boyfriend, and school personnel) to help her out. Positive network members balance out other members who have reservations.
- Heather uses a combination of informal network members (brother and boyfriend) as well as formal network members (school personnel, counselor from VR) to reach her employment goals.
- Heather's informal network provided both encouragement and specific help (like filling out applications).

Story 2:

Shared goals and a champion's support bring success

Shantelle, a recent high school graduate with a psychiatric disability, worked part-time while living at home. A large, dependable network of both formal and informal network members helped support her as she developed her goals. This included a close friend, teachers, a therapist, and a neighbor who employed her as a babysitter. Shantelle talked to a close friend and teachers about her decisions for a career, and a therapist about more personal problems.

Most importantly, Shantelle has had great support from her mother. They agreed in their hopes and goals for her future. Shantelle said her mother supported her to reach greater independence: "She doesn't suggest anything. She thinks it should be my concern and my issues what I should do. She thinks I am responsible for myself. She lets me make my own decisions...[but] if I don't know if it's a good or bad idea I ask for her opinion." Shantelle's mother confirmed this by saying "if she says she wants to try something I don't stop her.... We let her make her own decisions. The only way you are going to learn is to make the mistake on your own."

The only challenge Shantelle's mother saw that could stand in Shantelle's way was her tendency towards low self-esteem. This motivated her to surround Shantelle with support. Shantelle's mother gained insight through talking to teachers, the family doctor, church members, and even neighbors. "That's what it takes, you know. Keeping that self esteem up and saying... 'We know you can do it.'" Shantelle's family and friends were quite proud of her. Shantelle's mother best summed up her philosophy and optimistic outlook for her daughter when she said, "We're all looking for a bright future for her."

Important points:

- Shantelle's mother supports Shantelle's self-determination by listening and making suggestions, and not making decisions for her. Shantelle's family and friends focus on building her self-esteem and confidence so she can move forward and be more self-determined.
- Shantelle has a large personal network that includes both informal network members (close friend, neighbor, and especially a strong relationship with her mother) and formal network members (teacher and therapist).
- Shantelle uses members from her personal network differently—some she talks to specifically about work (friends and teachers), while others support her more personal concerns (therapist).
- Shantelle's mother uses her own network to learn how to support Shantelle and encourage self-determination.
- Shantelle's mother makes sure not only that **she** is surrounded by support, but uses her own network as an expansion of support for her daughter.
- Shantelle and her mother are in **alignment**. This means that they agree, and share high expectations for the future. This alignment and shared goals are crucial in maximizing Shantelle's self-determination.

More about where this came from

These stories are based on interviews with high school students and their parents/guardians. Each student and their parent/guardian were interviewed for roughly 45 minutes. Nine students and eight parent/guardians (6 mothers, 1 father, and 1 foster mother) were interviewed in total.

The families who participated in this study were probably much like your own. They had varying racial/ethnic backgrounds, and the students ranged from freshmen to seniors in high school. The young adults had a wide range of disabilities including physical, cognitive, learning, emotional/psychiatric, behavioral, and sensory impairments. Some families lived in suburban locations while others lived in cities.

Story 3:

On the road to self-determination

Carlos, a recent high school graduate with a cognitive disability, had a variety of interests including art and electronics and was very serious about working. However, while he had ideas about careers that would fulfill his interests, he did not know how to make it happen. He had high expectations for his future and didn't want to settle for any old job. High school frustrated him because he felt that the work experiences and skills he learned there would not prepare him for the working world: "I am not going to get anywhere with those jobs." Although he advocated to change his situation at IEP meetings, school personnel did not change his program.

Carlos' mother was also disappointed by his school, and supported his advocacy efforts. However, she was concerned that Carlos's standards might be too high. "He doesn't want to take any suggestions.... I don't think he understands [that] he doesn't get to pick and choose." She also doubted whether he would be able to pursue the jobs he liked. "It's kind of, like, out of his grasp, but I don't say that."

Carlos and his mother used two formal network members to help him succeed. This included a professional from a private organization and a counselor from the Department of Mental Retardation (DMR). Carlos's mother coordinated these services. Carlos' mother also used his monthly SSI check as a "bank account" to give him experience in using money. However, Carlos's mother reported that they didn't use their own personal network as a resource: "We're it, my husband and I." One result is that, according to Carlos's mother, Carlos relied on her too much.

While Carlos's mother wanted Carlos to be independent, she feared that he would make bad choices if left to his own resources. "I don't think he is mature enough to understand what the big decisions are and how he can handle them." She didn't know how to support him to make good decisions on his own without her making them for him. "I kind of guide him.... I kind of sway him, kind of try to con him into it."

Carlos felt the lack of support. Despite a college course in computers, he didn't feel confident that he could find a job he liked. Carlos felt stuck. "I don't want to be alone... for the rest of my life. And I don't have a good job that I am good at."

Important points:

- Carlos demonstrates self-determination through his strong desire to work, not settling for the limited options offered him by his school program, and self-advocating at school IEP meetings.
- Carlos shows self-awareness in that he had clear interests. Having self-awareness is a crucial first step to being self-determined.
- Carlos's family helps to develop self-determination by encouraging him access to his SSI checks. Carlos's mother uses SSI as a tool to increase independence, learn the value of money, and teach financial planning. However, Carlos's mother is responsible for coordinating the support from his formal network rather than Carlos doing it himself.
- Carlos and his family use formal network members to help him reach his goals. However, Carlos and his mother may not know how useful informal network members such as friends and family could be. A broader range of informal contacts could give Carlos a fuller array of assistance and help him get a clearer focus on his goals, skills, and opportunities.
- There is a **lack of alignment** between Carlos and his mother. This means they did not agree or share the same expectations for Carlos's future. Although they shared the vision that he would work and live independently in the future, they disagreed about what jobs he is capable of pursuing at that stage. Carlos's mother thought that Carlos was too picky. Carlos, on the other hand, didn't want to waste his time on jobs that didn't match his interests.
- Carlos feels **powerless**, like he was not "in the driver's seat." This is the opposite of self-determination. Carlos does not see himself as being on a positive path to a fulfilling future.

What can Carlos & his family do?

Carlos's mother can begin to give Carlos more responsibility in coordinating the support he receives from formal network members. In addition, while continuing to rely on their formal network members, Carlos and his family could develop their informal network. In this way, Carlos could gain a fuller array of assistance, particularly in areas that he is interested in, with the addition of the personal knowledge and insight that family, friends, and neighbors can give. Their support could help Carlos get a clearer focus on his goals, skills, and opportunities. How can a family develop their personal network? It may not be as hard as you think!

Here is what you and your family can do...

You and your family can identify and expand your personal networks and think about ways to reach out to them and practice self-determination.

Map out your current personal network

- Use the diagram on the top of **Worksheet #1** to make a list of everyone you know. This should include all people that you know well enough to have a conversation with. Include family members, friends, community members such as neighbors, and professionals such as teachers, counselors, employers, and co-workers.

Build your personal network:

- Go on a few informational interviews. The goal of this type of interview is to learn about a type of job or a certain company, not to get a job. Informational interviews are an excellent way to explore different interests and jobs while making new contacts. People in your network can help you set up interviews where they work.
- Join different community groups such as local neighborhood organizations, clubs, religious organizations, or recreational facilities.
- Volunteer for a cause you believe in, or an activity that interests you.
- Participate in community events, such as those sponsored by local groups, schools, and libraries.
- Focus on developing relationships. Establish trust. Spend time doing this before you make specific requests of people.
- Think about ways that you can help your network members. Offer your help. Remember, you can be helpful to your network members just as they are helpful to you.

Reach out to your network:

- Ask for help when you are facing big decisions in your life.
- Take the time to tell people what you are thinking about, share your goals, and the challenges you may be encountering.
- Be specific about the ways that you would like people to help you.
- Ask people in your current network about career ideas, and explain your interests. Network members may know about employment opportunities or be helpful in exploring job ideas with you.
- Ask people in your network to introduce you, or refer you, to people they know who may be helpful to you. This can lead to new opportunities.
- Don't be afraid to ask more than once.
- Realize that members in your network will play different roles and you will not get the same thing from each member.
- Realize that network members aren't always able to help. There may be times when you ask for help and they are not able to give it to you. This is okay!
- Keep your network updated on your progress. People like to help and it will make them feel good to know that you are working toward your goals.

You are already exercising self-determination just by reaching out to those you know. Remember, **a self-determined person knows what they want and can find the support to achieve their goals!** It's up to you to find this support.

A good network member:

- Thinks of themselves as a resource.
- Is willing to listen. He/she may offer suggestions or different ways to think about your decision or issue.
- Will make time in their schedule for you.
- Offers encouragement, guidance, and advice when you need it.
- Is a positive role model.
- Should never be someone you feel uncomfortable with or someone who puts you down.
- Is someone you can trust.
- Is someone who is happy to share his/her experience with you.

A good network member **supports self-determination** by:

- Asking questions but not directing or making decisions.
- Allowing you to experiment with more responsibility, encouraging you to be more responsible for yourself.
- Allowing you to make mistakes in order to learn from them.
- Offering fewer suggestions to encourage independent decision-making.
- Letting you know that they think you are capable and support the decisions you make independently.
- Building your ability to gradually handle your own affairs.
- Boosting your self-confidence.

Ideas for building independence and self-determination

- **Schedule** an informational interview in an area of interest. **Plan** and rehearse phone calls and interviews with someone in your network.
- **Take responsibility** for setting up job interviews and doing job searches. **Participate** actively in all aspects of your job search.
- **Get involved** in school meetings. Bring a list of questions and concerns to your IEP meeting. Consider conducting your own IEP meeting with guidance and support from your school personnel. Remember, they are there to help!
- **Learn** responsibility through household chores, cooking meals, or having a pet. **Hard work often produces rewards!**
- **Experiment** with public transportation when you don't have to be anywhere important. This is a good way to be able to eventually get to a job or friend's house without having to rely on others.
- **Practice** opening and managing a checking or savings account. Having a savings account is a good way to begin saving money for college, a first car, or moving out on your own.
- **Share** in family bill-paying. This helps to understand the value of groceries, clothing, personal items, or rent.

Figuring out what you want:

The **first step** to self-determination

Start by figuring out what you want for yourself. These should be your dreams, not someone else's dreams for you. Explore different career options. Think about what you are good at and what makes you happy. Use the bottom of **Worksheet #1** to think about who you are and create a personal vision statement. Write this statement down on paper. **Remember, a self-determined person understands his/her own strengths and weaknesses, and knows a lot about themselves.** Self-determined people may not necessarily know exactly what they want at all times, and their visions may change from one day to the next, but **they know how to get what they need.**

Going out and getting it:

The **second step** to self-determination

Once you have figured out what you want, it is time to develop clear goals and come up with an action plan. Use **Worksheet #2** to think about where you would like to see yourself down the road. Again, write down your plan step by step. Take out your list of network members and think about how each member might be able to help. Put a star next to the names of those that you feel especially close to, and whom you would be comfortable asking for help. Different people in your network can probably help you in different ways. Be willing to ask for help and be specific. Remember, you don't need to have all the answers. **Self-determined people know how to get what they want and know how to find help when they need it. They can define their goals and take initiative in achieving them.**

Starting early

Although the students in these stories are recent high school graduates, you and your family should not wait until then to start building these skills. In fact, it is important to build these skills early in high school. The point is... it is never too early to start practicing self-determination and expanding your network! So get started!

Conclusion

Being self-determined is exciting, although making your own choices can be difficult sometimes. Don't be afraid to find and ask for help. Reach out to your personal network and ask them to help you reach your goals. Don't get discouraged if you feel like you don't know what you want, you change your mind, or you've made bad choices in the past. It's okay to make mistakes. **Remember you are capable and you can do it!**

Additional ICI resources on this topic

Tools for Inclusion Series

www.communityinclusion.org/publications/tools.html

Stories of Success: Using networking and mentoring relationships in career planning for students with disabilities.
(February 2001, Vol. 9, No. 1)

Networking: A consumer guide to an effective job search.
(January 1999, Vol. 7, No.1)

Training Manuals

Building a Self-Determined Future For All Youth. *(2001)*
This manual offers an exciting approach to teaching and learning leadership and self-determination skills. It is divided into twelve curriculum units that are designed to introduce middle and high school students to a broad spectrum of leadership and self-determination skills. The guide is interactive and contains a collection of learning activities and materials that pertain to leadership.

Building Community Connections: Designing a Future That Works. *(1996)*
This manual serves as a curriculum for a two-day workshop designed to teach individuals with disabilities to utilize their contacts in a job search. Topics covered include: tapping the hidden job market, using networks for career development and job searches, identifying and engaging individuals, keeping in touch with people without becoming a pest, creating a mutually beneficial relationship with potential employers, dealing with disclosure, and using service providers.

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This publication will be made available in alternate formats upon request.

Worksheet #1

Mapping your personal network

Family	Friends

Community members (neighbors, people from clubs or groups)	Professionals (school personnel, counselors, people from jobs)

Who am I and what do I want? Solving the puzzle

Who am I?

Subjects I like(d) in school are:

Activities (sports, clubs, volunteer work) that I like are:

Things I like to do in my free time (work, spend time with friends, etc.) are:

My strengths are:

My weaknesses are:

What is my dream?

What types of goals do I have for myself?

What would be my ideal job? Why?

What is important for me to be happy?

How do I envision my life after high school? In 5 years? In 10 years? When I'm my parent's age?

My goals and dreams for the future are:

Worksheet #2

Going out and getting it! Planning for the future

When filling out this worksheet, think about your goals in four specific areas of your life. These are: work, learning, living situation, and leisure/recreation. Separate each area, and write out goals and steps for each.

Getting it down on paper

Something I would like to accomplish this year is:

I will take the following steps to achieve this:

Step one:

Step two:

Step three:

My goals for when I graduate are:

I will take the following steps to achieve these goals:

Step one:

Step two:

Step three:

My goals for when I'm my parent's age are:

I will take the following steps to achieve these goals:

Step one:

Step two:

Step three:

Just do it!

What types of decisions do I have to make?

What problems may come up and how do I solve them?

Some decisions I made this week are:

Gathering support

When I have had problems in the past, who has helped me solve them?

Who can help me achieve my goals? And how might they help?

Person #1_____How they might help_____

Person #2_____How they might help_____

Person #3_____How they might help_____

Person #4_____How they might help_____