

Supported Decision Making:

At-A-Glance for Parents

As a parent, you want your child or adult student to have a full, self-directed life. Supported Decision-Making is a powerful tool to help them get there. It's an approach that empowers your child or adult student to make their own choices while building a trusted network of support for guidance. By using Supported Decision-Making, you can help your child or adult student develop essential life skills, grow in confidence, and prepare for a successful future where their voice is always at the center of their life decisions.

Navigating the special education process is a journey, and our goal is to provide you with clear, accurate, and practical information to serve as your guide. We want to empower you as an essential member of your child's team.

Please know that while we strive for accuracy, this material is for informational purposes only. It is not intended as legal advice, and reading it does not create an attorney-client relationship. Because special education law is complex and every student's situation is different, this guidance should not be used as a replacement for individualized advice from a qualified professional.

What Is Supported Decision-Making?

Supported Decision-Making allows your child or adult student to be the primary decision-maker in their own life. Instead of someone else making choices *for* them, your child or adult student works with people they trust—family, friends, teachers, and mentors—to understand their options, weigh the advantages and disadvantages, and communicate their choices and decisions.

The benefits of this approach are clear:

- **Preserves Dignity and Rights:** Your child or adult student maintains their legal right to make decisions.
- **Builds Essential Life Skills:** Decision-making, like any skill, improves with practice.
- **Promotes Self-Confidence:** Empowers your child or adult student to express their preferences and see themselves as capable.
- **Prepares for Adulthood:** Creates a strong foundation for greater independence and self-advocacy.

Supported Decision-Making vs. Guardianship: Understanding the Difference

Every individual is unique, and the right level of decision-making support will vary. The goal is to find the least restrictive approach that ensures your child or adult student's safety while maximizing their independence. It's helpful to think of the options as a spectrum of support, not an all-or-nothing choice.

Supported Decision-Making	Guardianship
Your child or adult student makes their own decisions with help from a support network.	A court-appointed guardian makes decisions for your child or adult student in specific or all areas.

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Supported Decision-Making	Guardianship
No court involvement is required. It's flexible and can be changed easily.	Requires a legal process and ongoing court oversight to establish, modify, or terminate.
Builds decision-making skills and independence over time.	May limit opportunities for individuals to practice and develop their own decision-making skills.
The best first step when an individual can express preferences (in any way) and participate in the process with support.	May be necessary only when there is a significant risk of harm that cannot be managed through less restrictive means, even with extensive supports.

Oregon law encourages families to explore less restrictive alternatives like Supported Decision-Making *before* considering guardianship. Both Supported Decision-Making and guardianship have their place, and the best choice depends on each individual's unique circumstances.

Starting Supported Decision-Making at Home

Begin building a foundation for Supported Decision-Making today with these practical steps:

- Practice Daily Decisions:** Offer choices about meals, clothes, and activities. Start with two options and gradually add more complexity as your child or adult student's confidence grows.
- Talk It Out:** When making a family decision, think out loud. Explain the options you're considering and why you're leaning one way. This models the process for your child or adult student.
- Build a Circle of Support:** Help your child or adult student identify people they trust. Ask, "If you had a question about school, who would be a good person to ask?" or "Who helps you feel brave when you're trying something new?"

Conversation Starters

Starting the conversation is a key first step. Here are a few ideas:

With your child or adult student:

- "I'd love to hear your thoughts on [a specific decision, like a weekend activity]. What are your ideas?"
- "Let's figure this out together. Who are some people we trust that could help us think through the options for [a bigger decision, like a summer job]?"

With the school/IEP team:

- "We are using Supported Decision-Making at home and want to discuss how we can build on that at school."
- "Could we add a goal to the IEP that focuses on [child or adult student's name]'s decision-making and self-advocacy skills?"

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- “How can we make sure [child or adult student’s name] has a central role in their next IEP meeting?”

Take the Next Step: Your Action Plan

Ready to move forward? Here’s what you can do now:

1. **Talk it Out:** Begin conversations about who they trust and would want to help them make decisions.
2. **Connect with the School:** Ask your child or adult student’s teacher or case manager about incorporating Supported Decision-Making goals and practices into their school day and their IEP.
3. **Learn More:** Explore the resources below to connect with other families and find more tools.

Resources for More Information

- **National Resource Center for Supported Decision-Making:**
<http://www.supporteddecisionmaking.org/>
- **The Arc Oregon:** <https://www.thearcoregon.org/>
- **FACT Oregon:** <https://factoregon.org/>
- **Disability Rights Oregon:** <https://www.droregon.org/>

Remember: All people need support with decisions at times. Supported Decision-Making recognizes that needing help doesn’t mean a person can’t make their own choices. By implementing Supported Decision-Making, you’re helping your child or adult student build skills for a more independent future while ensuring they have the support they need to succeed.