new directions

...offering information and *inspiration* to individuals with disabilities and their families as they direct their own supports and services

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Self-Direction:

Moving from Awareness to Action

Self-direction is a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that allow a person to be more goal-directed, self-regulated, and autonomous. An understanding of one's unique strengths and limitations, and a positive self-concept are essential to self-direction. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals with disabilities have greater ability to take control of their lives and be successful in our society.

Self-directed people know how to choose—they know what they want and how to get it. From an awareness of personal needs, these individuals choose goals and pursue them. This involves asserting one's presence, making one's needs known, evaluating one's own progress toward meeting goals, adjusting performance, and creating unique approaches to solve problems.

"...self directed people are those who know how to choose - they know what they want and how to get it..."

Self-directed people can make things happen in their lives. They are goal oriented and apply problem solving and decision making skills to guide their actions. They know what they do well and where they need assistance. They are actors in their own lives, not being acted upon by others.

Self-direction is important for ***all*** people, but especially for those with disabilities. The skills leading to enhanced self-direction, like goal setting, problem solving, and decision making, enable people to assume greater responsibility and control. Moreover, when people with disabilities show they can make things happen and take responsibility for planning and decision making, others view them differently and change what they expect from them. People with disabilities have emphasized that having control over their lives, instead of having someone else make decisions for and about them, is important to their self-esteem and self-worth.

Self-direction pays off. Students with disabilities who leave school more self-directed are more than twice as likely as their less self-directed peers to be employed one year after graduation, and they earned significantly more. Three years after graduation, they are more likely to have jobs that provide benefits like health coverage and vacation, and are more likely to be living somewhere other than the family home.

Facilitating an Effective Person-Centered Plan:

Considerations for Professionals

by Lisa Simmons

One of the most common mistakes made by people who are new to person-centered planning is the assumption that everyone has similar goals and values.

Life values grow from life experiences and life experiences vary **dramatically** from person to person. When we look at the life experiences of an average middle class American and compare them to that of an adult with disabilities who may have spent a significant portion of his/her life in a specialized setting, the difference is startling. Add to that, the social, behavioral, physical, communication and/or cognitive challenges associated with having a developmental disability - and the fact that most people with developmental disabilities are not often asked what *they* want - the challenges of person-centered planning become more clear.

So how do you begin?

1. Identify past "struggle points"

If an issue has caused problems in the past, it is a probably important to the person and may be a high priority for inclusion in that person's plan. Often, 'struggle points' center around control or access:

- access to material things or preferred activities;
- control over the pattern or pace of the day; and/or,
- control over diet or access to specific foods.

If you aren't sure what past struggle points have been, talk to the individual or his/her direct support staff. They can be a source of information if the person cannot tell you him/herself.

> … our role is not to say,
> "*No problem - whatever you want.*"
> Our role is to say, *"That's a great dream - here's how we might get there from here!"*

2. Brainstorm with the individual and their support team

Once the key issues are identified, you'll want to gather the individual and all the important people in his/her life to find a workable solution. Sometimes, solutions are relatively simple, such as waking up a few minutes later, having a favorite food at lunch time, or helping the person budget for a special purchase, such as a T.V. or a vacation.

If the pace or routine of a person's day isn't working, consider *with them* how their activities can be rearranged or the pace changed to something more comfortable.

Activities, whether work, leisure, or domestic, that generate 'struggle points' should be seriously looked at. Most of us don't continue to do things we find objectionable. We find something else to do, or if the activity is essential, we find (or pay) someone else to do it.

If the issue is food related, it may take some creativity to balance health, diet or allergy issues against the individual's preferences. Trade offs are necessary for all of us at times when our health is on the line, but the person must be part of the decision.

3. Consider Quality of Life Issues

Once the obvious problems have been resolved, the support team can move on to expanding the individual's quality of life. Ask these questions to get started:

- Is the person satisfied with his or her living arrangement (who and where)?
- Does the person like his or her job?
- Is the person making enough income to support the lifestyle he or she wants?
- Does the person have hobbies or recreational activities to enjoy during free time?
- Are there any new skills (leisure or work related) that the person would like to learn?
- Does the person have satisfying relationships with friends and family?

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Fostering and Promoting Self-Direction

What Parents, Friends & Care Staff Can Do

The service planning process provides a powerful context in which to both teach and practice skills like goal setting, problem solving, effective communication and listening skills, assertiveness and self-advocacy, and decision-making. As part of the process the person will need to:

- Set personal goals
- Solve problems that act as barriers to achieving these goals
- Make appropriate choices based on personal preferences and interests
- Participate in decisions that impact the quality of their lives
- Advocate for themselves
- Create action plans to achieve goals
- Self-regulate and self-manage day-to-day actions

Instruction promoting components of self-direction should be part of the educational experience of every person with a disability. All people can learn to make choices, teaching them that they can exert control over some aspects of their own lives.

10 Strategies to Promote Self-Direction

1. Encourage the person to think aloud as they address problems. Parents and others can model their own problem-solving processes.

2. Provide feedback regarding the outcomes of their choices to help the person see the link between their choices and consequences.

3. Teach the person to systematically analyze potential options with related benefits and disadvantages in order to participate in simple decisions.

4. Examine past decisions to determine if the consequences were anticipated or desired.

5. Coach the person in setting and committing to personal and career goals, including identifying steps to achieve goals and obtaining support to monitor progress.

6. Encourage the person to evaluate his/her performance and reflect on ways to improve and enhance performance.

7. Teach the person to break long-term goals into short-term objectives, by emphasizing the link between daily decisions and choice and the longer term goals that the person sets.

8. Communicate high expectations and emphasize strengths and uniqueness. People with disabilities are often all too aware of what they cannot do, and they often are not as aware of their unique strengths and abilities.

9. Create a 'safety net' of community support around the person that promotes active problem solving and choice opportunities allowing the person learn from mistakes and experience natural consequences of poor choices without major, life altering ramifications.

10. Create partnerships with other like-minded individuals and families to ensure meaningful involvement and get the support and input needed.

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4. Look at both short term and long-term goals:

Short term issues can be tackled right away. If Joe has an interest in music and would like to buy a new CD, it can be quickly and easily resolved as long as he has the money to purchase the CD and a CD player to play it on when he gets home. Your role may simply be to help supply transportation to a music store or teach Joe how to operate his CD player without help.

Long term goals may take several steps to reach. For example, if Joe wants to go to backpacking in the mountains, your role may be to help Joe to plan in manageable steps, with a timeline to help guarantee success. You may guide him through planning how to save the money needed, how to learn the skills he needs to backpack, how to find a reliable tour group or hiking partners, and how build the stamina he will need to vacation outdoors.

Just remember, whatever the goal, your role is not to say, "No problem - whatever you want." Your role is to say, "That's a great dream! Lets see how we get you there from here!"

adapted from an article by Lisa Simmons. For more information, visit www.ideallives.com

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