

Coaching and Self-Determination by David R. Parker, Ph.D.

Self-determination is a concept that applies to countries, groups or organizations, and individuals. The media talked about “self-determination” when new countries emerged from the former Soviet Union as independent states (and continue doing so now with events in Ukraine). We also use this term to describe someone who knows what he/she wants and is skilled at making those goals a reality. People who are self-determined are [intrinsically motivated](#). They know themselves well, are clear about their goals, understand their options, and enact realistic plans that bring their hopes and desires into fruition.

Who *wouldn't* want to be self-determined? Several landmark studies in the 1980's raised the possibility that - without meaning to - many parents, teachers, and disability providers suppressed the self-determination of youth with disabilities. This research investigated the lives of thousands of young adults with mental retardation, learning disabilities, and other disabilities a few years after high school. Sadly, a large percentage of the graduates could not get or keep jobs, continued to live with their parents, could not manage their own finances, and lacked the drive to pursue their own goals. In short, they had developed “learned helplessness” or what is now known as “failure to thrive.”

When researchers interviewed hundreds of these study participants, a startling theme emerged. They reported that their parents and teachers had made decisions for them, limited their ability to make choices, and discouraged them from taking chances. Consequently, they had experienced few opportunities to learn from their experiences. Why? Follow-up interviews with parents and educators revealed a primary reason: to help the young people avoid further disappointments in life. It was as if the adults thought, “It's tough enough that he has a disability; let me ensure he will succeed at every opportunity.” These adults had the very best of intentions. But their approach inadvertently suppressed liberties most of us take for granted: formulate big dreams about our futures, make choices, take calculated risks, and learn from our mistakes as well as our successes. These findings led to the self-determination movement, which created more effective ways to help young people become more autonomous adults.

Related definitions of self-determination emerged from these federal research projects. Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, and Wehmeyer (1998) created the most widely-used description: “Self-determination is a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one's strengths and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective are essential to self-determination. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals have greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults (p. 115).” Hoffman and Field (2006) developed a briefer definition: “Self-determination is the ability to identify and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself.” They created a [diagram](#) that visually depicts this process of becoming more autonomous with the help of others. Subsequent [research](#) has continued to find that

young adults who are more self-determined are more likely to be academically successful, gainfully employed, and independent.

Research and clinical practice have shown that how we interact with others can influence their self-determination. When we do too much for others (even with the best of intentions), we end up suppressing their ability to learn how to think and act for themselves. I am often asked, “How would you respond to a 14 year old with a significant LD and ADHD who said, ‘I want to go to Harvard and be president one day.’?” What a great question. On a good day, I’d like to think my initial response would be, “Wow! Those aspirations are really impressive! Tell me more about your goals and what you are doing to accomplish them.” On a bad day, I would probably feel an urge to tell the teenager he is being unrealistic and needs to understand how difficult ANY college will be for him. Which approach is more likely to empower his ability to seek more independence and gather information needed to weigh his options realistically?

My “good day” response is what we are referring to in this issue as a coaching approach. When we [coach](#), we first and foremost listen to others. We pay attention to their words as well as the emotions beneath the words. We ask brief, open-ended questions that prompt further thinking, planning, and evaluating. We validate the person’s emotions, efforts, and desires as we ask what they need to make further progress on their goals. Parents often bring teenagers to my office and ask me to help that young person get ready for college, with all the independence that campus life will entail. Sometimes, when I invite the parent to come back to my office with us for that initial session, he or she turns to the teen and asks, “I’d like to but how do you feel about that?” I want to High Five the parent whenever that happens, recognizing the hard work he/she has probably done to give the teen more decision-making freedom in this developmentally appropriate way. This is a small but significant way to promote that young person’s self-determination. To strengthen that process, I often encourage parents and educators to read:

Coaching Students with Executive Functioning Deficits, by Peg Dawson & Richard Guare (2011; Guilford Press)

Ready for Take-Off: Preparing Your Teen with ADHD or LD for College, by Patricia Quinn & Theresa Laurie Maitland (2011; Magination Press)

Coaching College Students with AD/HD, by Patricia Quinn & Theresa Laurie Maitland (2000; Advantage Books)

Learning to coach begins with the belief that the person you are communicating with has the right, and the ability, to identify his/her own goals. When we coach people, we validate their feelings and experiences and help them develop their own solutions to achieving important goals. In the process, we help them build a [lifelong tool](#) for success known as “self-determination.”