

# The Importance of **SELF-DETERMINATION** in Achieving Independence



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JoDell Heroux, Ph.D.

Abby, a 16-year-old girl, decides to apply for a job at the local grocery store to earn some extra spending money. Abby enjoys socializing with her friends at sporting events, movies and other activities. Her parents know Abby has limited employment experience yet they encourage her to apply for the job, hoping that she will develop her skills over time.

Maya, an 18-year-old girl with developmental disabilities (DD), wants to get a part-time job, but her parents and teachers do not think she has the requisite skills to be successful. Maya sometimes has difficulty attending to the details of a task and often needs reminders to complete steps. Her parents and teachers decide that she needs more time to develop these skills, and they hold an **Individualized Education Program (IEP)** meeting to discuss the issue.

According to Kathie Snow, author of **Disability Is Natural**, a website dedicated to encouraging new ways of thinking about DD, this is an all-too-common scenario for children and youths with disabilities. Students without disabilities who may or may not have the requisite skills are encouraged to pursue their goals. Yet students with disabilities are often expected

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to master specific skills, identified by a team of specialists, before they are encouraged to pursue their goals. There is an assumption that students without disabilities will naturally develop the skills of self-determination (SD), while students with disabilities require explicit instruction and considerable practice in order to become self-determined. Research has historically supported the need for explicit instruction in SD for students with disabilities;<sup>1</sup> however, current research has highlighted the importance of student-centered individualized plans for addressing SD needs.<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Agran, 1997; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998

<sup>2</sup> Denney & Daviso, 2012; Mason, Field, & Sawilowsky, 2004; Wehmeyer, 2007

# WHAT IS SD and Why Is It Important?



Organizations such as [The National Gateway on Self-Determination \(NGSD\)](#) have echoed the call for elevating the voices of individuals with disabilities in developing, planning and achieving their own personal and professional goals. The NGSD created a series of videos designed to provide information about the role of SD in the lives of individuals with DD across settings and contexts. The video *What Is Self-Determination and Why Is It Important?* features individuals with DD sharing their personal understandings of SD. According to Brad, SD is “being able to not only be independent but to be able to make the decisions necessary to live life to the fullest.” For Scott, SD means the ability “to make your own choices and stand up for your own rights.” Kathy believes that SD is about independence and the ability to “do more things without having to be relying on others.” Mia focuses on what she believes to be central to SD: “The big part of self-determination is the ‘self’ part and the ‘self’ part is you!” This project reflects a shift away from the idea that only disability specialists and experts know what is best for individuals with disabilities, and acknowledges the desire and capacity for individuals with disabilities to direct their own lives with support and guidance.

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This has tremendous implications for how special educators prepare for and support the postsecondary goals of the students they teach. What does SD mean to special educators? What skills are associated with SD, and how are they addressed? How can SD skills be embedded in the curriculum to support student learning? These are important questions for special educators to consider as they work with and support students with DD.



# SD in **SPECIAL EDUCATION**



SD can mean different things to different people, but at its very core, it is an individual's ability to control their own destiny. In the field of special education, researchers have described SD as “a combination of skills, knowledge and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior.”<sup>3</sup> What types of skills and knowledge are necessary to become goal-directed and self-regulated? Michael Wehmeyer, Ph.D., an expert in the field of self-determination, along with colleagues Martin Agran, Ph.D., and Carolyn Hughes, Ph.D., identified 12 component skills that are necessary for becoming a self-determined individual:

- 1 Choice-making
- 2 Decision-making
- 3 Problem-solving
- 4 Goal setting and attainment
- 5 Independence, risk-taking and safety skills
- 6 Self-observation, evaluation and reinforcement skills
- 7 Self-instruction
- 8 Self-advocacy and leadership skills
- 9 Internal locus of control
- 10 Positive attributes of efficacy and outcome expectancy
- 11 Self-awareness
- 12 Self-knowledge





These are critical skills for all students; however, they are rarely explicitly addressed in general or special education academic curricula. Research indicates that teachers of students with disabilities are aware of the importance of self-determination but do not place significant emphasis on it in curricular planning, instructional practices, Individualized Education Program (IEP) development or transition planning.<sup>4</sup> When planning for instruction and developing IEPs, teachers should consider how these 12 skills can be embedded in their current practices rather than addressing them in isolation. The next section will share strategies for embedding three of the SD component skills into the existing curriculum: (a) choice-making, (b) self-instruction and (c) self-awareness.



4 Agran, Snow, & Swaner, 1999; Mason, Field, & Sawilowsky, 2004; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998

# PROMOTING SD in the Special Education Classroom



## Choice-Making

The ability to choose is a right that reflects our individualism. We can choose the music we listen to, the hairstyles/clothes we wear, the colors we prefer and the food we enjoy. This, however, does not hold true for all human beings. For students with DD, multiple barriers exist regarding opportunities to make choices. Others often presume that students with DD have few preferences, so their opportunities to choose or express preferences may be severely limited and their perceived lack of choice-making ability often results in others making choices for them.<sup>5</sup> Research has shown that when students with DD are allowed to express preferences and make choices, independent task performances and duration increase,<sup>6</sup> motivation increases,<sup>7</sup> academic achievement increases<sup>8</sup> and aggressive behaviors are reduced.<sup>9</sup> Special educators can support choice-making by assessing student preferences. While students with DD may not be able to verbally express preferences, special education professionals may be able to identify preferences



5 Mithaug, 2005

6 Taber-Doughty, 2005

7 Foster-Johnson, Ferro, & Dunlap, 1994

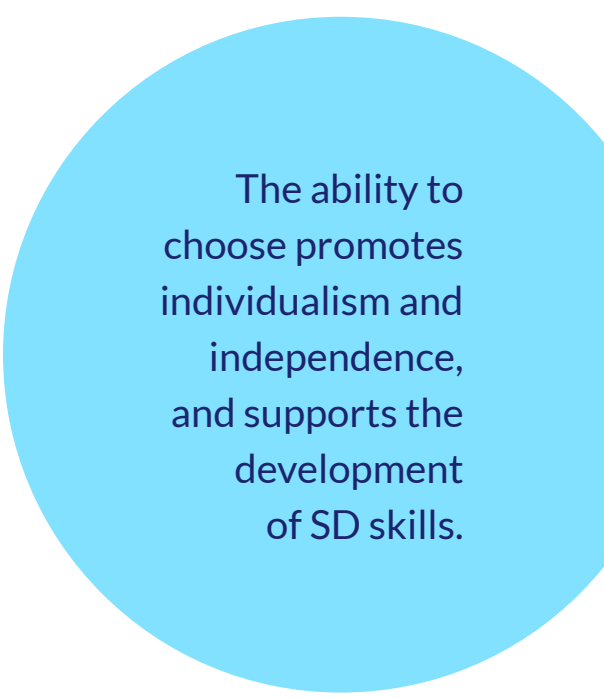
8 Cooper et al., 1992

9 Seybert, Dunlap, & Ferro, 1996



based on students' non-verbal responses when choices are presented. Wehmeyer (2007) offers several approaches for eliciting preferences, such as using a computerized touch screen or a microswitch, and noting student movement toward an object, physical selection of an item, verbalizations, gestures, physical affect and time engaged with an item. Observing the choices a student makes over an extended period of time will assist in the identification of their preferences, which will provide the framework for offering additional choices in the future.

Whether on the bus; in the hallway, classroom or lunchroom; or participating in a community-based outing, there are countless opportunities for choice-making. Special education professionals will need to consider the number and type of choices offered and how the choices will be presented.<sup>10</sup> In the classroom, the teacher may offer students the opportunity to choose one of two morning activities using images of the objects/materials or the actual objects/materials themselves. The ability to choose promotes individualism and independence, and supports the development of SD skills.



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### Self-Instruction

Many students with DD have difficulty with short-term memory and problem-solving skills, which can be mediated through self-instruction. Self-instruction involves making

task-specific statements out loud prior to or concurrent with their performance of a task.<sup>10</sup> Similar to metacognition (the awareness and understanding of one's own thought processes), self-instruction engages the student in verbalizing the expectations of the task as it is being performed. This enables students to direct their own learning and performance of tasks and allows them to become more self-determined learners.<sup>10</sup> This is a strategy often employed by adults as they attempt to retrace their steps to locate a lost item or as they tackle a difficult task with multiple steps, such as assembling a piece of furniture or following an unfamiliar recipe.

Wehmeyer (2007) identifies two steps in teaching self-instruction skills to students with DD: 1) teaching the student to repeat the self-instructions, and 2) teaching the student to complete the task at the same time or after each spoken self-instruction. Self-instruction can be used to support completion of household tasks, problem-solving and following directions. Wehmeyer (2007) shares the following self-instruction example for teaching a task-sequencing strategy using the **Did-Next-Now approach**:<sup>11</sup>

**DID** *"I swept the floor."*

**NEXT** *"I have to empty the trash."*

**NOW** *"I need to pull the bag out of the can now."*

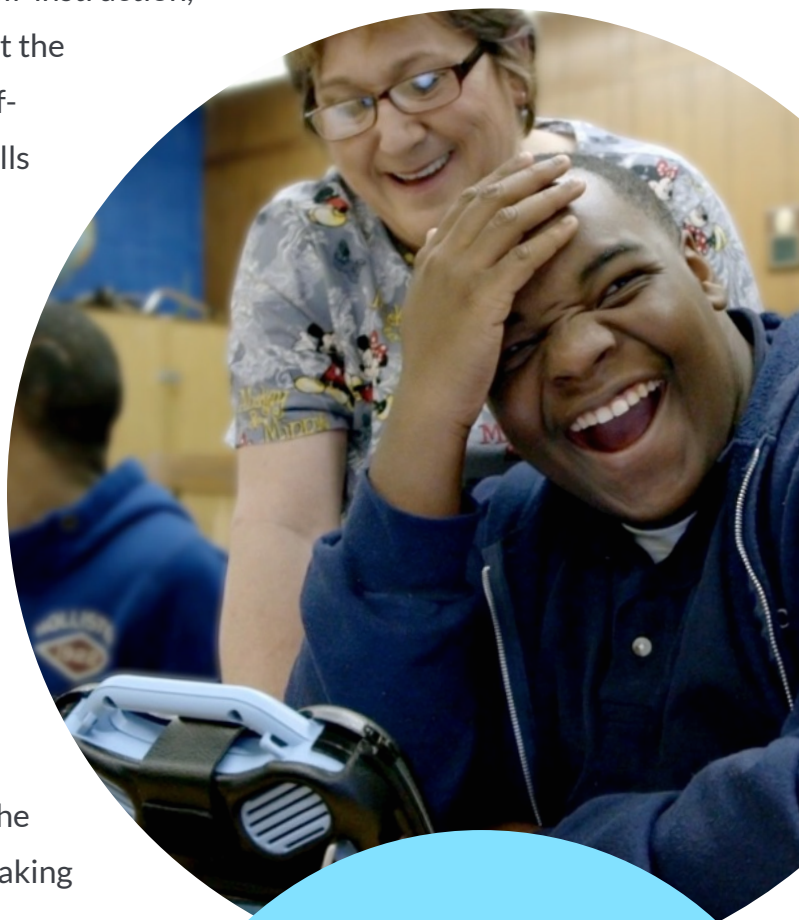




Although there is limited research on the use of self-instruction, the studies that have examined its efficacy support the feasibility of teaching students with DD to use self-instruction to acquire, maintain and generalize skills across a variety of tasks and settings.<sup>12</sup>

### Self-Awareness

To be self-determined requires awareness of one's own strengths, weaknesses, abilities and limitations and how they influence one's ability to meet personal and professional goals. How do educators promote self-awareness for students with and without DD? How do students identify their strengths and weaknesses? One of the most challenging aspects of this component is speaking openly about a student's disability. Some educators may be uncomfortable talking openly about a student's disability, preferring to speak more generally about how everyone has strengths and weaknesses. It is important to speak openly about disability to support students in learning more about how the disability impacts various aspects of their lives. Having an understanding of how DD impacts academic, social and vocational skills is necessary in order for students to be able to recognize and mediate potential challenges and increase independence. It is especially important for special education professionals to exhibit a growth mindset toward their students

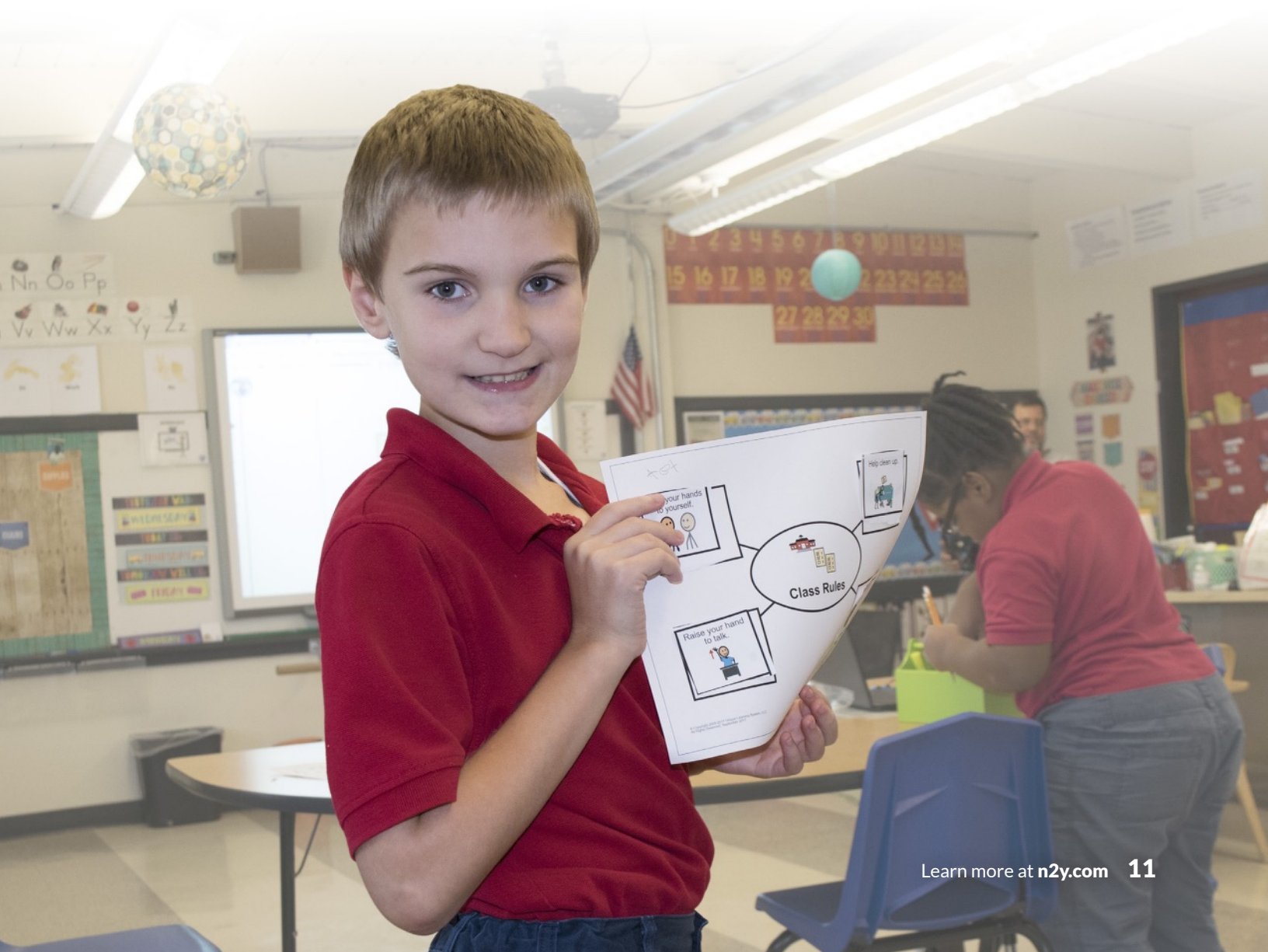


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with DD, rather than hold to clinical or medical definitions of an individual's disability, which might lead to lowered expectations.

The [Disability Is Natural](http://disabilityisnatural.com) website offers a unique perspective focused on the belief that our attitudes drive our actions, and changes in our attitudes and actions can help create a society where all children and adults with DD have opportunities to live the lives of their dreams ([disabilityisnatural.com/about.html](http://disabilityisnatural.com/about.html)).

The following section shares some resources for teaching SD including online modules, lesson plans and examples for embedding SD components into an existing curriculum.





## Integrating Into **DAILY LEARNING**



If you're looking for solutions to help integrate SD skills into daily learning, n2y's Unique Learning System is a complete online instructional program for students with special learning needs that fosters self-determination through persistent daily opportunities.

Each student using the program has an individualized home screen that provides learning choices and preferences, actively involving the learner in the day's lessons and encouraging independence.



# THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-DETERMINATION IN ACHIEVING INDEPENDENCE

Interactive, differentiated lessons help students set and reach learning goals. Starting in pre-K, embedded transition and life skills empower students with problem-solving, leadership and self-advocacy abilities.

**Unit 18**  
TRANSITION

## Dress for Success

**Unit Overview**

**Dress for Success**  
This month's unit focuses on how to dress to always look your best. Team members will learn the importance and benefits of dressing for success. The stories, articles and activities will focus on how to choose clothing and apply appropriate grooming habits. Team members will learn about different ways to look nice while building their reading, math, daily living, grooming, hygiene and responsibility skills.

Lesson	Activities	Description	Page
1	Daily Living Club	Topic Story 1 - <i>Dressing for an Interview</i>	4
2	Daily Living Club	Topic Story 2 - <i>The Shopping Trip</i>	60
3	Daily Living Club	Article 1 - "Does It Fit?"	115
4	Daily Living Club	Article 2 - "It's a Match"	135
5	Daily Living Club	Article 3 - "Looking Good!"	155
6	Daily Living Club	Rights and Responsibilities - Looking Good	172
7	Daily Living Club	Personal Survival Game - What Not to Wear!	182
8	Lifeline Skills	Banking Basics	189
9	Lifeline Skills	Offices in My World?	219
10	Lifeline Skills	Time Matters	235
11	Lifeline Skills	Safety Budget Planning	247
12	Lifeline Skills	Grooming Basics	285
13	Lifeline Skills	Social Skills	361
14	Lifeline Skills	Everyday Communication	365
15	Lifeline Skills	Monthly Newsletter	319
16	Lifeline Skills	Recipes	336
17	Job Club	Job Exploration	365
18	Job Club	Applications and Interviews	375
19	Job Club	Job Interview Surveys	386
20	Job Club	Work Habits	390
21	Job Club	Volunteer Jobs - Solutions for the Homeless Crisis	387

**Lesson 6 - Life Skills Application 2**  
**Keeping It Cool**

**Instructional Targets**

**Standards for Language**  
• **Vocabulary Acquisition and Use:** Use words acquired through academic and domain specific sources when speaking and writing.

**Daily Living**  
• **Home Living:** Responsibly use sources of energy and technology involving heat, light and electricity.

**Differentiated Tasks**

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Students will...	Students will...	Students will...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use unit topic words in conversation.</li> <li>Demonstrate safety rules when using electrical appliances and tools.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Point to pictures of key vocabulary from unit topics as part of a discussion.</li> <li>Use electrical appliances and tools with supported guidance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Make a selection to indicate a picture of key vocabulary within a unit topic.</li> <li>Activate electrical appliances with switch assistance (e.g., switch-latch timer).</li> </ul>

**Topic Connection**

In Chapter 2: **The Sun**, students learn about the Sun. The Sun provides heat and light to the Earth. Sometimes, the Sun can make us feel very hot, like during the summer. People use electrical appliances, like air conditioners and fans, to keep cool in the heat. In this lesson, students will learn how to safely use an electric fan.

Topic Words	Transition Words
Earth, solar system, Sun*	appliance, electricity, energy, heat, rule, safety, tool

**\* Power Words**

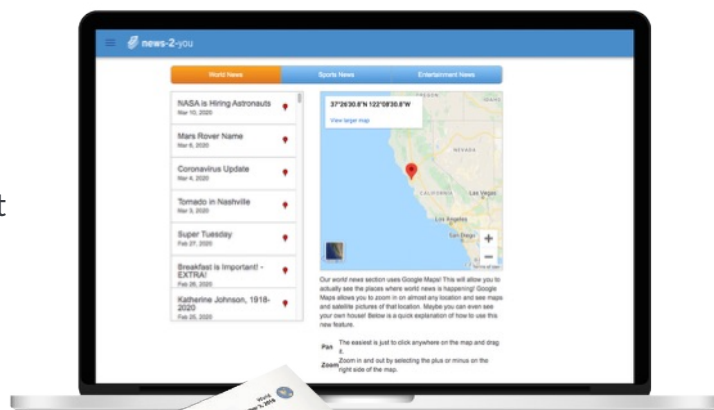
A complete Transition grade band at the post-high school level further promotes the self-determination skills students need to build success and independence beyond school. Within this grade band, a Transition Passport helps students take ownership of their futures with a personal collection of postgraduate resources that travel with them as they plan and complete their transition.

Integrated with Unique Learning System, these popular and proven resources further enrich and support all aspects of a successful learning environment: student engagement, communication, literacy and math skills, transition skills, self-regulation and classroom management for individual, small-group or whole-group instruction.

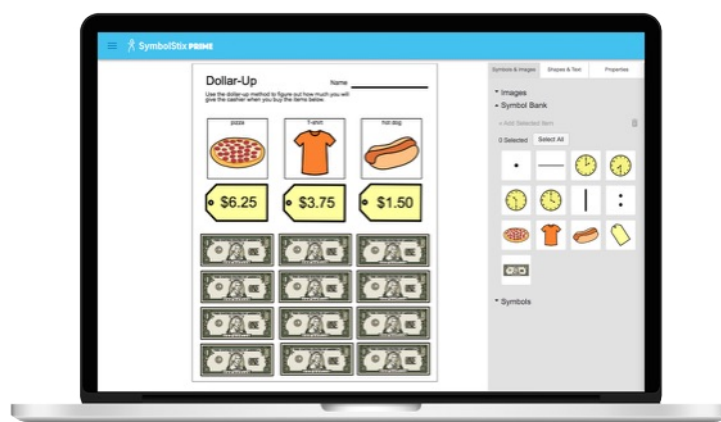




Deliver world events and breaking news in a differentiated, age-respectful, ELA standards aligned weekly newspaper that enables your students to access informational text and take part in meaningful discourse—in school or at home.



Efficiently create interactive or print-based visual supports, communication boards, routines and activities with this powerful symbol search engine and resources creation tool. Over 90,000 symbols with changeable skin tones provide visual consistency throughout all n2y solutions. Available with built-in text to speech!



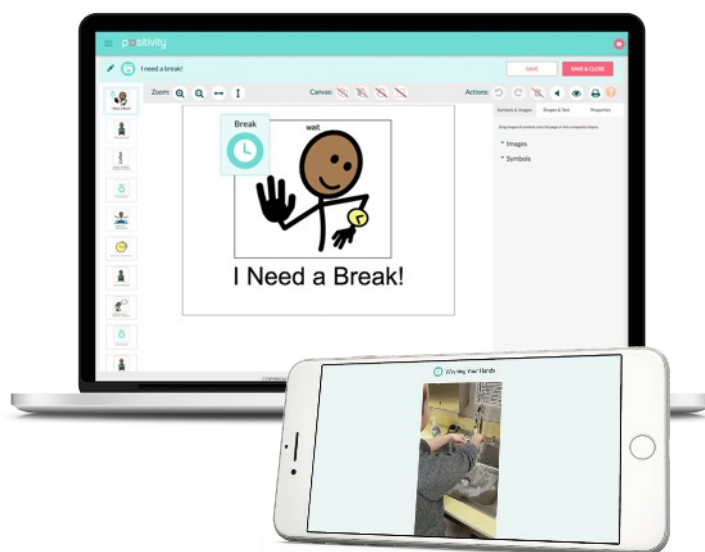
# L<sup>3</sup> SKILLS<sup>®</sup>

Provide a fun, real-world way for students to practice life and transition skills. L<sup>3</sup> Skills also reinforces core math and literacy skills and offers teachers added flexibility in grouping and classroom management.



# positivity<sup>®</sup>

Enhance classroom management and empower self-regulation to lay the foundation for successful learning outcomes. Research confirms that in order for learning to occur, self-regulation skills and emotional control are vital. Positivity, when integrated with n2y's instructional solutions, helps students build these skills. The strategies in Positivity, including decision trees, social narratives and video modeling, can be used in conjunction with day-to-day instruction to facilitate choice, self-instruction and self-awareness.



## Websites



Disability Is Natural

<http://www.disabilityisnatural.com>



I'm Determined

<http://www.imdetermined.org>



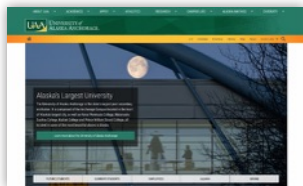
National Gateway to Self-Determination

<http://www.ngsd.org>



PACER's National Parent Center on Transition and Employment

<http://www.pacer.org/transition/>



UAA Center for Human Development

<https://www.uaa.alaska.edu>

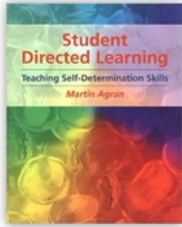


KU Beach Center on Disability

<https://beachcenter.lsi.ku.edu/beach-self-determination>



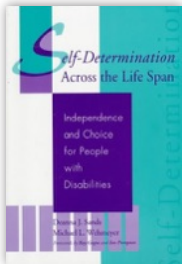
## Books & Articles



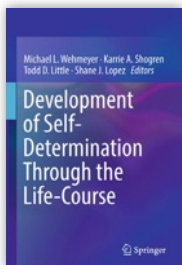
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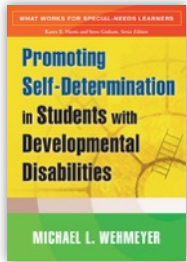
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## ABOUT N2Y

For over 20 years, it's been n2y's mission to support special educators, transforming not only the classroom, but also the lives of teachers and administrators, therapists and paraprofessionals, families and all the students we proudly serve. We believe everyone can learn, and every student has the right to reach their full potential. n2y offers the first comprehensive program serving at the epicenter of the entire IEP team. Our differentiated solutions are designed specifically to help unique learners access the general education curriculum in any learning environment, from self-contained to resource, inclusion, therapeutic, home or virtual settings. For more information, visit [n2y.com](http://n2y.com) and join us on Facebook and Twitter.



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