

Making choices is a learned skill that is important in our daily lives. All people, including those with disabilities, have the right to make choices about the things that affect their lives.

Why is Choice-Making Important?

Learning to make choices is like learning any skill. The best way to learn choice-making is to practice. Start practicing with your children by having them make small choices every day. It is okay if they make mistakes. Mistakes are how everyone learns. Making choices improves children's communication skills. Over the long-term, learning to make choices improves safety in the community and leads to **living a more self-determined life**.

By practicing choice-making during childhood, your child will be more prepared to make their own decisions as an adult. Adulthood may feel far off, but anything done now sets children up for greater independence down the road.

How is Choice-Making Different for Kids with Disabilities?

If we want our children with disabilities to control their own futures, and have a say in what they want, families and caregivers need to prepare them to make these decisions. The best way to start this process is to teach choice-making skills when your children are young.

There are many reasons that adults make decisions for children with disabilities. Sometimes these adults, including parents, school staff, therapists and others, are trying to keep children safe. However, adults need to recognize that children with disabilities are able, with practice and support, to make their own choices and decisions.

Giving children the space to make a choice, and maybe make a wrong decision, may seem risky to parents. In reality, it empowers children and gives them a sense of control. Research tells us that adults with disabilities who are more involved in their community, and who have more control and independence in their decisions, are **less likely to be victims** of abuse and neglect.

What Can Families Do to Promote Choice-Making?

As families, we need to make plans that encourage our children to make their own choices. Make sure these plans include activities that support your children to set their own goals, help them think about options and choices, and work with them to think through the consequences, or outcomes, of their choices.

Everyone's choice-making skills are different, and there is no right or wrong time to start building on them. You can begin by offering your children smaller choices and, as their skills improve, moving to larger choices, that might have a longer-lasting impact. This can feel scary. Make a list of the risks you're comfortable with your children taking. Then think about the benefits and consequences of each. When your children feel your encouragement and support, they will be more confident in their own abilities.



Adults with disabilities often share that they want to make their own choices and wished they had more opportunities as kids so they would be better prepared as adults.



How Can Professionals Promote Choice-Making Skills?

If your children are enrolled in Wisconsin's Children's Long-Term Support (CLTS) program, your support and service coordinator can help your family in this effort. Each year you will select the services covered by CLTS that direct your children toward their goals.

The annual review is the perfect opportunity to give children the space and time to be part of choice-making process. This can include asking children about their interests and talking with them about their short-term and long-term goals for the next year. [Deciding Together](#) is a great tool to use to guide this review. Together with the service coordinator, you can help your children communicate their ideas and make choices.

This same approach can also be used as you work with your children's school on the Individual Education Plan (IEP). Include children as active members of the team to share their thoughts and give feedback. The other members of the team will appreciate their input as they make goals for the next school year.



What is Supported Decision-Making?

By supporting your child when they are young to make more choices, they will be in a better position to make decisions as an adult. When your child approaches age 18, it will be time to talk with your child and family about the type of decision-making support your child will need. Options include Supported Decision-Making agreements, guardianship, and other legal tools. Supported decision-making allows people with disabilities, starting at age 18, to make informed decisions about their lives with the support of trusted allies. Supported decision-making allows family and friends to support an individual with a disability in making, understanding and communicating their choices and decisions.

Supported Decision-Making Agreements:

Supported Decision-Making agreements are legal documents. They are less-restrictive alternatives to guardianship. Supported decision-making agreements allow an individual with disabilities to get the support they need to live as independently as possible. They are easily changed and do not require an attorney.

To learn more about supported-decision making:

- Wisconsin BPDD, [Supported Decision-Making Toolkit](#)
- Family Voices fact sheet, [Supported Decision Making for Transition Aged Youth](#)



Learn more on the Family Voices website's [Learn page](#).

