

Goal Setting for Transition-Age Students

by Susan B. Palmer and Kendra Williams-Diehm

Setting goals is an essential part of life for students who are planning for the future. It is important for students to have many and varied opportunities to set goals and to practice the goal-setting process, including the evaluation of goals prior to exiting high school. Setting goals is just one aspect of Self-Determination that students with disabilities can learn and practice repeatedly over time to establish this activity in their lives. Goal-setting instruction can occur within the context of classes or in separate self-advocacy or counseling settings. Often goal setting can also be used in a job or community setting or just to think about things that students might like to achieve in their lives. Parents or others can use goal-setting with students away from school to increase involvement in life outside of school. All this can help students to accomplish what it is they wish to do.

You might ask a student, “What can you do to get a better grade in English this semester?” or “Do you have some ideas about getting the job you mentioned?” If students have no idea or are not able to express themselves, then you might begin teaching students to set goals and learn to solve problems and make decisions. This can be done with a single student, a small group of students, or an entire class.

The steps listed immediately below can be used to structure the teaching of goal-setting according to Wehmeyer and colleagues (2007):

1. Identify the Goal

What do you want to learn or do?

2. Write the Goal

Is the goal clear, concise, measurable, short-term/ long-term?

3. Create an Action Plan

How will you begin to work on this goal and when?

4. Evaluate Progress and Adjust Plan or Goal

How are you doing, what have you done, is the goal finished or not?

For students who have more severe disabilities, you may need to adjust the steps above, starting even before the first step to talk about what the word, “goal” means. Explain that a goal is what you wish to do, and have a conversation that involves either making choices between two different acceptable goals or taking more time to explore the student’s preferences. Use effective listening (including restating ideas to clarify) and allow plenty of time for students to express their thoughts.

Not only will teachers need to help students set goals but they will also help the goals be accomplished by working on methods to monitor the goals or setting up plans that involve skill building for all students. In this manner, teachers can assist all students with disabilities to learn to set goals, giving extra support, as needed, for the first few times adults manage the process of setting goals. Then, as time goes on and the procedure is repeated as many times as necessary, students will begin to take over more of the process as their own. Teachers need to know what students want or need to do, and blend these two streams of knowledge into support for their students.

As goals are being set, keep the following thoughts on this goal checklist in mind.

Goal Checklist

- _____ Is goal specific (not too narrow in focus, or too broad)?
- _____ Is goal measurable or directly observable?
- _____ Is it relevant for student’s environment or situation? or . . .
_____ an attempt to modify the environment of the student?
- _____ Is goal attainable, but . . .
_____ challenging enough?
- _____ Is this something the student really wants to work on, and something you can help student do?
- _____ Is there a timeline for the goal?
- _____ Can student vision the completed goal, or tell what the goal will “look” like when finished?

Benefits of goal setting

- ✓ Student involvement in school activities and transition planning
- ✓ A feeling of being capable and in control of the situations around you
- ✓ Increased motivation to achieve new goals

Students working on academic goals often report that they are able to finally understand how to manage their assignments or increase their grades with targeted studying or use of strategies. Teachers have reported that once students learn the Self-Determined Learning Model process (referenced below) and begin to use it as needed, students take a more active role in their education, appear to be less passive, and become more active decision makers and problem-solvers (Lee, Palmer & Wehmeyer, in press).

Goals and Self-Determination

Setting and achieving goals provides a way for students to become more self-directed and independent according to Sands and Doll (2005). Self-determination is essentially being able to make choices and decisions about one's own life without any more support than necessary. According to Wehmeyer (1999), self-determination emerges when individuals learn and use aspects of self-determination such as choice-making, problem-solving and others listed below. In addition, being in an environment that supports choice and student-involvement is important. Frequent experiences that involve self-determined principles are important. Supports and accommodations should be provided, as needed.

Below are some definitions of aspects of self-determination that influence goal setting.

Choice making is simply the selection of one thing from an array of options.

Decision making involves weighing the possible alternatives to any situation or problem and then making a choice.

Problem solving is the process of solving some situation or dilemma whose solution is not immediately known.

Self-Monitoring and **self-reinforcement** support being able to tell if one is doing what is needed, and if so, providing some way to reward oneself, either with a feeling of accomplishment or an external reward.

References

- Lee, S.H., Palmer, S., & Wehmeyer, M.L. (in press). Goal-setting and self-monitoring support for access to the general education curriculum. *Intervention in School and Clinic*.
- Wehmeyer, M.L., Agran, M., Hughes, C., Martin, J., Mithaug, D.E., & Palmer, S. (2007). *Promoting self-determination in students with intellectual and developmental disabilities*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Sands, D., & Doll, B. (2005). Teaching goal setting and decision making to students with developmental disabilities. In M. L. Wehmeyer & M. Agran (Eds.), *Mental retardation and intellectual disabilities* (pp. 273-296). Boston: Pearson.

Further Information on Goal Setting

Field, S., & Hoffman, A. (2005). *Steps to self-determination: A curriculum to help adolescents learn to achieve their goals*. Austin, TX: PROED.

Steps to Self-Determination centers on defining and accomplishing goals for secondary students using self-determination. Both short-term and long-term planning goals are addressed. Materials are provided to work with students to determine the steps to reach their goals.

Halpern, A.S., Herr, C.M., Doren, B., & Wulf, N.K. (2000). *Next S.T.E.P.: Student transition & educational planning*. Austin, TX: PROED.

The curriculum encourages students to take control of personal life decisions and become an active participant in the transition goal setting process. A whole unit is devoted to setting job, education and training, and personal life goals, using a step-by-step process.

Martin, J.E., Huber Marshall, L., Maxson, L., Jerman, P., Hughes, W., Miller, T., & McGill, T. (2000). *Choicemaker*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.

The *Choicemaker* curriculum is designed to assist secondary students to successfully choose, take action upon, and complete goals in all aspects of transition and life. Subcomponents of the curriculum include *Choosing Employment Goals, Choosing Education Goals, and Choosing Personal Goals*.

Sands, D., & Doll, B. (2005). Teaching goal setting and decision making to students with developmental disabilities. In M. L. Wehmeyer & M. Agran (Eds.), *Mental retardation and intellectual disabilities* (pp. 273-296). Boston: Pearson.

Detailing six principles of goal setting, the authors provide a step-by-step method for setting goals with students of any ability level, but examples illustrate the process for students with intellectual disabilities.

Wehmeyer, M. L., Lawrence, M., Kelchner, K., Palmer, S.B., Garner, N., & Soukup, J. (2004). *Whose future is it anyway? A student-directed transition planning process* (2nd ed.). Lawrence, KS: Beach Center on Disability, University of Kansas.

The *Whose Future* curriculum provides a complete guide to preparing for IEPs for secondary students, with a strong emphasis on self-determination. An entire section of the curriculum promotes goal setting and keeping track of goals in all areas of transition. The curriculum is written as if the author is directly speaking to students, using a student-friendly language. It can be used independently by student readers, or can be read and explained to students in large or small groups by the teacher.

Wehmeyer, M. L., Palmer, S., Agran, M., Mithaug, D., & Martin, J. (2000). Promoting causal agency: The Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction. *Exceptional Children*, 66, 439 - 453.

This article includes a description of the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction that can be used for solving problems and achieving a wide variety of goals. Twelve student questions lead teachers and students through a discussion to identify a goal, to design a plan to meet the goal, and to generate an approach to evaluate the plan or goal.