

## **Supporting and Assisting Decision-Making by People with Intellectual Disabilities**

### Decision Making is a Skill – People Can Improve with Practice!

- No one is born with the capacity of a great decision maker – these skills are learned through different life and learning experiences over time.
- People with intellectual and developmental disabilities deserve and need a variety of support and opportunities to acquire decision-making skills.
- When we withhold support or limit experience when decision making is limited, we create situations and circumstances that reinforce beliefs about links between intellectual disability and limited capacity for decision making.
- The assessment of individual decision making ability and “capacity” should be conducted in real life situations and take into consideration prior life and learning experience.
- The person's ability to make decisions should be developed and supported to over their lifetime through varied, real life learning opportunities and supports.
- People can develop capacity by taking an active role in everyday decisions like:
  - what to wear,
  - what to eat, and
  - what to do today.
- People who have not had the opportunity to participate in decision making should not be determined to lack capacity without additional opportunities and support to learn – unless it is an emergency situation.

*The opportunity for self-direction is an essential part of dignity and respect for all people. We can all help by providing opportunities for people to express preferences and direct decisions about their lives and how they are supported.*

**Want to learn more?** Contact Morgan Whitlatch at (202) 459-4004  
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## Some People May Need Help with Decision-Making Now– But Everyone Can Learn to Make Some Decisions for Themselves

- Guardianship is a legal intervention to assist people who lack capacity for decision-making.
- Establishing guardianship removes rights and freedoms from a person and assigns control to someone else.
- A careful and comprehensive assessment should be made to determine if guardianship is the most appropriate and least restrictive support option available to the person.
- This assessment should focus on the person's:
  - decision-making skills,
  - experience,
  - capacity, and
  - circle of support.
- Guardianship should be pursued after all other alternatives have been considered and found insufficient to meet the person's needs for assistance.
- Many people with intellectual disabilities are capable of making some decisions for themselves with minimal supports even if others require the assistance of a guardian.
- Efforts should always be made to involve the person in decisions about his or her life and provide opportunities for the person to build decision making skills even when a guardian is appointed.
- Conduct annual reviews to see if guardianship can be terminated or reduced.
- Each year, you should also assess the effectiveness of support and learning experiences to see if the person is making progress in building decision making skills.

*Capacity is not static and can change over time. With education, support and practical experience, many people can develop their decision-making skills and reduce or eliminate the need for surrogate decision making support.*

For information about training or consultation designed to meet your specific needs, call Tina Campanella at 202-448-1442 or email [tcampanella@dcqualitytrust.org](mailto:tcampanella@dcqualitytrust.org).



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