PACER CENTER
CHAMPIONS FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES®

Supported decision-making

What is supported decision-making (SDM)?

All people need support when making decisions that are difficult or risky for them. Supported decision-making (SDM) is a process where an individual with disabilities receives support to make life decisions as needed. It offers a structured process that allows individuals with disabilities to make their own choices with help from trusted supporters such as family members, friends, advocates, and professionals, rather than having a legal guardian make decisions for them. Supporters do not make decisions for the individual but help them understand their options, weigh the consequences, and communicate their choices effectively. This is especially important to consider as youth turn 18 and are legally considered adults.

What is age of majority?

The age of majority is the age when a person is considered an adult and gains full decision-making rights and responsibilities. It is set by the state and is usually 18. When a person reaches the age of majority, the transfer of decision-making rights shifts from the parents to the individual. This includes the right to make medical decisions, have control over finances, pursue an education, and hold legal responsibility for contracts.

How does it work?

- **Identify needs:** Assess the individual's decision-making abilities and areas where support is needed. Common areas for support include medical, financial, staffing, relationship, transportation, and independent living decisions.
- **Select supporters:** The individual chooses trusted supporters in their circle who understand their needs, have established a good rapport, and are willing to provide ongoing, flexible support. It is important that current and future communication is effective.
- **Developing a support plan:** With support, the individual creates a customized plan that outlines how supporters will assist in making and implementing decisions. Documents like ***When do I want support?*** are helpful tools for this process.
- **Informed decision-making:** Best practices include guiding the individual through the decision-making process by presenting options, explaining the consequences, and facilitating their choices. Decision-making is a learned skill that benefits from a variety of both successful and challenging experiences.

©2025 PACER Center, Inc. | PHP-c318
8161 Normandale Blvd., Minneapolis, MN 55437 | (952) 838-9000 | (800) 537-2237
pacer@pacer.org | pacer.org

PACER Tip Sheet

PACER Center is not a legal services agency and does not provide legal advice or legal representation. The content of this resource is for informational and educational purposes only, and is not legal advice, and should not be used as a substitute for legal advice.

- **Review regularly as needs and abilities change over time:** People are constantly growing and changing. An individual's needs and interests will shift as they mature, learn new skills, and gain experiences. What is a good match now may not be as good in the future.

SDM vs. guardianship: What's the difference?

Guardianship has traditionally been considered the best option for individuals unable to make safe or quality of life decisions such as medical, financial, staffing, relationships, transportation, and living arrangements. It is typically a court-appointed, long-term legal commitment. The guardian is responsible for the individual's major life decisions.

SDM is an alternative to guardianship that allows guidance without removing the individual's rights. The individual makes their own quality of life choices with flexible support from their chosen team as needed. Their team might include family, friends, advocates, or professionals. SDM may be an informal agreement or legally recognized in some states.

Conclusion: SDM is a less restrictive alternative to guardianship and encourages individuals with disabilities to stay in control of their own lives. It allows trusted people to assist them in understanding their options and making informed decisions. SDM emphasizes autonomy and self-determination in decision-making while providing necessary assistance as needed. It is an alternative to court-appointed guardianship, where someone else is responsible for an individual's important decisions because they are not capable of representing themselves. SDM centers around the individual's values resulting in a greater sense of control and dignity. It is more likely to help the individual mature and take responsibility for their quality-of-life decisions. The focus is entirely on the individual with a disability and their unique needs, preferences, and goals.

This document was created in collaboration with
West Virginia Parent Training & Information