

Parental Autonomy Support and its Implication for Children's Self-Esteem, Emotional Health, and Prosocial Tendencies

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Abstract

Self-determination theory (SDT) deems autonomy to be one of three universal needs for all humans. Autonomy supportive parenting is characterized as parental responsiveness towards children's emotions, feelings, ideas, and perspectives. This paper emphasizes the SDT definition of autonomy as feeling volitional control over one's actions compared to the common misconception of autonomy as being a sense of independence and individualism. It discusses the application of SDT in both Western and Eastern societies and aims to highlight the importance of autonomy supportive parenting. The literature reveals that the need for autonomy is prevalent in both Western and Eastern societies. The fulfillment of autonomy needs in early childhood and adolescence has been associated with better emotional health, higher self-esteem, and promotes prosociality. Thus, suggesting that early autonomy support provided by caregivers builds a foundation for better developmental outcomes later in life. These findings may be especially pertinent for future investigations regarding autonomy support as a potential mitigator for mental health concerns later in life.

Keywords: *developmental psychology, parenting, self-determination theory, emotional health, autonomy-granting.*

Introduction

Socialization of prosociality is a crucial part of social development as it builds a foundation for children to build positive social relations with others. Socialization principles of prosociality begins in infancy through affiliative exchanges between the child and other social agents which are facilitated by processes such as imitation, sharing and giving behaviours, and positive emotional interactions (Brownell & The Early Social Development Research Lab, 2016).

Socialization agents, such as parents, are invested in understanding which facets of parenting can maximize their child's well-being, promote prosocial tendencies, self-confidence in their children and how they can best support their children in times of hardship. While in the Western context, it may seem evident that the best developmental outcomes stem from nurturing and supportive environments, it is essential to gain a deeper understanding of what constitutes a positive environment and how it can be fostered. Autonomy support may be one

essential factor for cultivating caring environments where children feel in control of their actions and feel motivated to be active agents in their development. This paper aims to emphasize the importance of autonomy supportive parenting across Western and Eastern cultures and the associated developmental outcomes which result from the extent to which children's autonomy needs are met. In particular, I will be addressing the impact of autonomy supportive parenting on children's self-esteem, emotional health, and prosociality.

Autonomy and Autonomy Support

Joussemet and colleagues (2005) define autonomy as "feeling as if one is the origin of one's own actions [and] that one has input into determining one's own behaviour" (p. 1216). In other words, autonomy is conceptualized by how much volitional control and freedom an individual feels to create their own choices (Vansteenkiste, 2005). An autonomous perception of the self is built through autonomy-supportive behaviour exhibited by the primary caregivers and determined by the extent to which parents are responsive towards their child and engage in validating behaviours towards their child's thoughts, feelings, and perspectives (Clark & Ladd, 2000). Autonomy support is also communicated by how much parents promote children's initiative-taking and self-expression (Rodríguez-Menéndez et al., 2024).

These factors make up what is considered an autonomy supportive environment in which children are regarded as individually functioning members and are appreciated for their unique perspectives. For example, allowing children to make their own choices in small daily tasks such as dressing themselves up for school or, making their own snack can be characterized as autonomy supportive. Social environments in general, which allow children to lead their own tasks and activities, may also promote autonomy development, such as children leading groups and games in school or, during other extracurricular activities.

Parental Control

The conceptual opposite of autonomy support is parental control (Wong et al., 2022). The concept of parental control can be divided into two subcategories: external control and, internal/psychological control. Wong and colleagues (2022) define external parental control as parenting which intends to coerce children to act in accordance with the caregivers' strict rules through the use of corporal punishment, assertion of power, and threats to remove privileges. In contrast, internal control, which is also sometimes referred to as psychological control, has been described as, "parenting aims to pressurize children to feel, think, or behave in particular ways by appealing to their internal self" (Wong et al., 2023, p. 702). The strategies used by caregivers to evoke internal control are the use of guilt and shaming tactics, belittling the child's feelings and opinions, and the withdrawal of affection. Internal control has been linked to internalizing issues, such as depression and poor emotional regulation as well as reduced prosociality in children and youth across cultures (Rodríguez-Menéndez et al., 2024; Vansteenkiste et al., 2005). Engaging in controlling behaviours limits children's freedom to engage autonomously in their environment and restricts their need for self-determination.

Some level of parental control, however, is necessary for children's adjustment. Behavioural control consists of parents setting reasonable expectations and rules to ensure the development of self-regulation skills and the safety of the child (Harma et al., 2025). Aspects of behavioural control include setting curfews, monitoring children's whereabouts, overseeing children's schoolwork, and providing structure for daily routines. Behavioural control parenting is associated with better adjustment, prosocial skills, high academic success, self-efficacy, and self-regulation in adolescents. Thus, good parenting is not conceptualized as a lack of control, but rather as setting reasonable boundaries that ultimately support children to fulfill their goals and responsibilities.

Self-Determination Theory

According to self-determination theory (SDT), humans have a universal need for competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2008). SDT posits that the extent to which all three basic needs are met corresponds to individual well-being, intrinsic motivation, goal making, and thriving towards psychological growth (Ryan, 2009). On the contrary, deficits in meeting one's needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy may lead to issues in self-motivation and symptoms of psychopathology, such as negative self-image and a lack of liveliness or enthusiasm. Moreover, Ryan & Deci (2000) suggest that autonomy is crucial for promoting a natural orientation of internal motivation. Feeling internally motivated to achieve one's goals rather than being extrinsically motivated or compelled by external pressures or coercion requires self-determination, or in other words, feeling self-directed and volitional. Thus, the expression of autonomy is an essential component in endorsing personal growth and promoting mental well-being in children.

Cross-Cultural Application of SDT

Many scholars have questioned SDT's claims about universality, specifically due to the theory's inclusion of autonomy as one of the three basic psychological needs. Criticisms about individual autonomy being a universal need have been made due to the differences in parenting techniques and cultural beliefs between Western and Eastern cultures (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999). Eastern cultures are collectivist and emphasize the importance of individuals conforming to societal standards and forming a dependence on other social actors (Nalipay et al., 2020; Vansteenkiste et al., 2005). The main critique of SDT's inclusion of autonomy is that the notion of independence and promotion of individuality may not translate well in Eastern societies. This is exemplified in a prominent study done by Iyengar and Lepper (1999) in which they found that Asian American children prefer to have choices made for them to maintain group harmony, whereas Anglo-American children made choices as a way to express their independence and individuality. The authors suggest that, due to these results, the

need for autonomy may not be universally prominent.

The criticisms directed at SDT's claims about autonomy and independence being a universal need are flawed because SDT does not define autonomy as the need to be independent. Independence is typically seen to be a sense of detachment from other external sources. Rather, SDT conceptualizes autonomy as feeling in control of one's actions on an intraindividual level (Vansteenkiste et al., 2005). Thus, criticisms about the theory's assertion of individualism are unsubstantiated and can be considered as misinterpretations of SDT's claims. Indeed, studies conducted on cross-cultural applications of SDT have been found to support the theory's claims of being universal in both collectivist and individualist cultures (Nalipay et al., 2020). Nalipay and colleagues (2020) found that satisfaction in all three components of SDT (competence, relatedness, and autonomy) promotes academic competence and achievement, and optimal functioning in educational settings for students in five Western societies and six Eastern societies. Furthermore, autonomy support was found to facilitate autonomous motivation and reduce internalizing symptoms such as anxiety and depression, in a sample of Chinese students (Vansteenkiste et al., 2005). Likewise, in a US & East Asian meta-analysis conducted by Yu and colleagues (2018) found support for autonomy support to be a universal need. They also identified autonomy support to promote wellbeing across both Eastern and Western cultural contexts. In a sample of Turkish students, Tunca (2024) reported that autonomy supportive parenting increased adolescents' mental toughness and predicted better social-emotional health outcomes and positive stress perception. Mental toughness is one's ability to remain self-confident even in difficult and, challenging environmental contexts. Whereas positive stress perception is one's belief in their ability to cope in stressful conditions. These findings support the suggestion that meeting autonomy needs delineated in SDT are shown to promote universal well-being across cultures in both Western and Eastern societies. Therefore, SDT can be considered a universal model of needs and can be applied to parenting and

developmental outcomes in both cultural contexts.

Importance of Autonomy Support

Engaging in autonomy supportive parenting has been connected to several components of well-being in children, such as high self-esteem, good emotional health, and prosociality (Joussemet et al., 2014; Froiland, 2015; Rodríguez-Menéndez et al., 2024). These three components minimize the development of internalizing and externalizing symptoms that are characteristic of psychopathology. The American Psychological Association (2018) defines externalizing issues as behaviours that are directed outward into the external world such as, hostility or anger; whereas internalizing behaviours are those that are directed inward within oneself such as, anxiety and depression.

Self-Esteem and Emotional Health

Many studies have shown that autonomy supportive caregiving is related to high self-esteem and emotional well-being in children. Joussemet and colleagues (2014) found that parenting programs specifically tailored to encourage autonomy support decreased externalizing (aggressive and disruptive behaviour) and internalizing symptoms, and promoted positive affect, higher life satisfaction, and higher self-esteem in children. The parenting program specifically aimed to encourage authoritative parenting by focusing on dimensions such as, affiliation, structure, and autonomy support. Highly controlling parenting approaches that provide little opportunity for autonomy, on the other hand, have been shown to undermine children's self-esteem and give rise to internalizing issues such as, symptoms of anxiety and depression (van der Bruggen et al., 2010). Likewise, Froiland (2015) found that engaging in autonomy supportive parenting characterized as, providing rationale for rules, expressing empathy, acknowledging children's interests, and using noncontrolling language during daily interactions, promoted internal motivation in children towards completing homework, and expanded children's intellectual experiences. This is because, through autonomous parenting, caregivers aim to evoke internal motivation by making difficult tasks fun

and engaging through positive dyadic bonding, in which both the child and parent share a positive interaction, and understanding the child's perspective rather than imposing commands, rules, and expectations upon the child. During autonomous parenting, children also tend to feel more positive emotions and develop positive mentalities towards learning. For example, turning a difficult and frustrating wordsearch into a fun game by providing hints to the child and showing excitement towards their progress and success (Froiland, 2015). Thus, turning a bothersome task into an enjoyable dyadic activity evokes a positive emotional reaction from the child rather than frustration and giving up.

Prosocial Orientation

Parental autonomy support during childhood has been linked to prosocial tendencies in childhood and later in life. A study by Rodríguez-Menéndez and colleagues (2024) found that children with autonomy supportive parents exhibited higher prosocial competence such as, engaging in problem-solving behaviours, and were more likely to behave empathetically towards others. Moreover, Roth (2008) found that in a sample of college students, individuals who reported receiving autonomy supportive parenting during childhood were more likely to engage in helping behaviours to support others' needs. This study indicates that autonomy support has been shown to promote an internal motivation to help others rather than a self-oriented mentality towards helping. Self-oriented helping is when individuals engage in prosocial behaviours to gloat, or to receive appreciation and approval from others. Therefore, having early encouraging and supportive parenting can not only lead to prosociality in childhood, but create a foundation for an internally motivated prosocial orientation which remains stable in adulthood.

Future Directions

Future research should focus on how autonomy-supportive parenting may contribute to the development of children's moral self-

concept. A moral self-concept is the awareness a person has of themselves as being either a moral or immoral agent (Schiele et al., 2025). This self-concept emerges as early as kindergarten and is built by the internalization of one's social environment, such as parenting and cultural norms. Little is known about how specific autonomy supportive parenting practices give rise to moral self-concept formation during mid-childhood and adolescence. It may be valuable to investigate these developmental periods particularly, as these are the times in development in which children may be attempting to seek more autonomy and learn about their individual capacities and their role in the world.

Conclusion

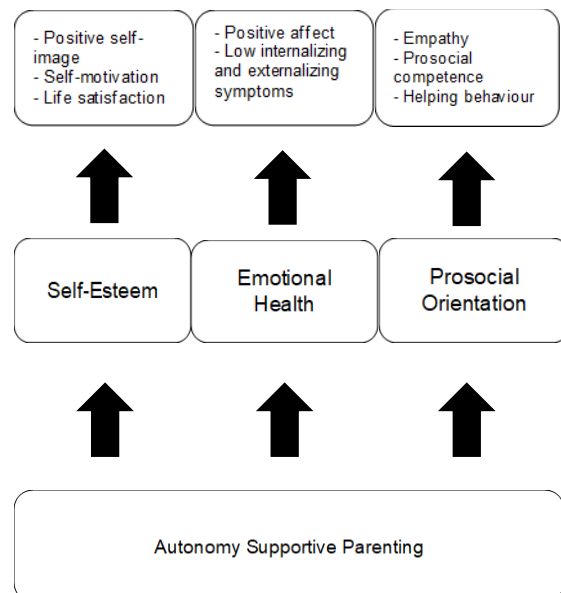
Self-determination theory asserts autonomy as one of three universal needs. Critiques of SDT often misinterpret the definition of autonomy as a need for independence, when in reality SDT suggests autonomy to be a sense of volitional control rather than a need for individualism (Vansteenkiste et al., 2005). The fulfillment of autonomy needs is associated with positive developmental outcomes including, better emotional health and higher self-esteem, and prosociality (e.g., Figure 1). Needs for autonomy can be satisfied by autonomy supportive parenting, which is characterized by being responsive and validating towards the child's feelings and thoughts and providing rationale for rules and expectations (Clark & Ladd, 2000; Joussemet et al., 2005). On the contrary, parenting techniques that limit autonomy and impose excessive control may lead to issues with anxiety and depression (Wong et al., 2023).

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Currently, the burden of mental health issues is rising in young people across many parts of the world (McGorry et al., 2025). While there may be a myriad of reasons for why this may be, it is crucial to recognize certain relieving factors that may help mitigate these issues. Autonomy supportive parenting may serve as one vital factor that may attenuate the prevalence of mental health concerns during adolescence and early adulthood. Lastly, the developmental outcomes of autonomy supportive parenting seem to be applicable across cultures in both Eastern and Western societies thus, making autonomy supportive parenting a core tenet in promoting better developmental outcomes for children across cultures.

Figure 1. *Autonomous Parenting and Developmental Outcomes*



Note. Autonomy supportive parenting promotes self-esteem, good emotional health, and prosocial orientation in children. The components of each factor are delineated above.

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