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*A Self-Determination Theory Perspective on Parenting*

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To cite this article:

Joussemet, M., Landry, R., & Koestner, R. (2008). A self-determination theory perspective on parenting. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie canadienne*, 49(3), 194-200. doi:10.1037/a0012754

To link to this article: <https://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2008-10897-004.html>

Author Notes

This research was funded by grants from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and the Fonds Québécois de Recherche Sur la Société et la Culture, Québec (FQRSC) to Richard Koestner and from the FQRSC to Mireille Joussemet. Renée Landry was supported by fellowships from the same two organizations.

## Abstract

This article describes research on parenting that supports children's need for autonomy. Firstly, we define parental autonomy support and distinguish it from permissiveness or independence promotion. We also define psychologically controlling parenting and distinguish it from behavioral control (structure). Secondly, we present studies examining how parental autonomy support promotes healthy development. Indeed, clear and consistent positive effects arise from different types of studies, conducted with children of various ages. Parent observation studies suggest that parental autonomy support is associated with infants' motivation and toddlers' internalization. Parent interview studies reveal that an autonomy-supportive parental attitude relates to children's adjustment at school. Children self-report studies demonstrate a clear link between perceptions of parental autonomy support and psychosocial functioning among adolescents. Thirdly, the correlates and precursors of parental psychological control and autonomy support are presented, with a special focus on parents' trust in their children's ability to develop in an autonomous manner. Finally, ideas for future research are suggested. Though Self-determination theory is not strictly a developmental theory, it seems highly pertinent to the socialization of children, their internalization and development.

### A Self-Determination Theory Perspective on Parenting

Parents are confronted with a fundamental but often difficult task: teaching children the values and regulations necessary to function effectively in society while also nurturing children's drive to express themselves and to pursue their unique interests and capacities. The central socialization goal is internalization, wherein children "take in" social regulations, make them their own, and eventually self-regulate autonomously (e.g., Lepper, 1983; Schafer, 1968). When it functions optimally, internalization is beneficial for children's learning, well being, and psychosocial adjustment. However, because activities that need to be internalized are often not enjoyable (e.g. clean-up, homework), adults wonder how to encourage children's engagement in such tasks without negatively affecting their self-determination.

Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, in press) uses the concept of innate, universal, psychological needs to understand human motivation. All human beings have the fundamental needs to feel related, competent, and autonomous in order to develop and function optimally (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The paramount importance given to the need for autonomy is the core feature of SDT. It refers to the experience of freedom in initiating or endorsing behaviors, i.e. to authentically concur with the internal or external forces that influence behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000b). It is important not to confound this need with independence or selfishness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Rather, autonomy is about volitional, harmonious and integrated functioning, in contrast to more pressured, conflicted or alienated experiences.

Intrinsic motivation and internalization are the two processes underlying personality and social development (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Individuals naturally seek to

engage in interesting activities (i.e. intrinsic motivation), but also naturally seek to integrate in their sense of self less interesting but important values and behaviors of their social environment (i.e. internalization). Self-determination theory suggests that children have an innate propensity toward mastery of their environment, and that the internalization of values, behaviours, and attitudes in the social surround is a spontaneous, natural process (Ryan, 1995). The organismic assumption that there are “innate integrative or actualizing tendencies underlying personality and social development” (Ryan, 1995, p. 397) is in line with attachment theories that posit a biologically driven propensity to comply with society’s norms (e.g., Stayton, Hogan, & Ainsworth, 1971).

Self-determination theory highlights the role of the social context, which can either facilitate or undermine children’s intrinsic motivation and internalization. Both intrinsic motivation and internalization are likely to function optimally when children’s need for autonomy is supported by parents and teachers (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). It is not merely that children can develop well without external pressure and control: external pressure that goes against children’s developmental tendencies can actually have a negative effect on their development.

#### Autonomy Support

Autonomy support refers to the active support of the child’s capacity to be self-initiating and autonomous (Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, & La Guardia, 2006) and it is one of the three key components of successful parenting (with the others being involvement and structure). When parents want to encourage children to do certain activities, there is autonomy support if the goal is to foster autonomous self-regulation rather than mere

compliance. For interesting activities, all there is to do is to avoid controlling strategies and let the developmental process of intrinsic motivation flourish. In contrast, when the targeted tasks are not inherently enjoyable (e.g. clean-up, homework) and internalization needs to take place, supporting children's autonomy takes a more proactive form.

In an experimental study with young children, Koestner and colleagues showed that it was possible to encourage children to comply with behavioural limits without adversely affecting children's intrinsic motivation, as long as the limits were provided in an autonomy-supportive manner (Koestner, Ryan, Bernieri, & Holt, 1984). Though the actual behavioural guidelines were identical in the different conditions, the manner in which they were provided had a strong differential impact on children's experience. Autonomy support was operationalized in terms of four ingredients: (1) providing rationale and explanation for behavioural requests; (2) recognizing the feelings and perspective of the child; (3) offering choices and encouraging initiative; (4) minimizing the use of controlling techniques. This operationalization was derived from the child psychologist Haim Ginott's method of empathic limit-setting (Ginott, 1969). Subsequent experimental studies have shown that autonomy support, operationalized in this manner, is associated with greater internalization and integration of important but uninteresting activities (Joussemet, Koestner, Lekes, & Houliort, 2004).

Autonomy support should not be confused with permissiveness (i.e. lack of structure) or neglect (i.e. lack of involvement). Autonomy support concerns how structure and involvement are provided by parents (e.g., the extent to which consideration of the child's perspective and needs is displayed). Autonomy support is

thus entirely compatible with high levels of parental involvement and structure; indeed, the combination of autonomy support with a developmentally appropriate level of parental involvement and structure is considered the ideal for fostering positive child development (Grolnick, 2003).

Supporting autonomy should also not be confounded with the promotion of independence. This conceptual distinction was recently supported in a study assessing adolescents' perceptions of their parents' behavior (Soenens et al., 2007). Adolescents completed questionnaires measuring their parents' promotion of volitional functioning, their promotion of independence as well as adolescents' own personal autonomy and psychosocial functioning. First, factor analyses validated the distinction between the promotion of volitional functioning from the promotion of independence by parents. Second, structural equation modeling indicated that perceived promotion of volitional functioning uniquely predicted psychosocial adjustment while perceived promotion of independence did not. Moreover, results demonstrated that adolescents' personal autonomy mediated the relationship between the promotion of volitional functioning and adolescents' adjustment.

### Psychological Control

In contrast to autonomy support, psychological control is thought to undermine intrinsic motivation and produce non-optimal forms of internalization. Psychological control is defined as parental control that intrudes on the child's psychological world (Ryan, 1982). This type of control aims to change the child. Parents can pressure their child to think, feel or behave in particular ways by using a variety of techniques, such as

guilt induction, love withdrawal and invalidation of feelings (Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004; Barber, Stolz, & Olsen, 2005).

It is important to differentiate *psychological* control from *behavioral* control, which refers to parents communicating clear expectations about appropriate behaviors and monitoring children's behavior related to those expectations (Barber, 1996; Barber et al., 2005; Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Luyckx, & Goossens, 2006). While most studies on behavioral control relied on a monitoring scale (parental knowledge of child behavior), the construct refers more broadly to the imposition of a clear, consistent, and developmentally appropriate structure on children's behavior (enforced rules, regulations, limits; Barber et al., 2005; Schaefer, 1965).

While the structure inherent in *behavioral* control supports competence and fosters healthy development, the power assertion inherent to *psychological* control is detrimental for children (Barber, 2002; Grolnick, 2003). By pointing to psychological control as a threat to optimal internalization, SDT is in line with the parenting styles literature (e.g., Barber, 1996; Baumrind, 1971). In this research on the promotion of child adaptation, authoritative parenting (i.e. provision of structure in a warm and democratic way) has often been found to be associated with the best child outcomes (e.g., Baumrind, 1967, 1978; Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987; Maccoby & Martin, 1983) When the authoritative parenting construct was first "unpacked" into its components of acceptance, behavioural and psychological control, each component was shown to make an independent contribution to school success (Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989).

## Studies of Parental Autonomy Support

Studies of parental autonomy support can be divided into three categories:

(1) studies that used observational methods to measure parental behavior, (2) studies that used parental interviews and (3) studies that assessed perceptions of parental behavior as reported by their children. The observational studies have involved very young children, the interview studies have involved school-age children, and the perception studies have involved primarily teenagers and young adults. Despite the different age groups associated with the three approaches, the results from studies tend to be highly consistent. The following sections will review the three categories of studies.

### *Parent Observation Studies*

In the first observational study, Grolnick, Frodi, and Bridges (1984) measured maternal autonomy support during a play session in which mothers were instructed to demonstrate various toys to their one-year-old children and to sit next to them while they played. The play sessions were videotaped and analyzed in terms of mothers' vocalizations, task-oriented behavior, and affect, with ratings ranging from controlling to autonomy-oriented. Controlling communications were defined as those that sought to change the infants' ongoing activity, whereas autonomy-oriented communications were defined as those that sought to help maintain it. The children were later videotaped while they played independently with different toys. The results indicated that the maternal autonomy support was significantly related to the amount of time infants spent later in persistent, task-related behavior. A follow-up study when the children were 20 months old indicated that infants of autonomy-supportive mothers displayed greater



task-oriented persistence and competence during solo play than did infants of more controlling mothers (Frodi, Bridges, & Grolnick, 1985).

Another study (Deci, Driver, Hotchkiss, Robbins, & Wilson, 1993) used similar methods to measure autonomy support and control in parents of 6- and 7-year-old children. Mother-child dyads played together with construction toys for two sessions, each followed by a “free-choice” period in which the child was left alone to play for 5 minutes. The mothers’ vocalizations were classified into three categories (controlling statements, autonomy support, and neutral statements). Results showed that controlling vocalizations from mothers were negatively related to children’s level of intrinsic motivation during the free-choice periods.

In the developmental psychology area, observational research by Kochanska and colleagues points to the importance of autonomy-supportive parental behavior in children’s internalization of rules and guidelines. In one study with toddlers, mothers and their children were videotaped while they performed various tasks (Kochanska & Aksan, 1995). In one task, the mother was asked to prohibit the child from touching attractive objects. Videotapes were coded for the type of control used by mothers. *Gentle guidance*, a concept similar to autonomy support, was defined as controlling the child’s behavior in a manner that was not power assertive (e.g. using reasoning, polite requests, positive comments, suggestions, distractions). *Negative control* was defined as using threats, harsh physical interventions and negative statements. Next, the child was left alone with the prohibited attractive objects for a few minutes to measure the degree to which he or she had internalized the prohibition. Results showed that children’s compliance was associated with maternal use of gentle guidance. Moreover,

mothers who used “gentle guidance” were more likely to have children who showed a high level of “committed compliance” across various tasks. Compared to “situational compliance,” which refers to superficial obedience to request, “committed compliance” reflects a genuine eagerness to adopt the mother’s agenda and is considered a preliminary form of internalization and self-regulation (Kochanska, Coy, & Murray, 2001)

### *Parent Interview Studies*

The most extensive early study of parental autonomy support was conducted by Grolnick and Ryan (1989) who examined how it relates to children’s adjustment and competence in school. Mothers and fathers of 8 to 12 year old children were interviewed about the ways in which they motivate and respond to their child. The researchers coded the interviews on various parenting dimensions, including autonomy support, focusing on sections pertaining to internalization (e.g. doing homework, cleaning one’s room, going to bed on time). Autonomy support was operationalized as (a) valuing autonomy rather than an emphasizing obedience, (b) using autonomy-oriented techniques (e.g. reasoning rather than using rewards and punishments), and (c) allowing choices rather than imposing their own agenda. Composite scores of parental autonomy support were computed by calculating means across its three components.

A diverse set of children’s school outcome were measured. Children reported on their self-regulation, competence, and control at school. Their teachers rated their social (i.e. acting-out, anxiety) and academic (i.e. performance, motivation, independence) adjustment. Children’s academic achievement was measured by standardized tests and classroom grades. Regression analyses of parental autonomy support revealed unique effects for positive child outcomes. Children whose parents were more autonomy-

supportive reported more autonomous self-regulation and performed better on both achievement indexes. Parental autonomy support was also associated with better teacher-rated academic adjustment and less acting-out.

A longitudinal study by Joussemet, Koestner, Lekes and Landry (2005) built on that work to examine the relations between maternal autonomy support and children's school adjustment over time. Autonomy support was coded from maternal interviews, given when children were 5 years old. The coding system was comparable to the procedure used by Grolnick and Ryan (1989) and assessed the four ingredients typically used to operationalize autonomy support (Koestner et al., 1984). Outcome measures were gathered three years later, when children were in third grade. These included teacher-rated academic and social adjustment, as well as achievement in math and reading. Regression analyses controlling for demographic and child factors at age 5 revealed that autonomy support was positively related to social and academic adjustment as well as to reading achievement. Autonomy support was also associated with greater consistency across social and academic domains and a higher overall adjustment.

#### *Children's Reports of Parental Behavior*

The first study to assess children's perceptions of their parents' autonomy supportive behavior was by Grolnick, Ryan and Deci (1991). These researchers asked children in grades 3 through 6 to report on their parent's level autonomy support and involvement. The autonomy support items inquired about the extent to which parents took time to talk to the child, explained the way the child should behave, and sought to understand the child's perspective. The scale was completed twice, once for mothers

and once for fathers. Results showed that perceived autonomy support from both mothers and fathers was significantly positively associated with children's own feelings of competence and autonomy, which, in turn, predicted children's school performance. Subsequent research has confirmed the importance of perceived parental autonomy support to adolescents' self-regulation, adjustment and school success (Guay, Ratelle, & Chanal, in press; Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). Similar results have been obtained with college students (Niemic et al., 2006; Robbins, 1994). Interestingly, other research has suggested that parental autonomy support is especially helpful to children as they make stressful school transitions (Grolnick, Kurowski, Dunlap, & Hevey, 2000; Ratelle, Guay, Larose, & Senecal, 2004; Ratelle, Larose, Guay, & Senecal, 2005).

Studies assessing adolescents' perceptions of their parents' level of autonomy support have also been used to explore the consistency of the relation of autonomy support to positive child outcomes across diverse cultures. Studies completed in Russia and China showed that parental autonomy support was associated with effective self-regulation and positive school outcomes for adolescents, just as in studies completed with North American adolescents (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001; Vansteenkiste, Zhou, Lens, & Soenens, 2005). Another recent study assessed immigrant and sojourning students to examine the relation of parental autonomy support to the way in which young people internalized the values and guidelines of both their heritage culture and the host culture (Downie et al., 2007). The results showed that autonomy-supportive parenting was associated with greater internalization of both heritage and host cultural values, and with higher levels of well-being, as measured in both self and peer reports. Together,

these studies support Self-determination theory's claim for the universal importance of autonomy support in promoting healthy internalization and adaptation.

### Parenting Styles Correlates

#### *Factors Associated with Controlling Parenting*

A variety of factors can lead parents to be controlling rather than autonomy-supportive. Grolnick (2003) argues that parental experiences of pressure lead to more controlling behaviors because autonomy support requires time and psychological availability, which are both reduced under pressure. Internal forms of pressure, like worry and anxiety, have such negative effects (Grolnick, Gurland, DeCoursey, & Jacob, 2002). One recent study suggested that parents' perceptions of external threat in their child's environment as reflected in worries about the future, limited resources, and unpredictability were also associated with controlling behaviors (Gurland & Grolnick, 2005).

Children's behavior can also contribute to the pressure experienced by a parent and contribute to controlling parenting. Indeed, an early experimental study involving a child confederate trained to act cooperatively versus oppositionally during a play session showed that mothers' level of autonomy-supportive versus controlling behaviors varied depending on the behavior of the child (Jelsma, 1982). Research with actual parent-child pairs has generally failed to demonstrate significant relations between children's temperament and parents' level of autonomy support (Joussemet et al., 2005; Landry et al., in press) but this may be due to the use of insensitive or imprecise measures of temperament. It does seem likely that children with motivational or self-regulatory deficits will elicit more controlling and less autonomy supportive behavior

from parents. SDT would predict, however, that the consequence of parents responding to their children's poor self-regulation with controlling strategies would be to forestall positive developmental change among these children.

Ego-involvement in parents may also influence the provision of autonomy support versus control. When a person is ego-involved in a task, her feelings about herself depends on a good performance on that task (Ryan, 1982). It is also possible to be ego-involved in the performance of one's child (Grolnick et al., 2002). One study showed that when mothers became ego-involved in the performance of their child, they tended to be more controlling (Grolnick et al., 2002). Another recent study examined how mothers interact with their 4th-grade children when they feel that their children's social skills are being put to the test (Grolnick, Price, Beiswenger, & Sauck, 2007) and included a measure of the degree to which mothers hinge their self-worth on their children's social outcomes. In the evaluation condition, mothers were told that children would be evaluated by other children. In the no-evaluation condition, there was no mention of evaluation. Results showed that mothers who were ego-involved in their child's social outcomes and who were in the evaluation condition were most controlling. Thus, an interaction between individual and situational factors seems to play a role in the level of autonomy support versus control displayed by parents.

#### *Factors Associated with Autonomy-Supportive Parenting*

One psychological factor that may predispose parents to behave in an autonomy-supportive rather than controlling ways is parents' implicit beliefs about their child's ability to develop in an autonomous fashion. Self-determination theory supports the idea that children play an active role in their own development. Through the processes of

intrinsic motivation and internalization, children actively explore their environment, pursue their interests, take on challenges and engage in activities in which they can develop their competence, as well as internalize the behaviours, values and attitudes of their social surround. Thus, children are innately driven to engage in these behaviours that are key to their own development (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Parents may vary, however, in how much they trust that children's development will naturally take place. Landry and colleagues recently developed a scale to assess parental beliefs related to how their child's development will unfold (Landry et al., in press). It was hypothesized that parents who trust that development occurs naturally will have relaxed rather than rigid goals for the development of their child, and will feel less ego-involved about their child reaching these goals. Holding such trusting beliefs should translate into relatively lower level of stress in parents, as well as in autonomy-supportive parenting behaviors that will foster better parent and child adaptation.

A recent series of studies confirmed the relations between mothers' trust in organismic development, autonomy-supportive parenting, and adaptation among mothers and their young children (Landry et al., in press). A first study showed that trust in organismic development was distinct from optimism, neuroticism, and social desirability whereas it related to having relaxed expectations for developmental milestones and making fewer social comparisons about one's child. A second study used observational methods to demonstrate a significant link between trust in organismic development and mothers behaving in an autonomy-supportive rather than controlling manner toward their one year old child. Importantly, this study also showed that the relations of trust in child development were independent of the child's cognitive

and self-regulatory capacities. A third study used a prospective design to show that trust in first time mothers was associated with better maternal and child adaptation over one year's time, controlling for initial levels of adaptation and child temperament. A final study explored social/political antecedents of trust in organismic development by comparing the beliefs of first time mothers from Canada and Norway. Although Norway and Canada have many similarities, Norway places great emphasis on child and parent welfare and provides considerable social resources for young parents. Results showed that Norwegian mothers reported higher levels of trust in organismic development and more relaxed developmental norms compared to Canadian mothers. Together, the four studies suggest that trust in organismic development fosters autonomy-supportive parenting practices and positive maternal and child adaptation.

Two recent studies exploring teachers' autonomy support shed further light on the antecedents on autonomy support by revealing patterns similar to those found with parents. Pelletier, Séguin-Lévesque, and Legault (2002) conducted a questionnaire study with 254 teachers, from grades 1 to 12. As expected, teachers' self-determined motivation toward their work predicted their disposition to be autonomy-supportive with students. Moreover the more teachers perceived students to be self-determined toward school, the less they perceived pressure at work, and the more they indicated that they were self-determined toward their work. In a study with 132 teachers and their 1,255 students from Grades 3-6, Roth, Assor, Kanat-Maymon, and Kaplan (2007) found that teachers' self-determined motivation for teaching enhanced their autonomy-supportive behaviour (as reported by students), which in turn promoted students' autonomous motivation for learning. While autonomous motivation for teaching was positively



associated with teachers' sense of personal accomplishment, it was negatively associated with emotional exhaustion. These school studies suggest that for both parents and teachers, self-determined motivation fosters an autonomy-supportive socialization style, which in turn promotes positive outcomes for children. Experiences of pressure, perceptions of threat, ego-involvement and emotional exhaustion seem to undermine autonomy support, whereas self-determined motivation, trust in organismic development, and perceptions of self-determined motivation in children seem to promote it.

#### Future Directions for SDT Research in Parenting

There are several important issues in Self-determination theory research conducted in other domains that could usefully be examined in the context of parenting. First, although SDT research focuses a great deal of attention on individual differences in motivationally relevant behavior, it has also increasingly adopted intra-individual methodologies to examine the variations of need support, need satisfaction, and adaptation over the course of every day life (e.g., La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000; Sheldon, Ryan, & Reis, 1996) It would seem important to adopt daily recording methodologies in research with parents and children to more carefully examine the reciprocal relations between parent and child behavior, and to determine more precisely what internal and external factors act upon parents to make them behave in controlling rather than autonomy-supportive ways. We would anticipate that daily variations in felt support from spouse, own parents, friends, and other parents will play an important role in the extent to which parents can find the inner resources required to provide the patient, gentle guidance that characterizes autonomy-supportive parenting.

A second direction for future research is to expand the way in which internalization processes have been examined in relation to parents and children. Parenting research in the SDT tradition has focused on parents' role in helping their children internalize important values and guidelines. However, another important question is how the parents themselves internalize expectations, values and guidelines about how to be a good parent. Parents are exposed to diverse norms and guidelines about what it means to be a good parent and it would be interesting to explore the variety of influences (e.g., other parents, friends, media reports, extended family) and how they are experienced and integrated in the self. Recent research suggests that parents vary greatly in the extent to which they have autonomous versus controlled reasons for pursuing various aspects of the parenting role and that the type of internalization is importantly related to parenting adjustment (Landry, Joussemet, & Koestner, 2008).

The final direction for future research is to develop and test parent training programs based on Self-determination theory. There is now evidence that managers, teachers, and doctors can be taught to behave in more autonomy-supportive ways and that such behavior change is accompanied by positive effects in the employees, students, and patients who work with them (Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989; Reeve, 1998; Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004; Williams, Gagné, Ryan, & Deci, 2002; Williams, McGregor, Zeldman, Freedman, & Deci, 2004). Research on the self-determined theory of parenting has advanced sufficiently so that it should be possible to design parent training programs that effectively teach first-time parents to adopt autonomy-supportive methods with their children. Notably, there already is a widely

used parent workshop based on Haim Ginott's theory of empathic limit-setting (1969) that has been employed with parents in numerous countries (Faber & Mazlish, 1980, 1990). Compared to four other workshops, this parenting intervention which emphasized the elements of autonomy support was the one that was associated with more improvements in the familial climate, in addition to better parenting practices (Fetsch & Gebeke, 1995).

### Conclusion

Research reviewed in this article clearly suggests that autonomy support is a key element in the parent-child relationship. SDT is a parsimonious motivational theory that pertains particularly well to socialization, children's internalization, and development. When parents support their children's need for autonomy, they are not permissive or promoting detachment. Rather, they provide structure in a democratic manner, which respects children's interests and feelings. Such autonomy support in the familial context is associated with a host of positive child outcomes. Observational studies reveal that parents' autonomy support is associated with better motivation and persistence in infants and better internalization among toddlers. Interview studies in which parental autonomy support was coded reveal that this style is positively linked with children's social and academic adjustment at school. Similarly, adolescent reports of their perceptions of parental autonomy support are related to psychosocial and academic benefits. Parental autonomy support is probably influenced by a host of factors and some are more malleable than others (e.g., parental beliefs versus child temperament). Interestingly, the degree to which parents trust that children have a natural tendency toward internalization and development (a central tenet of SDT) strongly influences their

capacity to provide autonomy support. Future research may benefit from exploring how autonomy support fluctuates with daily recordings, from examining how parents integrate norms and values about their role and from testing if autonomy support can be taught by implementing parenting workshops.

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