The role of parents in facilitating autonomous self-regulation for education

WENDY S. GROLNICK

Clark University, Massachusetts, USA

ABSTRACT

Self-determination theory identifies three dimensions of parenting – autonomy support versus control, involvement, and structure – as facilitating children's autonomous motivation in school. Research involving children of a range of ages – one-year-olds through adolescents – and from a variety of research labs supports this theory. This work is reviewed, as is research on characteristics of children and parents and their external surrounds that facilitate and undermine parenting that is conducive to children's autonomous motivation. Research suggests bidirectional and dynamic influences among context, parenting, and children's motivation.

KEYWORDS *autonomy support, education, involvement, parenting, self-regulation, structure*

As ANY TEACHER WILL ATTEST, children enter their classrooms with a variety of attitudes, motivations, and approaches to learning. Some children are curious and eager to take on challenges and initiate learning activity on their own. Others comply with directions and contingencies but do so only at the behest of the teacher and do only what is absolutely required. Still others appear to feel helpless regarding their assignments and require extra prodding to complete them.

One way to conceptualize these individual differences in motivation for school activities is that children differ in their levels of autonomy for learning. Children can be intrinsically motivated, whereby they engage in schoolwork and homework for the fun and enjoyment it brings, or be more or less autonomously extrinsically motivated. In addition they can be amotivated, meaning that they lack motivation to engage in school activities.

Children's levels of autonomy for learning have important concomitants, with more autonomously motivated children showing more positive coping, higher achievement, and better adjustment (Gottfried, 1985, 1990; Ryan and Connell, 1989).

As children's primary socializers, parents play a key role in the development of these individual differences in children's motivation. Research suggests a bidirectional process, whereby parents influence, but also respond to children's motivation (Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994; Pomerantz and Eaton, 2001). Such transactional processes help maintain children's motivational styles, as well as the approaches parents take to motivating them.

PARENTING DIMENSIONS

According to self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci and Ryan, 1985), parents facilitate children's motivation in school by meeting their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Parents can support their children's need for autonomy by taking children's perspectives and viewpoints, allowing children choices, and supporting their initiatives and problem solving attempts. Such practices would help children to experience themselves as active agents in their school and other endeavors. In contrast parents can act in a controlling manner by solving problems for children, directing their behavior, and taking their own (rather than the child's) perspective. Such practices undermine children's experiences of themselves as autonomous. In addition, environments that provide structure in the forms of clear rules, expectations, and guidelines help to facilitate the experience of competence. Thus, when rules, guidelines, and contingences are spelled out, and clear feedback is provided for behavior, children are most likely to understand how to achieve success and avoid failure in school (i.e. have a sense of perceived control), which is crucial to motivation (Skinner et al., 1990). Finally, environments that are caring, and supportive, with involved parents who provide resources to their children, should satisfy a need for relatedness. Such a feeling should facilitate children's internalizing the values promoted by parents (e.g. doing well in school)

Autonomous self-regulation requires all three nutritive dimensions of parenting (i.e. autonomy support, structure, involvement). Children cannot regulate their schoolwork willingly and with a sense of importance without feeling competent that they can achieve desired outcomes. Further, they are most likely to internalize the regulation of their learning when they feel connected to authorities such as parents and teachers. Thus, it makes sense that all three nutrients are crucial to autonomous motivation.

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RESEARCH ON PARENTING DIMENSIONS FROM AN SDT
PERSPECTIVE: FROM INFANCY TO ADOLESCENCE

Young children

Although most work on parenting and children's motivation centers on school-age children, there is some evidence that parents play key roles in children's motivational development well before they begin school. Evidence of the importance of autonomy support and involvement has been garnered in very young children. For example, Grolnick, Frodi and Bridges (1984) observed mothers and their one-year-olds engaging in problem-solving tasks and coded mothers' behavior for the degree to which it supported versus controlled children's autonomous problem solving. Children's motivation to master tasks was assessed by observing children working on challenging tasks on their own. Children of more autonomy-supportive mothers persisted longer in trying to solve tasks on their own. Further, eight months later, children of more autonomy-supportive mothers were both more persistent and more competent at solving tasks. Similarly, in somewhat older children, parental autonomy support during play was associated with children's intrinsic motivation to pursue challenges presented by toys when on their own (Deci et al., 1993). With regard to school outcomes, more autonomy-supportive interactions between mothers and their preschool children have been associated with greater school readiness (Hess et al., 1984) and better adjustment at the transition to school (Barth and Parke, 1993). Such studies suggest that more autonomy-supportive parenting may help children develop the self-regulatory resources they need to succeed at school.

In addition, there is clear evidence that early parental involvement is associated with positive achievement trajectories in children. For example, higher parental involvement in preschool programs was associated with increased academic outcomes for at-risk students (Reynolds et al., 1996).

School-age children

While various researchers label parenting dimensions differently, research from a variety of perspectives supports the importance of all three parenting dimensions – autonomy support versus control, involvement, and structure – for children's school motivation. In one of our first studies on this issue, Grolnick and Ryan (1989) interviewed 64 mothers and 50 fathers about how they motivated their children for school and home behaviors (e.g. doing homework, completing chores) and how they handled conflict around such behaviors. Parents' responses were rated for autonomy support versus control, structure, and involvement. Parental autonomy support was positively

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associated with children's autonomous regulation of their school behaviors, perceived competence, grades, and achievement test scores. Interestingly, structure was associated with children's understanding of how to achieve success and avoid failure in school. Finally, involvement was positively related to perceived competence and school performance and negatively related to behavioral problems. Building on this work, Grolnick et al. (1991) showed that relations between parental autonomy support and involvement and children's school performance were mediated by children's motivational resources of self-regulation, perceived competence, and perceived control. Similar results were found with a Taiwanese sample of fourth through sixth graders, with mothers' involvement and autonomy support predicting children's autonomous self-regulation and perceived control, which were then linked to school achievement (d'Ailly, 2003).

Several studies have focused on parental autonomy support, examining it in relation to a variety of outcomes relevant to self-regulation. Grolnick et al. (2003) rated parents' levels of autonomy support when interacting on tasks with their third-grade children. More controlling interactions were associated with children's poorer performance and lower creativity on similar tasks when on their own. Gurland and Grolnick (2005) reasoned that more controlling parental styles focus children on the outcomes rather than the process of learning. Thus, such children would be more likely to have as goals to get good grades and 'to look good' in school (i.e. performance goals) than to increase their knowledge and skills (i.e. learning goals) (Dweck and Leggett, 1988). Results supported these predictions as children of parents who were more controlling during parent–child interaction were more likely to endorse performance goals than those of parents rated as more autonomy supportive. In a related study, Kenney-Benson and Pomerantz (2005) found that more controlling parenting was associated with children's more perfectionistic achievement concerns – an approach to learning that is antithetical to intrinsic motivation. Finally, Ginsburg and Bronstein (1993) showed that parents' surveillance of homework, reactions to grades that included negative control, and controlling styles of motivating achievement were related to children's extrinsic (versus intrinsic) orientations to learning and lower school performance.

Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) took a more in-depth look at parental involvement. These authors suggested that parental involvement has its effects not by building skills per se (e.g. math skills) but by facilitating the motivational resources children need to achieve. Three types of involvement – school (e.g. going to conferences and school events), cognitive/intellectual (e.g. discussing current events, visiting libraries), and personal (e.g. asking

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about the school day, knowing the names of children's classmates) – were examined. Results indicated that for mothers school and cognitive/intellectual involvement were uniquely related to school grades through their relations with perceived competence and control understanding. For fathers, school and intellectual/cognitive involvement were associated with children's perceived competence, which was then associated with grades. In addition, there was a direct inverse effect of school involvement on children's school performance, suggesting a possible feedback loop whereby parents become more involved when their children are having difficulties. The results for both parents support a motivational model and suggest bidirectional influences between children and parents.

While much research has been conducted on autonomy support and involvement, less has been devoted to structure. In the parenting literature, it has been acknowledged that there is a third parenting dimension, beyond autonomy support versus control and warmth/involvement, crucial to children's motivation and adjustment. However, there has been confusion about this dimension, with several investigators discussing two types of 'control' – the first associated with intrusion and coercion (akin to autonomy support versus control) and the second with guidance and parents serving as authorities. Although various terms have been used to describe this dimension, including firm versus lax control (Schaefer, 1965), demandingness (Jackson and Foshee, 1998), and behavioral control (Barber, 1996), we suggest that the term 'control' is best used to describe the autonomy support versus control dimension whereas structure, which is tied to the need for competence, is best used to describe the other dimension (Grolnick and Pomerantz, in press).

In recent work, we have attempted to delineate a comprehensive model of structure, pulling from past work on the third dimension. In particular, Farkas and Grolnick (2008) identified six components of structure relevant to children's motivation and adjustment:

1 clear and consistent rules, guidelines, and expectations
2 opportunities to meet or exceed expectations
3 predictability
4 informational feedback
5 provision of rationales
6 authority.

Preliminary work found that provision of clear and consistent guidelines was associated with children's understanding of how to attain success and avoid failure in school (i.e. perceived control) and perceived competence. Further work on structure, in a variety of cultural groups, is currently underway.

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Adolescence

Several studies have examined the effects of parental autonomy support on adolescent development from an SDT perspective. For example, Soenens and Vansteenkiste (2005) showed that mothers' and fathers' autonomy support was associated with adolescents' perceived autonomy in the academic context, which was, in turn, associated with greater academic performance. Grolnick et al. (2000) used an SDT perspective to explore factors predicting children's adjustment to the transition to junior high. While not all children decline in motivation and self-esteem, the transition to junior high has been identified as a point of vulnerability for children's motivational and academic trajectories given the shift from a smaller to a larger school, from self-contained classrooms to multiple, less personal classes and many teachers, and higher demands for independent work (Simmons and Blyth, 1987). In particular, Grolnick et al. (2000) asked whether both parent support of autonomy and involvement would buffer children from the negative motivational consequences of the transition. Parental involvement and autonomy support, as well as children's motivational resources and grades, were measured when the children were in sixth grade and again in seventh grade. Results indicated that children of more autonomy-supportive and involved parents showed less of an increase in acting-out and learning problems across the transition. Further, these children did not show the same declines in self-regulation, control understanding, and grades that children of more controlling and less involved parents showed. Thus, parental autonomy support and involvement appear to help children navigate the difficult transition to junior high that places so many children at academic risk.

Studies conducted in several research labs using different theoretical perspectives and terminology support the importance of autonomy support, structure and involvement for adolescent adjustment. Several studies conducted within Steinberg's laboratory have used Baumrind's (1971) typology of parents (i.e. authoritarian, authoritative, permissive) to examine relations between parenting and children's self-regulation and achievement. In one study, three components of these parenting types – acceptance, psychological autonomy, and behavioral control (akin to involvement, autonomy support versus control, and structure, respectively) – were found to be related to adolescents' sense of autonomy and healthy work orientation, which were then associated with school success. Barber's group has used the concept of psychological control to describe parents' intrusion into the psychological and emotional life of children through such behaviors as love withdrawal and guilt evoking. Behavioral control refers to parents' attempts to manage or control children's behaviors and is most frequently operationalized as parents' knowledge of

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their children's whereabouts and activities. Psychological control has been linked to more withdrawn symptoms in adolescence, whereas behavioral control has been associated with fewer acting-out problems. These relations have been demonstrated longitudinally (Barber et al., 1994) and across a variety of cultures (Barber et al., 2006).

In sum, research across a wide range of ages and cultures suggests the importance of three dimensions of parenting – autonomy support, involvement, and structure – for children's school-related self-regulation and adjustment.

FACTORS AFFECTING PARENTING

We can now identify parenting styles conducive to children's self-regulation in school. We have, however, also identified a number of factors that interfere with parents' abilities to provide these resources to children. Such factors fall into three types of pressures: those from below, or the child's unique characteristics and propensities; those from without, or the context in which parenting occurs; and those from within the parent. Regarding factors within children, children are born with unique temperaments that lead to various personalities and behavioral tendencies. Previous work has found that parents respond to these characteristics with particular parenting practices. For example, parents who perceive their adolescents as more difficult tend to be more controlling (Grolnick et al., 1996). Further, children with lower grades elicit more control from their parents (Grolnick et al., 2002; Pomerantz and Eaton, 2001). Thus, when children have more difficulty in school, parents may respond with control, which may lead to a cycle in which control leads to less autonomous regulation, which in turns elicits more subsequent control.

A second pressure arises from the wider context. Providing autonomy support, involvement and structure requires time, tangible resources, and psychological availability to take children's perspectives and allow them to solve their own problems. In support of this reasoning, parents in families with low resources and high levels of stress are more controlling (Grolnick et al., 1996) and less involved (Grolnick et al., 1997) with their children than those from less stressful environments. Clearly we must take a broader perspective if we wish to understand the dynamics of parenting and children's self-regulation.

Finally, parents may feel internal pressure to have their children succeed. Because parents are biologically prepared to protect their children, when they feel their children are threatened or at risk of losing resources, they may feel pressure to assure their children's success (Gurland and Grolnick, 2005). In one laboratory study (Grolnick et al., 2002), we found that parents induced

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to believe their child would be tested were more controlling on a parent–child task than those not given this information. In another study (Grolnick et al., 2007) parents with a high level of contingent self-worth (i.e. those who tended to hinge their self-worth on their children's outcomes) were more controlling on a task with their child. This effect was most evident when such parents were led to believe their child would be evaluated thus illustrating the interplay between characteristics of parents and those of the context.

In sum, research conducted from a variety of approaches supports the SDT perspective on parenting. In particular, when parents support children's autonomy, are involved, and provide structure, children are most likely to display autonomous motivation in school. Further, such effects appear to function as a bidirectional process whereby parenting affects and is affected by children's motivational qualities. Research has identified a number pressures, including those in the social environment and in their own psychologies, that impact on parents' ability to provide resources to children. This work highlights the importance of those who work with parents, including teachers and counselors, being sensitive to the pressures on parents and helping them promote autonomy as a goal of their parenting. Further research on bidirectional processes between parents and children, factors that facilitate and undermine facilitative parenting, and the experience and effects of parenting dimensions in various cultural groups will round out this research area.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

WENDY S. GROLNICK is Professor and Chair of Psychology at Clark University. She is the author of two books, *The Psychology of Parental Control: How Well-Meant Parenting Backfires* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates) and *Pressured Parents, Stressed-Out Kids: Dealing with Competition while Raising a Successful Child* (Prometheus) as well as numerous publications in the area of parenting and children's motivation. Her primary scholarly interests focus on home and school contexts that facilitate motivation and adjustment in children and adolescents, and she is particularly interested in factors that allow caretakers to provide motivationally facilitative environments to children. Correspondence to: Wendy S. Grolnick, Department of Psychology, Clark University, 950 Main Street, Worcester, MA 01610. [email: wgrolnick@clarku.edu]

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