



# Predicting school adjustment from multiple perspectives on parental behaviors



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## ABSTRACT

Past research supported the importance of parental autonomy support, involvement, and structure for student outcomes. The goal of this study was to test the contribution of these behaviors from mothers and fathers in predicting adolescents' adjustment in school using a multi-informant approach. A sample of 522 adolescents (233 boys, 389 girls), their mothers ( $n = 535$ ), and fathers ( $n = 296$ ) participated in the study. Results revealed that parents' self-evaluations explained additional variance in children's school adjustment, over and beyond the contribution of children's evaluation of their parents. Maternal reports on their positive behaviors (autonomy support, involvement, and structure) predicted their child's academic and emotional adjustment while their reported control predicted lower levels of these. Fathers' self-reported positive behaviors predicted academic adjustment while their control predicted lower academic and personal-emotional adjustment. These findings support the importance of multiple assessments of parental behaviors for improving the prediction of adjustment in school.

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A key factor to understanding how adolescents can adjust to school demands is the role of parents, who have been recognized as the “single most consistent predictor of adolescents' mental health and well-being” (Steinberg & Silk, 2002, p. 120). Parenting behaviors were found to contribute to positive school outcomes (Reschly & Christenson, 2009) and the quality of the home environment parents provide is an important predictor of students' adjustment (Dubow & Ippolito, 1994). This study examined parental behaviors from a self-determination perspective and used a multi-informant approach. We first present our conceptualization of parental behaviors, followed by a discussion on the use of multiple informants in evaluating behavior.

## 1. A self-determination perspective on parenting

Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000), an organismic dialectical perspective on individuals' growth and development, recognizes the role significant individuals, such as parents, have in promoting adjustment. Research within SDT

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identified three categories of supporting behaviors, which have been studied in the context of parent-child relationships (Joussemet, Landry, & Koestner, 2008; Skinner, Johnson, & Snyder, 2005).

First is *autonomy support*, where parents recognize the child as a unique and volitional individual (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989) through behaviors such as providing a meaningful rationale for one's rules and expectations toward the child, recognizing the child's feelings and behaviors, as well as offering opportunities to hold responsibilities that are appropriate for their age and competence level and to exert meaningful choice, when possible. Autonomy support has been contrasted with parental control (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Soenens, Vansteenkiste, & Sierens, 2009), a category of behaviors whose aim is to coerce, pressure, and dominate the child (Pomerantz & Grolnick, 2009); they were found to be distinct (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). The present study therefore distinguished between autonomy support and control.

Second is *involvement*, which encompasses the allocation of important resources to the child's learning (see Pomerantz, Kim, & Cheung, 2012) such as material (e.g., providing the child with a functional learning environment, have a budget for purchasing books) and emotional resources (e.g., interest in the child's schooling, time and affection for the child). Finally, *structure*, a category of behaviors in which parents provide information that makes children's environment predictable and support their self-regulation and competence (Farkas & Grolnick, 2010). Through structure, parents communicate their expectations and rules, the predictable outcomes of meeting these or not, and guidelines and feedback on their actions.

Previous studies in the self-determination literature that examined these parental behaviors has mostly focused on the role of autonomy support and, to a lesser extent, involvement. More recently, a new conceptualization of parental structure was proposed (Farkas & Grolnick, 2010), which helped better distinguishing it from parental control (also see Pomerantz & Grolnick, 2009) and contributed to an increase in research on parental structuring behaviors. To our knowledge, there is little, if any research that considered autonomy support, involvement, and structure simultaneously when examining parents' contribution to their child's schooling. Because each of these behaviors predict specific motivational processes (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner et al., 2005), a more complete understanding of children's outcomes will therefore be gained by assessing all behaviors.

### 1.1. Parental need support and adjustment in school

Children's adjustment in school is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct (Baker & Siryk, 1984, 1989) that distinguishes between academic, social, and personal-emotional adjustment. *Academic adjustment* pertains to the way students deal with the demands associated with their homework, class work, and exams. *Social adjustment* refers to how students deal with the demands of the academic community (e.g., responsiveness to social activities, their appreciation of their social environment in school). Finally, *personal-emotional adjustment* involves the way students come to terms with an environment characterized by pressure and stress (e.g., anxiety, distress, somatic symptoms).

There is ample evidence in the literature regarding the positive contribution of children's perceptions of their parents' behaviors to their adjustment, in general and in the school context. Children adapt more easily to the challenges they face within school when their parents support their autonomy (and refrain from using controlling behaviors), are involved, and structuring (for reviews, see Joussemet et al., 2008; Pomerantz, Grolnick, & Price, 2005; Pomerantz et al., 2012; Raftery, Grolnick, & Flamm, 2012). This conclusion applied for children's academic (e.g., competence, autonomous motivation, engagement in school work, skill development, and achievement), social (e.g., cooperation with classmates; desirable social behaviors; respectful attitude), as well as personal-emotional adjustment (e.g., positive emotions, life satisfaction; self-esteem, anxiety, negative emotions, internalizing problems; e.g., Costa, Soenens, Gugliandolo, Cuzzocrea, & Larcen, 2015; Grolnick, Raftery-Helmer, Flamm, Marbell, & Cardemil, 2014; Joussemet, Koestner, Leskes, & Landry, 2005; McLeod, Wood, & Weisz, 2007). Hence, the positive contribution of parental behaviors, as evaluated by children, is robust and well-established. Without calling into question the value of these findings, it is important to note that they constitute half of the perspectives on the parent-child relationship. A remaining question is whether parents' perspective explains additional variance in their school adjustment.

### 1.2. A multi-informant approach to parental behaviors

In the psychological assessment literature, having more than one informant evaluating a behavior is recommended (see De Los Reyes, Thomas, Goodman, & Kundey, 2013). What has been labelled as *multiple informant methodology* mainly aimed at increasing reliability of psychiatric diagnosis in the psychological literature (e.g., Kraemer et al., 2003; van der Ende, Verhulst, & Tiemeier, 2012) or of organizational dynamics in the sociological literature (Wagner, Rau, & Lindemann, 2010) but it can also be used to study disagreement between raters (e.g., Ringoot et al., 2015). However, using multiple evaluations can yield discrepancies between scores. Such discrepancies are recognized and also accepted as a norm rather than an exception (De Los Reyes et al., 2013). In the context of parental need supporting behaviors, our review of the literature showed that children and parents differ in their evaluation of parental behaviors, from no overlap (e.g., Sessa, Avenevoli, Steinberg, & Morris, 2001) to a larger correspondence (e.g., Rohner et al., 2005). The overall pattern suggests parent-child agreement is fairly inconsistent across parental dimensions as well as for each target (mother or father) and that developmental age does not appear to be the explaining mechanism.

When multiple informants are discrepant in their evaluations, researchers typically treat variations as measurement error without actually testing whether it is a justified interpretation (see De Los Reyes et al., 2013). But discrepant evaluations are

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