



Risk and protective factors for autonomy-supportive and controlling parenting in high-risk families

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined antecedents of autonomy support (AS) and control in a high-risk sample. One hundred mothers with their children ages 1–6 years participated. AS and control were coded during two contexts: 1) free play and 2) interference (i.e., mother completes a questionnaire while her child plays alone). Results revealed that maternal childhood histories of both aggression and social withdrawal, low SES and high psychosocial stressors (i.e., mental health issues, parental stress and lower satisfaction with social support) predicted the use of more control in a challenging interference context only. Conversely, child age and a relatively higher SES predicted the use of less control in the free play. Furthermore, child age and high SES were the sole predictors of AS in the interference and free play contexts respectively. Findings highlight the value of examining individual-person and environmental antecedents, and contextual specificity, when investigating the origins of autonomy-support and control.

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Parenting practices are vital for child development, particularly during early childhood when parenting plays a critical role in almost every aspect of a child's physical, cognitive, social and emotional development (Baumrind, 1967; Landry, Smith, & Swank, 2003; Moreau & Mageau, 2013; Stack, Serbin, Enns, Ruttle, & Barrieau, 2010). There are various theories regarding how to appropriately define good or bad parenting (Baumrind, 1967; Deci & Ryan, 1987; Maccoby, 1992). The growing body of evidence for Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1987, 2000, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000) has led to an increase in the interest in one such parenting style, that of autonomy-supportive parenting. According to SDT, in order for a child to achieve optimal development, the environment must be conducive to the child's autonomy rather than controlling the child's behavior. Autonomy is about the experience of freedom or volition in one's behaviors, in contrast to experiencing pressure, conflict or alienation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Joussemet, Landry, & Koestner, 2008a). It should not be confused with a need for independence or selfishness, which are distinct constructs from autonomy (Soenens et al., 2007); rather, it is about the motivation behind one's behavior coming from within (because it is enjoyable, or it is something

one values or finds important) as opposed to being coerced or forced from without (because of external rewards or punishments).

An autonomy-supportive environment provides choices, encourages self-initiation from the child and promotes full internalization. The opposite of an autonomy-supportive environment is a controlling environment, in which a child's autonomy is stifled by attempts to control the thoughts or actions of the child through coercion or external rewards (Joussemet, Koestner, Lekes, & Landry, 2005). While children are performing a difficult or unpleasant task, autonomy-supportive behaviors may take the form of encouraging initiative, providing a rationale for behavioral requests, recognizing the child's feelings, and offering choices. In contrast, controlling behaviors may take the form of demanding the compliance of the child, providing no rationale for behavioral requests (e.g., "because I said so"), offering rewards for compliance or threatening punishment for non-compliance (Joussemet et al., 2008a). Autonomy support and control have been consistently associated with socio-affective and cognitive outcomes among children (such as executive functioning, motivation, attachment security, internalization and school adjustment; Joussemet et al., 2008a; Leyva, Reese, Grolnick, & Price, 2008; Matte-Gagné & Bernier, 2011; Whipple, Bernier, & Mageau, 2011a,b). However, less is known about the factors that promote or hinder the use of autonomy supportive versus controlling behaviors, especially during the early years of life. Having a better understanding of these factors may have important implications for future intervention programs designed to help parents be more autonomy-supportive and less controlling. This may be particularly

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important among disadvantaged and high-risk families where the children are more likely to be at-risk for various problems, including developmental problems.

Autonomy support and control during infancy and early childhood

An autonomy supportive environment is believed to be essential for the satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, whereas a controlling environment is seen as undermining these needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Given that these needs are believed to be universal and their satisfaction is essential for psychological well-being, the benefits of autonomy support, and pitfalls of control, are similarly seen as universal (Savard, Joussemet, Pelletier, & Mageau, 2013). The universality of the benefits of autonomy support and pitfalls of control is supported by positive outcomes for autonomy support and negative outcomes for control being observed at various ages throughout the life span, in various life domains, such as parent–child relationships, academic achievement, well-being, sports and work, and with various populations across cultures (see Moreau & Mageau, 2013). However, while autonomy support and control may be important throughout the life course, they play a particularly important role early on during infancy and the early childhood years. The earliest benefits of autonomy-supportive parenting have been reported for infants' cognitive development (Bernier, Carlson, Deschênes, & Matte-Gagné, 2012; Bernier, Carlson, & Whipple, 2010; Matte-Gagné & Bernier, 2011) and attachment (Bernier, Matte-Gagné, Bélanger, & Whipple, 2014; Whipple et al., 2011a, b). Whereas, the earliest pitfalls of controlling parenting have been reported for infants' mastery motivation (Grolnick, Frodi, & Bridges, 1984). Importantly, autonomy support and control during infancy have been shown to have a lasting impact into early childhood on task-oriented persistence and competence (Frodi, Bridges, & Grolnick, 1985), executive functioning (Bernier et al., 2010; Matte-Gagné & Bernier, 2011) and children's percentage of night-time sleep (Bordeleau, Bernier, & Carrier, 2012). Furthermore, previous studies have also found that maternal autonomy support is an important predictor of infants' development above and beyond other important aspects of parenting, such as maternal sensitivity (Bernier et al., 2010, 2014).

Autonomy support has also been related to young children's cooperation (Hindman & Morrison, 2012), persistence (Walker & MacPhee, 2011) and motivation for literacy, and the use of more emergent literacy in five-year-old African-American children from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Gutman & Sulzby, 2000). Conversely, control has been positively related to aggressiveness and negatively related to agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, acceptance by peers (McNamara, Selig, & Hawley, 2010) and social skills (Walker & MacPhee, 2011) in young children. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that control is particularly problematic early on when acquiring new skills, as previous exposure to controlling behaviors has been shown to undermine children's subsequent motivation for acquiring that skill (Gutman & Sulzby, 2000). Importantly, using autonomy-supportive behaviors, as opposed to controlling ones, has also been demonstrated to have lasting impacts on children's later academic achievement, social and academic adjustment in grade school (Joussemet et al., 2005), and socio-emotional development during preadolescence (Matte-Gagné, Harvey, Stack, & Serbin, 2015).

While the benefits of autonomy support for many aspects of infants' and young children's cognitive and socioemotional development across low- and high-risk samples with diverse cultural backgrounds have been well established, less is known about the factors that promote or hinder the use of autonomy support versus control during the early childhood period (see Moreau & Mageau, 2013 for an extensive review). Previous studies have shown that parenting style (Grolnick, Gurland, DeCoursey, & Jacob, 2002; Grolnick, Price, Beiswenger, & Sauck, 2007), maternal attachment state of mind (Bernier et al., 2014), conscientiousness (Neitzel & Dopkins Stright, 2004) and ego-involvement (Grolnick et al., 2007) are all related to using autonomy support or control.

However, many psychosocial risk and protective factors that have been found to be predictors of other parenting behaviors in the past such as SES (Belsky, Bell, Bradley, Stallard, & Stewart-Brown, 2007; Bornstein & Bradley, 2012; Gershoff, Aber, Raver, & Lennon, 2007; Hoff, Laursen, & Tardif, 2002 for a review), maternal childhood histories of risk (Grunzweig, Stack, Serbin, Ledingham, & Schwartzman, 2009; Hops, Davis, Leve, & Sheeber, 2003; Jaffee, Belsky, Harrington, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2006; Martin, Stack, Serbin, Schwartzman, & Ledingham, 2012; Stack et al., 2012; Temcheff et al., 2008; Stack et al., accepted for publication), mothers' mental health problems (Levey, 2012; Lovejoy, Graczyk, O'Hare, & Neuman, 2000; Turney, 2011), parental stress (Crnic, Gaze, & Hoffman, 2005; Nelson, O'Brien, Blankson, Calkins, & Keane, 2009; Stack et al., 2012) and social support (Adams, 2006; Stack et al., 2012), have yet to be explored in relation to autonomy support and control in order to gain a better understanding of why a parent will become more autonomy supportive or more controlling. As such, the goal of the present study was to investigate protective and risk factors associated with the use of autonomy support and control within a disadvantaged at-risk sample of children from one-to-six-years-old.

Potential risk and protective factors

According to Belsky's (1984) social-contextual model of the determinants of parenting, when investigating the antecedents of parenting, one must consider child factors, parents' psychological resources, and environmental factors (Belsky & Jaffee, 2006; Bornstein, 2002). Over 30 variables have been identified as antecedents of parenting behavior in the literature (Holden, 2010). Following Belsky's model, we chose to examine whether the use of autonomy support and control differed depending on child age, maternal childhood histories of aggression and social withdrawal, SES, mental health problems, parental stress and social support. These factors are identified determinants of parenting behavior and represent the three types of possible influences on parenting: child, parent, and contextual characteristics (Belsky, 1984; Belsky & Jaffee, 2006; Bornstein, 2002; Holden, 2010).

One previous study investigated child age with regards to autonomy support and found it to be related, such that older infants (36 months) are less likely to bring out autonomy-supportive behaviors from mothers, as opposed to controlling ones, than are younger infants (15 months; Matte-Gagné, Bernier & Gagné, 2013). However, child age has never been examined as a potential predictor of autonomy support or control with older children and given the vast developmental differences between infants and young children, we were interested to ascertain whether this pattern would also be observed in a sample with a larger age range. It is possible that child age may only be a relevant predictor during the toddler years and thus would not be relevant when considering a larger age range. Conversely, it is possible that it might be easier for mothers to be more autonomy-supportive, and less controlling, with older children than with infants due to the greater demand for attention placed on mothers by younger children.

In line with Belsky's (1984) model, past research has shown that maternal childhood histories of aggression (behaviors that through physical or verbal means attempt to injure others or property; an externalizing behavioral problem) and/or social withdrawal (socially isolating behaviors associated with avoidance, shyness and fear; an internalizing behavioral problem) are risk factors for poor parenting behavior (Grunzweig et al., 2009; Jaffee et al., 2006; Martin et al., 2012; Stack et al., 2012; Temcheff et al., 2008; Stack et al., accepted for publication). It is possible that the influence of childhood aggression and social withdrawal may impact a mother's ability to be autonomy supportive as aggression and social withdrawal have been shown to be stable over time (Cairns, Cairns, Xie, Leung, & Hearne, 1998; Hops et al., 2003; Moskowitz, Schwartzman, & Ledingham, 1985; Rubin, 1993; Rubin, Burgess, & Hastings, 2002; Rubin & Coplan, 2004; Serbin et al., 1998; Serbin & Karp, 2004; Warman & Cohen, 2000). Thus, those behavioral tendencies during childhood might persist across the

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