

## CHAPTER 13

# Parenting and the Facilitation of Autonomy and Well-Being in Development

SDT's approach to development begins with the assumption of inherent growth processes, including intrinsic motivation, relatedness, internalization, and integration. Parents facilitate or hinder these natural processes through their responsiveness to children's basic psychological needs. SDT specifies three critical dimensions of parenting—autonomy support, structure, and involvement—each of which influences internalization and basic need satisfaction. We consider first the issue of attachment and we contrast Bowlby's (1988) focus on security and anxiety reduction with SDT's emphasis on autonomy support and sensitivity as bases for secure relatedness. Research strongly suggests that autonomy support is critical to the promotion of attachment security, as well as to growth and curiosity, a finding supported across diverse cultures. We also compare SDT's three parenting dimensions with Baumrind's (1967) authoritative-authoritarian-permissive distinctions, as well as the constructs of psychological and behavioral control (e.g., Barber, 1996). Parental psychological control is also discussed in relation to SDT research on parental conditional regard (PCR). Essential to SDT's developmental approach is a clear distinction between autonomy and independence. Autonomy is associated positively and reliably with developmental outcomes, another finding true across cultures, whereas independence or nonreliance on parents can have both positive and negative sources, timing, and consequences. We conclude by summarizing in everyday language what the research tells us about optimal parenting.

Across cultures, parents represent the most significant influence on children's development, not only because they are typically the most critical figures in resource provision but also because they play the most central role in creating the social and emotional contexts children encounter within their formative years (Grolnick, 2009; Pomerantz, Ng, & Wang, 2008). Accordingly, much research within SDT has focused on parents and their pervasive impact on children's psychological development and wellness. A defining feature of SDT is its emphasis on the internal propensities toward growth that require psychological need supports across developmental epochs and domains of life to properly unfold. Nowhere does this emphasis come more to the fore than in discussions of parenting.

## Parenting and the Facilitating Environment

Capacity  
to be  
self-regulating

Autonomy  
Support

Particularly crucial for the healthy development of children is parental provision of *autonomy support*, which represents the *active nurturing* of the children's capacities to be self-regulating. Autonomy support includes actively taking children's perspectives, as well as providing support and encouragement for self-expression, initiation, and self-endorsed activities (Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, & La Guardia, 2006). When autonomy-supportive parents must be directive, they provide or convey a rationale that, from the child's perspective, helps bring value to the required behavior. Autonomy support nurtures self-development and therefore is critical during the early stages of life, when children are finding their psychological footing, developing rudimentary capacities for becoming aware of emotions and need-relevant internal states, organizing actions, and becoming more attuned to others' feelings and reactions. Yet the importance of autonomy support continues beyond these early years of childhood into adolescence and early adulthood, when offspring can ideally retain a healthy dependence on their parents (or primary caregivers) for caring support and guidance (Ryan & Lynch, 1989).

Clearly there are developmental benefits to autonomy-supportive parenting. Supporting this, a recent meta-analysis of 36 parenting studies showed that when parents are more autonomy-supportive, their children are more autonomously motivated and positively engaged in school, perform better in their academic work, and evidence greater psychological health and well-being. When both parents are autonomy-supportive, the consequences for their children are even more positive than when support is strong from only one (Vasquez, Patall, Fong, Corrigan, & Pine, 2015).

In addition to autonomy support, SDT specifies two additional *nutritive parenting dimensions* (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Grolnick, 2009)—namely, the provision of both structure and involvement, dimensions that we more elaborately discuss later in the chapter. In brief, *structure* entails the transmission of information and direction that provides the scaffolding to support and enhance the child's competence development. Structure, that is, facilitates the children's capacities to safely and confidently gain mastery with respect to both their internal and external worlds. *Involvement* concerns the parents' dedication of resources to the children, including attention and engaged caring, provisions that allow the children to feel both relationally connected and emotionally supported as they face the challenges of development. Together, parental autonomy support, structure, and involvement, as shown in Table 13.1, supply the core nutrients for the basic psychological need satisfactions that energize healthy self-development.

In this chapter, we discuss the SDT model of parental nurturance in detail, comparing it with other perspectives on parenting, addressing constructs such as behavioral control, independence promotion, and the use of conditional positive regard, all of which have been considered in some other perspectives as positive approaches to parenting, but each of which we find problematic in specific ways.

### Attachment, Trust, and Autonomy Support in Parenting

SDT is relatively unique among current empirically driven theories in its strong emphasis on nutrients and facilitation. Many theories focus on managing children's behaviors (e.g., Baumrind, 1971) or on reinforcing achievement and performance (e.g., Bandura, 1996), but few are so centrally focused on the facilitation of children's self-development through their intrinsic growth tendencies, such as intrinsic motivation and organismic integration, and the need satisfactions that underpin feelings of confidence, vitality, and belonging.

**TABLE 13.1. SDT's Three Critical Dimensions of Parenting**

| Parenting Dimension | Key Elements  |
|---------------------|---|
| Autonomy support    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take the child's perspective.</li> <li>• Offer meaningful choices.</li> <li>• Encourage and support initiative and voice.</li> <li>• Minimize controlling language.</li> <li>• Provide meaningful rationales for required or requested behaviors.</li> </ul>   |
| Structure           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organize the child's environment to support competence (scaffolding).</li> <li>• Focus on mastery rather than performance goals.</li> <li>• Provide guidelines and effectance-relevant information.</li> <li>• Provide rich feedback that is informational rather than evaluative or controlling.</li> <li>• Explain contingencies and sources of control.</li> <li>• Set limits in noncontrolling way.</li> </ul> |
| Involvement         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Devote time.</li> <li>• Invest attention and resources.</li> <li>• Be caring and supportive.</li> <li>• Show warmth and concern.</li> </ul>  |

### Facilitating Environments: Bowlby versus Winnicott?

Perhaps the most influential work on nurturing children is derived from Bowlby's (e.g., 1969, 1973) seminal thinking on the attachment system and its central concept of felt security. For Bowlby, attachment was first and foremost about safety and protection rather than growth. As Kobak, Cassidy, and Ziv (2004) stated, Bowlby viewed attachment as a "behavioral system activated by appraisals of danger and accompanying signals of fear" (p. 388). Adult attachment theorists agree. As Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) stated: "the goal of the system is a sense of protection and security" (p. 14).

Without doubting the importance of protection and the value of reducing anxiety in moments of danger, we have nonetheless questioned whether this is the proper foundation for an organismic theory of relatedness, let alone for the nurturance of the self (see Ryan, Brown, & Creswell, 2007). Although moments of "dangers and strangers" can be salient, they are typically episodic, and the comfort that follows them does not provide an adequate basis for self-development or closeness in relationships. Security, that is, is merely a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for healthy self-development.

Among the object relations theorists in Bowlby's time, Winnicott (1965) stands out to us as being more attuned to the issue of ongoing positive supports for the nascent self. He specifically highlighted the importance of being warmly held, of receiving empathy, and of having one's spontaneous initiations and expressions of need responded to and amplified through mirroring and responsive care in fostering self-development, rather than focusing on avoiding or being sheltered from threat.

Like Winnicott, SDT posits that supportive, nurturing relationships in infancy and beyond must be conceived of as having a broader base than just security and protection. Indeed, although acting to reduce insecurity in moments of fear is one important type of responsive involvement, parents' or caregivers' responsive involvement is critical in other moments as well. A parent's expression of joy mirroring the infant's smile, a hand