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The role of observed autonomy support, reciprocity, and need satisfaction in adolescent disclosure about friends

Dorien Wuyts, Bart Soenens*, Maarten Vansteenkiste, Stijn Van Petegem

Ghent University, Belgium



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ABSTRACT

Although research increasingly addresses the role of parenting in fostering adolescent disclosure, most research relied on self-report measures of parenting and did not address the role of autonomy support. In the present observational study (conducted in Belgium), with 62 mother-adolescent dyads (mean age mothers = 44 years; mean age adolescents = 14 years; 77% of adolescents female), we rated mothers' provision of autonomy support during a 10-minute conversation about friendships. We found that observed maternal autonomy support was related positively to adolescents' degree of and volitional reasons for disclosure about friends. These associations were mediated by observed non-verbal reciprocity during the conversation and by adolescent satisfaction of their needs for autonomy and relatedness. Mothers' autonomy-support and mother-adolescent reciprocity also predicted mothers' own psychological need satisfaction and conversation pleasure. The relevance of the findings for adolescent autonomy and disclosure are discussed.

'My child tells me so little!' At least some parents of adolescents express this complaint. Indeed, during adolescence children tend to keep more information for themselves (Keijsers, Frijns, Branje, & Meeus, 2009) and they use a variety of strategies to manage information to parents, including not only disclosure but also secrecy and lying (Smetana, 2008). Parents may differ in their approach towards fostering disclosure (Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991). Some parents may act "pushy" in their attempts to find out what is happening in their children's life. Yet, such a controlling approach might backfire, leading adolescents to share less parent-desired information. Other parents may behave more empathically, patiently respecting the adolescent's pace to talk about private issues. They may be sincerely interested in the few things their adolescents share, thereby creating a warm and reciprocal parent-child environment. In such an environment adolescents might feel understood and accepted, which may make them more willing to share information, even when parents dislike the information.

Disclosure is defined herein as disclosure of activities and whereabouts, which has been referred to as 'routine disclosure'. Such disclosure is distinct from disclosure of private thoughts and feelings, which has been referred to as 'self-disclosure' (Tilton-Weaver, Marshall, & Darling, 2014). Given that adolescent routine disclosure is a main source of parental knowledge about the child's whereabouts and is a consistent predictor of psychosocial adjustment (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Kerr, Stattin, & Ozdemir, 2012), it is important to examine which factors promote or hinder adolescents in disclosing information to their parents. One line of research addressing the role of parents in adolescent routine disclosure has focused on the role of parenting practices such as parental solicitation and parental rule setting regarding adolescents' whereabouts. These practices appear to be rather weakly related to adolescents' general routine disclosure (e.g., Keijsers, Branje, VanderValk, & Meeus, 2010; Kerr, Stattin, & Burk, 2010). A second line of research focused on the role of parental warmth and responsiveness, which appears a more reliable predictor of adolescents'

* Corresponding author. Department of Developmental, Personality and Social Psychology, Ghent University, H. Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Gent, Belgium.
E-mail address: bart.soenens@ugent.be (B. Soenens).

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general routine disclosure (e.g., [Salafia, Gondoli, & Grundy, 2009](#)). In addition to responsiveness and direct parental attempts to regulate behavior, parental support for autonomy is considered a third important source of influence on adolescents' development ([Joussemet, Landry, & Koestner, 2008](#)). However, few studies have addressed the role of autonomy-supportive (as opposed to controlling) parenting in adolescent disclosure or disclosure about friends specifically. This is unfortunate because many scholars assume that autonomy-relevant developmental processes play a key role in adolescent disclosure (e.g., [Darling, Cumsille, Caldwell, & Dowdy, 2006](#); [Smetana, Metzger, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2006](#)). As such, it seems important to examine whether and how parents' support for autonomy is related to adolescent disclosure.

Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT; [Deci & Ryan, 2000](#)), the present study aimed to examine associations between observed maternal autonomy support (as rated during a 10-minute conversation between mothers and their children about friendships) and adolescents' degree of disclosure about friends as well as their reasons (i.e., volitional relative to pressured) for disclosure. In addition, we investigated possible explanatory mechanisms (i.e., reciprocity and psychological need satisfaction) underlying these associations. We focused on the topic of peer relations because it is a sensitive topic. Indeed, adolescents have been found to disclose less about their peers than about other topics ([Smetana et al., 2006](#)). According to social domain theory, this is because the domain of peer relationships is considered an area over which parents have little legitimate authority ([Smetana et al., 2006](#)). At the same time, peer friendships play a key role in adolescents' adjustment and problem behavior (e.g., [Brown, Mounts, Lamborn, & Steinberg, 1993](#)). In sum, fostering disclosure in this sensitive yet important domain represents a challenging task for parents.

1. Parental autonomy support and adolescent disclosure about friends

A central tenet of SDT involves the postulation of the psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, the satisfaction of which is said to be critical to for well-being and social adjustment ([Deci & Ryan, 2000](#)). For children to flourish and develop optimally, they need to feel autonomous (i.e., experiencing a sense of volition and psychological freedom), related (i.e., experiencing a sense of connectedness and intimacy), and competent (i.e., experiencing efficacy to deal with tasks and activities) in their daily activities ([Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994](#)). Parents can contribute to satisfaction of these psychological needs by promoting an autonomy-supportive rather than controlling parenting style ([Grolnick et al., 1991](#); [Joussemet et al., 2008](#)). In SDT, autonomy support is defined as the degree to which parents promote volitional functioning and self-endorsement in children ([Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Van Petegem, Beyers, & Ryan, 2018](#); [Soenens et al., 2007](#)). To do so, autonomy-supportive parents try to relate to the child's frame of reference, allow meaningful choices when possible, encourage self-initiation, and provide a meaningful rationale for a request ([Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997](#)).

Autonomy-supportive parenting is contrasted with a controlling or pressuring approach, in which case parents pressure their children to think, act, or feel in accordance with the parental agenda and standards ([Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009](#); [Grolnick et al., 1991](#); [Joussemet et al., 2008](#)). Controlling parenting can manifest in at least two different ways ([Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010](#)). Externally controlling parenting involves the use of external contingencies (e.g., threats of harsh punishment, taking away privileges, and controlling rewards) to pressure a child into compliance. Internally controlling parenting involves the use of tactics to pressure the child from within by appealing to feelings such as guilt, shame, and separation anxiety. The concept of internally controlling parenting is similar to the concept of parental psychological control, which involves intrusive parental strategies such as love withdrawal and guilt-induction ([Barber, 1996](#)).

Research has shown convincingly that autonomy-supportive, relative to controlling, parenting relates to diverse developmental outcomes, including better personal adjustment and well-being as well as better interpersonal functioning (as indexed by less relational aggression and more empathy; [Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009](#); [Joussemet et al., 2008](#); [Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010](#)).

We reasoned that children growing up in an autonomy-supportive family climate would be more likely to disclose information about their activities and behavior with their friends because autonomy-supportive parents would respect the child's rhythm and pace in disclosing information rather than pushing them to do so. Also, when engaging in disclosure, autonomy-supportive parents would display an authentic interest and willingness to understand the child's perspective. Instead, children of controlling parents may experience their parents as intrusive and meddlesome or they may feel judged and evaluated when disclosing personal information. Ironically, such controlling practices may lead them to disclose less. A number of previous studies have provided support for this reasoning in other domains. For instance, [Roth, Ron, and Benita \(2009\)](#) found that perceived maternal autonomy support related positively to adolescents' disclosure about mistakes at school which, in turn, related to children's willingness and capacity to learn from these mistakes. Conversely, perceived psychologically controlling parenting in general ([Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Luyckx, & Goossens, 2006](#)) and more specific manifestations of psychological control such as the perceived use of love withdrawal ([Roth et al., 2009](#)) and privacy invasion ([Hawk et al., 2012](#)), were found to relate negatively to general measures of routine disclosure.

2. The importance of observed autonomy support

Most studies on parental autonomy support and adolescent disclosure have relied on self-reported measures of parental style. However, adolescent self-reports of parental behavior might be biased by adolescents' own functioning. Research indeed suggests that individuals' mood and behavior can affect their perception of parental behavior (e.g., [Brewin, Andrews, & Gotlib, 1993](#)). In the context of our research questions, an adolescent with a history of problem behavior (and subsequent secrecy) might be inclined to perceive a parent as controlling and autonomy-suppressing even when, in reality, the parent is not particularly controlling. Such biased self-reports of parenting might then artificially inflate the relation between parental autonomy support (versus control) and adolescent disclosure, in particular when adolescents also report themselves on their disclosure. This problem of shared method

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