Self-determination Theory: Implications for Parenting

[Note: Addressing learning, behavior, and emotional problems require careful attention to motivation, and especially intrinsic motivation. In this respect, the Center watches for applications of Ed Deci's self-determination theory. Thus, we were pleased to see the theory applied to parenting by Patrick, Hennessy, McSpadden, and Oh and wanted to share the following excerpts from their 2013 article.]

"Parenting practices refer to specific behaviors that parents engage in when attempting to socialize their children, whereas parenting styles reflect the broader emotional and relational climate created by the ways in which parents go about these socialization attempts. Thus, parenting practices generally address what parents do, while parenting styles address how they do it." ...

"... much of the existing literature has focused primarily on parenting practices — that is, the specific behaviors parents engage in .... Less research has addressed broader parenting styles — the emotional and relational environment that parents create in their interactions with their children. It is possible that parenting styles operate at a more global level than parenting practices. That is, parenting styles may reflect the general ways in which parents interact with their children around a variety of behaviors .... These more global ways of interacting may serve as the basis from which specific parenting practices emerge." ...

"Consider the case of social influences such as parenting norms. There is some evidence to suggest that recent decades have seen a rise in more permissive parenting.[27] Permissive parenting involves allowing children to make many decisions for themselves, setting few rules or boundaries, and aligning with children more as 'friend' than as a parental 'authority' figure. There are several ways in which these social and cultural norms may influence parenting styles and practices. First, parents may observe how other parents interact with their children — whether this occurs in the context of other family relationships, casual observations of other parents' behaviors, or elements of parenting portrayed in the media which may influence perceptions of socially acceptable parenting practices. Furthermore, norms around parenting may influence what children expect from their parents. ... Thus, social and cultural norms have the potential to shape the legitimacy of parental authority — from both child and parent perspectives. Social and cultural norms around parenting may therefore influence the general ways in which parents and children interact and the specific practices or strategies parents use with their children ...."

"Characteristics of neighborhood environments may also be important in shaping parenting styles and practices. The environment predisposes, enables, and reinforces both individual and collective behaviors.[28]

The Need for a Conceptual Framework

"... Theory provides a lens through which to view behaviors, interpret findings, and understand the ways in which complex variables and associations interrelate. Theoretical and conceptual models convey mechanism; they address how (i.e., mediators) and under what circumstances (i.e., moderators) variables are likely to be associated. Thus, theoretical and conceptual models may offer important insights into additional and, in some cases, more proximal targets for intervention."
...
"Self-determination theory (SDT) is a general theory of human motivation that addresses the extent to which behaviors are self-endorsed and volitional versus pressured or coerced.[43,44] One of the unique aspects of SDT is its acknowledgement of both intrinsic (i.e., engaging in behaviors because the behavior itself is inherently enjoyable or valued) and extrinsic (i.e., engaging in behaviors for some separable outcome) motivation, and a characterization of extrinsic motivation as varying in degree of internalization or integration. Thus, not all forms of extrinsic motivation are equivalent. This is particularly important in the context of health behaviors that often fall along the continuum of extrinsic motivation (i.e., people engage in, or encourage their children to engage in, health behaviors for separable outcomes that vary in the degree to which they are more or less internalized or integrated with one's sense of self).

According to SDT, the social context may support or thwart the process by which relatively more external forms of motivation become more internalized. SDT has conceptualized the social context in terms of supporting or thwarting basic psychological needs for autonomy (i.e., the need to feel volitional, as the originator of one's actions), competence (i.e., the need to feel capable of achieving desired outcomes), and relatedness (i.e., the need to feel close to and understood by important others).[43] Table 2 presents some examples of how psychological need support may be manifested behaviorally. Psychological need support has been operationalized as consisting of a number of critical elements, including offering and respectingchoices, giving a meaningful explanation for recommended courses of action, and avoiding controlling language and guilt, as well as refraining from use of performance-contingent rewards and punishments.[44,45] This is not an exhaustive list, but it does provide a flavor of what need support "looks like." It is worth noting that, from the perspective of SDT, the need for autonomy is not synonymous with independence. One may volitionally choose to rely on others and seek their input, and the social context can provide input in ways that support or thwart an individual's capacity to act volitionally and personally endorse one's behaviors.

Table 2. Examples of Need-Supportive Behaviors: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective

Psychological need	*Need-supportive behaviors*
Autonomy support	Elicit the person's (child's) perspective, emotions. Provide a menu of options from which to choose. Provide rationale for advice given. Minimize control/avoid judgment.
Competence support	Be positive about potential for success. Identify barriers. Skills building/problem solving. Create an appropriate level of challenge.
Relatedness support	Develop a warm, positive relationship. Provide unconditional positive regard. Be empathic with the person's (child's) concerns, etc.

"There is a great deal of conceptual overlap between SDT's characterization of the social environment as need-supportive versus need-thwarting and the broader literature on parenting styles. For example, as described above, supporting psychological needs involves providing structure in the form of a menu of options from which to choose and providing a rationale for recommended behavior. These practices are largely consistent with authoritative parenting. In contrast, social contexts that have been characterized as controlling or need-thwarting are those in which an authority figure is much more directive and demanding. This may take the form of conditional regard or unilateral decision-making on the part of a parent regarding rules and limits, with little or no provision of rationale and little or no input from the child.[46] Some confusion has arisen when SDT autonomy is made synonymous with independence. Thus, some have described autonomy-support as lacking structure, boundaries, or guidance. This is, in fact, closer to permissive or neglectful/uninvolved parenting. However, it is not consistent with the tenets of psychological need support broadly or autonomy-support in particular. A fairly substantial body of research in the SDT literature has examined the role of parents' support of children's psychological needs in a variety of domains, including academic achievement,[47,48] involvement in sports,[49] emotion regulation,[50] identity development[51] and mental health.[52] It, thus, may be useful to extend this line of research from SDT and further test similarities between SDT's concept of psychological need support and parenting styles and practices." ...

"Finally, SDT may offer a model for developing new measures to assess parenting styles to move beyond the current approach, which involves deriving styles from measures of parenting practices. First, measures of psychological need satisfaction and the nature of parent–child relationships in SDT have, by and large, focused on assessing the general ways in which parents interact with children rather than the specific behavioral practices parents enact. For example, items assess the extent to which parents are available for their children to talk to them, parents' emotional responses to children, and the extent to which parents engage children in decision-making and discussions about household and other rules. Second, these measures have included assessments of children's perceptions of their parents, rather than relying on parent reports of their own behavior. Children respond to items separately for their mother and for their father. This approach to measurement acknowledges the importance of children's perceptions of how their parents interact with them — i.e., how children experience their parents' interaction styles — and also addresses how the multiple adults involved in children's care (i.e., mothers and fathers) may be perceived in similar or dissimilar ways. ..."

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*Transforming student and learning supports:
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transforming student and learning supports is fundamental to
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