

Children feel most positively about mothers who respect their autonomy

January 28 2015, by Sarah Clinton



Mothers who support their children's need for autonomy as the children grow tend to be viewed more positively by their children, MU researchers found. Credit: Mark Bowden via Getty

Research shows that the quality of mother-child relationships greatly influences children's development socially, emotionally and academically. Although previous studies have demonstrated the importance of promoting children's autonomy, available research often has not addressed ways parental respect for autonomy may affect parent-child relationships. Now, University of Missouri researchers have found that mothers who support their children's need for autonomy as the children grow tend to be viewed more positively by their children.

"When [mothers](#) are highly controlling of small children's play, those children are less likely to want to engage with them," said Jean Ispa, co-chair of the MU Department of Human Development and Family Studies and a professor in the College of Human Environmental Sciences. "Respect for autonomy is important, not only for children's growth, but also for creating positive parent-child relationships. We found that mothers who supported their children's autonomy were regarded more positively by their children than mothers who were highly directive."

Ispa's study, which included more than 2,000 mothers and their children, measured maternal directiveness—or the extent to which mothers controlled activities—in play when children were 2 years old and then during a discussion about areas of disagreement when the children were in the fifth grade. Ispa found that mothers' tendencies to display controlling behaviors predicted the extent to which the children viewed their mothers positively or negatively when the children were in fifth grade. She said that these results did not differ by ethnicity or gender of the children.

"Mothers who are very directive when their children are toddlers often tend to still be controlling when their children enter adolescence," Ispa said. "With [small children](#), mothers mostly use physical controls, but when children are older these directives become more verbal and psychological, such as by restricting what children are allowed to say or by not allowing them to speak their minds. It's not surprising that their children begin to view them in a negative light."

Ispa said allowing children levels of autonomy does not mean parents should stop setting ground rules or providing input. She stated that behavioral controls, such as teaching children not to cross the street without first checking for cars, did not negatively impact mother-child relationships as did psychological controls, like purposely inducing guilt

or telling children to think, feel and play in certain ways.

"Many times, parents think that employing these controlling behaviors is the 'right way' to raise children, but our research shows that really does not work," Ispa said. "Allowing children age-appropriate levels of [autonomy](#) to make safe decisions is very good for kids, and they usually will make wise decisions when they have been taught about safe choices as well as consequences. A good place for parents to start would be to have open discussions and allow their children to express their own points of view. When giving [children](#) instructions, explain reasons for decisions rather than simply saying, 'Because I said so.'"

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

Citation: Children feel most positively about mothers who respect their autonomy (2015, January 28) retrieved 13 January 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-01-children-positively-mothers-respect-autonomy.html>

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