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How to Support Toddlers' Autonomy: Socialization Practices Reported by Parents

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ABSTRACT

Autonomy-supportive parenting is found to foster children's adjustment but relatively few studies have been conducted with toddlers. In the present exploratory study, parents (N = 182) reported what practices they use when asking their toddlers (M age = 26.9 months) to engage in important yet uninteresting activities. Parents rated twenty-six potentially autonomy-supportive practices, along with a well-known scale measuring the extent to which they have a positive attitude towards autonomy support. *Research Findings*: Using correlational and factorial analyses, eight practices were identified: various ways to communicate empathy, providing developmentally appropriate rationales, describing the problem in an informational and neutral way, and modeling the requested behavior. This subset of autonomy-supportive practices for toddlers was positively related with toddlers' rule internalization, providing them with further validity. *Practice or Policy*: These preliminary findings may be useful in guiding future conceptual, empirical, and applied work on the support of toddlers' autonomy and its assessment in an emotionally-charged and challenging context.

During toddlerhood, much of the activities that children engage in can be considered to be interesting and intrinsically driven (e.g., playing with toys). However, as socializing agents, parents often make requests to their toddlers that compete with their immediate and often more enjoyable goals. Socialization concerns how parents help children acquire the skills necessary to optimally function within their society (Maccoby, 1984). In the early years, parents help children internalize socially and culturally sanctioned norms, attitudes, values, and behaviors. Internalization refers to the process of accepting values and behaviors, identifying them as our own, and carrying them out volitionally (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kuczynski & Kochanska, 1990). This process is crucial because it helps children effectively integrate into their society (Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997) and it has a positive impact on children's learning, well-being, and psychosocial development (Joussemet, Landry, & Koestner, 2008).

Toddlers' emerging ability to regulate their behaviors develops rapidly and parents expect them to comply with greater and more complex demands (Gralinski & Kopp, 1993). Gradually, self-regulation replaces external, parental regulation (Hoffman, 2000). Still, it is not always easy for toddlers to engage in these requests as their cognitive, language, socio-emotional, and self-regulation skills are still limited compared with school-aged children (Blum, Williams, Friman, & Christophersen, 1995). For example, toddlers (i.e., children between 1 and 3 years of age) cannot always understand verbal explanations, they have a hard time verbalizing how they feel, and their tolerance to frustration is not yet well developed (Blum et al., 1995).

On one hand, socially prescribed behaviors often require prompting from parents (Ryan, Deci, & Grolnick, 1995), as they are often less enjoyable (e.g., tidying toys away rather than playing with them).

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On the other hand, some types of compliance (e.g., to avoid punishment) are associated with psychological discord and ill-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Dix, Stewart, Gershoff, & Day, 2007). The goal of this exploratory study is to search for ways in which parents of toddlers cope with the difficult task of simultaneously fostering their toddlers' internalization of important social requirements (Kuczynski, 1984; Kuczynski, Kochanska, Radke-Yarrow, & Girnius-Brown, 1987; Lytton, 1980) while also tending to their growing autonomy (Deci, Ryan, & Guay, 2013; Grolnick, 2003; Zigler & Child, 1973). The present study aims to help answer the question: When parents value supporting their toddler's autonomy, how do they go about making requests?

Psychological autonomy (or self-determination) is a fundamental need (Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2017), optimal human development, internalization, and well-being depend on the satisfaction of this innate psychological need, along with competence (Bandura, 2012; White, 1959) and relatedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Harlow, 1958). The need for autonomy refers to feeling that behaviors are self-governed, that actions stem from the sense of self (deCharms, 1968; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, & La Guardia, 2006). This basic psychological need is said to be universal (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001; Jang, Reeve, Ryan, & Kim, 2009; Lynch, La Guardia, & Ryan, 2009; Marbell & Grolnick, 2013). Since parents play a central role in the early years of a child's development (Masten & Shaffer, 2006; NICHD, 2006), the degree to which their parenting style satisfies their young children's need for autonomy is seen as a key determinant in the promotion of internalization and adjustment (Ryan et al., 2006).

The optimal authoritative parenting style (Baumrind, 1967) is composed of three key dimensions: affiliation, structure, and autonomy support (Gray & Steinberg, 1999). *Affiliation* refers to a caring interpersonal involvement (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Schaefer, 1959); the opposite of this dimension is rejection. *Structure* refers to the provision of clear and consistent rules, expectations, and consequences (Barber & Olsen, 1997; Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009; Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984); its opposite is laxness or permissiveness. *Autonomy support* refers to empathy and respect for children's own ideas, feelings, and initiatives (Grolnick et al., 1997; Ryan et al., 2006). Its opposite is psychological control (Barber, 1996) or controlling parenting (Grolnick, 2003), which can be either overt or covert (e.g., coercion and pressure vs. intrusion and conditional love; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). Whereas parental structure refers to exerting authority, controlling parenting refers to exerting power over children (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009).

Providing structure helps children understand that their actions have an impact on their environment and doing so in an autonomy-supportive way fosters a feeling of volition, allowing children to understand and integrate the values that underlie parental rules and demands (Griffith & Grolnick, 2014). The authoritative style thus features a child-centered approach to discipline where parents establish limits and standards while remaining responsive to their child's needs and respecting his/her individuality (Baumrind, 1967, 1991). Authoritative parents are characterized as listening to their children, encouraging their autonomy, providing consistent and fair structure, as well as a warm environment (Aunola & Nurmi, 2005; Barber & Olsen, 1997; Gray & Steinberg, 1999; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Schaefer, 1965; Steinberg, 1990).

One context in which parents are more likely to thwart their child's autonomy is when they aim to obtain immediate obedience from them. Negative parent–child interactions may occur when parents are trying to meet their own goals which are at odds with their child's (Dix & Branca, 2003). Exerting power to obtain compliance may seem an effective socialization tactic, but controlling practices (e.g., threats, criticisms, conditional love, pressure) thwart children's autonomy, well-being, and ultimately hinder their internalization of rules (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, & Deci, 2004). Ryan and Deci (2002) recommend supporting children's need for autonomy instead, even when prompting important (and possibly uninteresting) behaviors.

Autonomy-supportive parenting thus refers to the degree to which parents recognize that their children have needs and feelings that are unique and different from their own; respect/support children's ideas, interests, and feelings (Grolnick et al., 1997; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991; Ryan et al., 2006); and provide meaningful choices and relevant rationales when introducing rules

(Soenens et al., 2007). In a socialization context, parents who support their children's autonomy aim to foster their self-determined internalization and self-regulation instead of immediate obedience (Joussemet et al., 2008).

The classical autonomy support (AS) definition is typically composed of four key elements (Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994; Koestner, Ryan, Bernieri, & Holt, 1984). The first is *providing rationales* for requests, to help the child understand why these are important (Deci et al., 1994). Secondly, parents *encourage self-initiated activities* and can provide *choices* on how to accomplish the requested task (Grolnick, Gurland, DeCourcey, & Jacob, 2002). Thirdly, *acknowledging the child's perspective and feelings* (i.e., communicating empathy) conveys an understanding and respect for the child's experience (Deci et al., 1994; Grolnick et al., 1997). Finally, *using non-controlling language* when making requests conveys respect rather than pressure (e.g., avoiding *shoulds, musts*, and *have tos*; Deci et al., 1994; Koestner et al., 1984; Ryan, 1982). AS is highly compatible with the provision of structure (Grolnick, 2012; Grolnick, Raftery-Helmer, Flamm, Marbell, & Cardemil, 2014; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010). Research on toddlers' internalization (Kochanska & Aksan, 1995) has shown that gentle guidance (i.e., guiding a child's behavior in a positive rather than a power-assertive way; Blandon & Volling, 2008; Kochanska & Aksan, 1995), a concept similar to AS, was linked to higher committed compliance, an early form of internalization.

Toddlers' internalization of rules has traditionally been measured through types of compliance (Blandon & Volling, 2008; Feldman & Klein, 2003; Forman, 2007; Kochanska & Aksan, 1995; Kochanska, Coy, & Murray, 2001, Kochanska, Tjebkes, & Forman, 1998; Kuczynski & Kochanska, 1990). Whereas situational compliance, which refers to obedience elicited by and contingent upon parental prompts, is not related to rule internalization (Kochanska et al., 2001), committed compliance, which takes place wholeheartedly and without parental prompts, has been found to be a good predictor of internalization (e.g., Kochanska & Aksan, 1995; Kochanska et al., 2001, 1998).

AS has been shown to greatly assist children and adolescents in the process of internalizing the values, norms, and behaviors that parents put forward, and to foster engagement and self-determination (Grolnick et al., 1997; Joussemet, Koestner, Lekes, & Houlfort, 2004; Lekes et al., 2011; Mageau et al., 2009). Grolnick and Ryan (1989) interviewed parents and asked them to report the extent to which they acknowledged their child's feelings and points of view, justified their requests and limits, as well as heard their children out when decisions had to be made. They found that more autonomy-supportive parents had children who experienced greater school motivation, achievement, and showed more competence. Chirkov and Ryan (2001) showed that parental expression of AS was positively related with children's well-being and academic achievement. Similarly, Joussemet, Koestner, Lekes, and Landry (2005) found that maternal AS when children were 5 years of age was related to their social and academic adjustment in third grade. Autonomy-supportive parenting has also been associated with children's better emotional regulation (Eiden, Edwards, & Leonard, 2007; Ryan et al., 2006).

A few studies on autonomy-supportive parenting toward toddlers have been conducted; some of these have explored its impact on child motivation. For example, Grolnick, Frodi, and Bridges (1985) found that mothers' autonomy-supportive behaviors during a game-like task were positively associated with their 12-month-old infant's subsequent exploratory behaviors. This AS benefit remained 8 months later, when child task-oriented persistence and competence were assessed (Frodi, Bridges, & Grolnick, 1985). In a set of studies, maternal AS was coded when 15-month-old infants and their mothers engaged in a puzzle task. This measure, based on perspective taking and scaffolding (adjusting challenge, pace, and available help), was found to predict toddlers' security of attachment (Bernier, Matte-Gagné, Bélanger, & Whipple, 2014; Whipple, Bernier, & Mageau, 2011) and self-regulatory abilities at 18 and 24 months of age (Bernier, Carlson, & Whipple, 2010).

In all, it appears that autonomy-supportive parenting promotes positive child outcomes, even as early as toddlerhood. However, these few studies examining AS toward toddlers did so in game-like contexts, as opposed to frustrating or "hot" socialization contexts (Kim, Nordling, Yoon, Boldt, & Kochanska, 2013). Research has shown that children's ability to self-regulate their emotionally

charged response in hot situations is predictive of their later behavioral and psychological difficulties (Cole & Deater-Deckard, 2009; Eisenberg et al., 2004; Keenan, 2000; Kim et al., 2013).

Given the developmental differences between toddlers and older children, it is important to explore further how AS can be conveyed to toddlers, since AS may be manifested differently depending on the developmental period and context. Therefore, the goal of the present study is to explore what autonomy-supportive parents report doing when making requests to their toddler. To our knowledge, the only research investigating concrete manifestations that characterize an autonomy-supportive approach has been conducted in the education context. In 1999, Reeve, Bolt, and Cai showed that teachers who had an autonomy-supportive orientation acted differently from more controlling teachers. They assessed school teachers' self-reported motivational approach (Deci, Schwartz, Sheinman, & Ryan, 1981), ranging from highly autonomy-supportive to highly controlling, and subsequently observed their classroom behaviors. Compared to more controlling teachers, teachers who valued AS to a greater extent did more of the following: listening to their students, allowing students to work their own way, encouraging problem solving, making learning material available to students, inviting students to share their interests, and acknowledging their perspective. The validity of these practices was further corroborated, as teachers who adopted these practices were rated as being more autonomy-supportive by students (Reeve & Jang, 2006). In a recent qualitative study, Côté-Lecaldare, Joussemet, and Dufour (2016) explored practices that daycare educators who strongly value AS report using with toddlers, but in a wide range of situations. These educators reported using classical AS elements such as empathy, rationales, and choices, as well as other practices, such as modeling and adaptation.

Present Study

Building on this prior work, the present exploratory study will examine how parents' AS is manifested in parent–toddler socialization situations (i.e., making requests). The main goal was to explore a wide range of socialization practices that could be favored by parents who prioritize supporting their toddler's autonomy when they have to ask their child to do something that is not pleasant. By using exploratory factorial and correlational analyses, we aimed to explore which practices would (1) load on a putative AS factor and (2) relate positively with the Parent Attitude Scale (PAS; Gurland & Grolnick, 2005), a scale assessing parents' beliefs about AS (e.g., "I encourage my child to make his/her own decisions"), and psychological control (e.g., "The most important thing to teach children is absolute obedience to parents"). We also explored how the selected subset of practices relates with toddlers' rule internalization (Kochanska & Aksan, 1995).

We expected to obtain a single factor structure for three reasons. First, our study focuses on one type of situation, i.e., when parents ask their toddler to do something s/he doesn't enjoy doing. Second, we assessed each behavior using a single item (which greatly limits the possibility that different factors can emerge) since our goal was to include as many different potentially autonomy-supportive behaviors as possible to identify those that could be used in this situation, with this age group. Third, prior research has shown that even when multiple items are used to assess each specific autonomy-supportive behaviors, all autonomy-supportive behaviors typically merge to form a single factor (Mageau et al., 2015). Although our study is exploratory, we hypothesized that the AS factor would include practices related to empathy, as parents of young children can show sensitivity and responsiveness, akin to AS (Griffith & Grolnick, 2014; Hoffman, 2000). However, we had no specific prediction about the use of rationales, choices, and non-controlling language, as these may not all be developmentally appropriate for toddlers. Finally, we expected that some practices falling outside of the classical AS definition could be identified as autonomy-supportive, but no specific hypotheses were made in regard to the nature of these practices.

Method

Recruitment

Participants were French-speaking parents of toddlers, principally recruited from daycare centers within the province of Québec (mainly in the Montréal area), Canada. Some participants were recruited via parent blogging websites and associations.

After obtaining ethical approval, interested daycare principals assisted in recruitment by sending out a letter to parents, posting a recruitment flyer, and/or allowing researchers to recruit parents on site. The recruitment material summarized the study's goal, inclusion criteria, and procedure (i.e., to fill out an online questionnaire). The main researcher always communicated with parents to confirm their eligibility prior to giving them an identification number and the link to the online questionnaire. The inclusion criteria were: raising a toddler aged between 18 and 36 months, and being able to communicate in French. When participants had more than one child meeting the inclusion criteria, they were asked to identify one of them, to ensure that parents would keep the targeted child in mind when answering the questionnaire.

Participants

A total of 182 parents participated in the study (145 mothers; 37 fathers). Only one parent per family was permitted to fill out the questionnaire. In terms of ethnicity, 73.6% of parents identified themselves as Canadians while 26.4% categorized themselves as "Other" (e.g., African American, Italian, Mexican). Most (98.2%) were married or in a common-law relationship. The average age of parents was 33.78 years (SD = 4.82). The youngest parent was aged 21 years, while the oldest parent was 45; most (70.2%) had a university degree. Most participants spoke French at home (92.0%). The average age of targeted toddlers (91 boys; 91 girls) was 27.08 months (SD = 5.46).

Procedure

Once parents had read and answered the online consent form, they proceeded to fill out the questionnaire. It took approximately 1 hour to complete and all participants were mailed a $20 compensation check upon completion. The questionnaire began with the list of parenting practices, designed for the purpose of the present study, followed by the Parent Attitude Scale (Gurland & Grolnick, 2005), then the My Child Questionnaire (Kochanska, DeVet, Goldman, Murray, & Putnam, 1994), and ended with socio-demographic questions. This order of presentation was selected to prevent participants from thinking about their beliefs concerning motivational approaches before examining how often they use each parenting practice (i.e., to minimize social desirability). The listed items were presented in a random order within the parenting practices section, varying from one participant to another. Parents were able to access the questionnaire at all times and could complete it during separate time periods, at their convenience.

Measures

Socialization Practices Used

A pool of 26 potentially autonomy-supportive practices was generated, based on the classic operational definition of AS (Koestner et al., 1984) as well as on the literature on parental AS (e.g., Griffith & Grolnick, 2014; Grolnick et al., 2014; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989), parental discipline (e.g., Critchley & Sanson, 2006; Davidov, Grusec, & Wolfe, 2012; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994), maternal sensitivity and cooperation (including mood-setting techniques; Ainsworth, 1969; Bretherton, 2013), moral development (Hoffman, 2000), some parenting programs (Caughy, Miller, Genevro, Huang, & Nautiyal, 2003; Faber & Mazlish, 2012), and other studies on disciplinary tactics (Papaioannou, 1998; Robinson, Mandleco, Olsen, & Hart, 1995).

The list of 26 parenting practices was presented to parents, who were asked to rate how often they use each practice, on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from *Never* (0) to *All the time* (5). The "request" context was made explicit. First, examples of "important things toddlers need to do and that are not always enjoyable" were provided (e.g., pick up toys, put on a hat, take a bath). Participants were also asked to add examples of the everyday requests (things s/he has to do but doesn't like doing) they make to their toddler. The stem preceding the listed practices was "When you ask your toddler to do something s/he doesn't like doing (e.g., getting dressed, taking a bath, picking up toys), how often do you…?" or "Once you realize that your toddler is not listening to your request, how often do you…?" The list of practices can be found in Table 1. Examples include:

- Make your request by beginning with "Can you…"
- Acknowledge your toddler's feelings (e.g., anger, fear, etc.) with a sound such as "Hmm…" and/or by naming the feeling
- Explain the reason(s) behind your request (i.e., say why it's important to do it) by giving a short explanation (e.g., "You have to put your boots on because it's cold").

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of continuous variables used in the principal analyses.

Variable	*n*	*M*	*SD*
Parental Attitude toward Autonomy Support (on a scale from 1 to 7)	176	5.41	.75
Toddler Level of Rule Internalization (on a scale from 1 to 7)	178	3.76	.87
Parenting Practices (on a scale from 0 to 5)			
Explain the reason(s) behind your request (i.e., say why it's important to do it) by giving a short explanation (e.g., "You have to put your boots on because it's cold") [a]	180	4.56	.99
Make your request by finishing with "please" [a]	180	4.51	1.22
Warn toddler in advance about what's to be asked of him/her (e.g., "In 5 minutes, it's going to be time to pick up your toys") [a]	180	4.23	1.38
If your toddler asks why s/he has to do it, explain why it's important [a]	179	4.21	1.44
Show your toddler what you want him/her to do by doing it yourself as well (e.g., put your own hat on; wash your hands with him/her) [a]	182	4.19	1.12
Make your request by saying "It's time to …" (e.g., pick up the toys) [a]	181	4.07	1.10
State the rule (e.g., "Toys belong in the toy chest") [a]	179	4.02	1.20
Hear your toddler out if s/he protests (i.e., listen to what s/he has to say) [b]	179	3.97	1.30
Make your request by beginning with "I would like…" [a]	180	3.86	1.23
Try to understand why s/he is not listening (e.g., s/he must be tired, hungry, etc.) [b]	182	3.82	1.19
Take your toddler's desires into account when making your request (e.g., "I can see you still want to play but it's time for a bath. Why don't you take your toy with you") [a]	181	3.62	1.34
Make the task fun (e.g., pretend to be a truck transporting and dumping blocks) [a]	181	3.49	1.24
Acknowledge your toddler's feelings (e.g., anger, fear, etc.) with a sound such as "Hmm…" and/or by naming the feeling [b]	181	3.47	1.43
Show your toddler that you understand that s/he is annoyed by your request [b]	181	3.33	1.28
Describe the problem (e.g., "It is difficult to walk around with all these toys on the floor") [a]	181	3.33	1.31
Make your request by beginning with "Can you…" [a]	180	3.29	1.34
Allow your toddler to decide how to perform the task [a]	180	3.28	1.13
Distract your toddler while you do it yourself (e.g., put your toddler's hat on while you show him/her something interesting) [b]	182	3.10	1.30
Explain the reason(s) behind your request (i.e., say why it's important to do it) by giving a long explanation (e.g., "You have to put your boots on because it's cold out, you can't walk outside without shoes. You would catch a cold if you didn't") [a]	179	3.07	1.42
Sing a song (e.g., sing the "Clean-up" song) [a]	181	3.03	1.49
Describe what you feel (e.g., "It upsets me when I can't walk around because toys are all over the floor") [a]	179	2.94	1.29
Have your toddler do the same thing to their doll/teddy (e.g., wash his/her doll in the bath at the same time as him/her) [a]	180	2.58	1.41
Use make belief (e.g., pretend your toddler's hat is magical to make him/her put it on) [a]	182	2.58	1.28
Put on some music [a]	181	2.43	1.50
Make excuses (say that it's not his/her fault; e.g., toddler is not listening because s/he is tired) [b]	181	2.06	1.00
Use fantasy to show toddler that you understand his/her frustration (e.g., "I wish we had a magic wand so the room can be all cleaned up") [b]	182	2.00	1.20

Notes. [a] Practices presented after the stem "When you ask your toddler to do something s/he doesn't like doing (e.g., getting dressed, taking a bath, picking up the toys), how often do you…?" [b] Practices presented after the stem "Once you realize that your toddler is not listening to your request, how often do you…?"

The French version of this list was used for the purposes of this study, after using the back-translation procedure (Vallerand, 1989). All practices, generated in English, were translated from English to French by a research assistant who was fluent in both languages and then re-translated from French to English by a second research assistant who was also perfectly bilingual. The original and the back-translated versions were then compared and edited by the first and second authors, to produce final English and French versions of the list.

Parental Attitude toward AS

The Parent Attitude Scale (Gurland & Grolnick, 2005) is composed of a series of 10 items (α = .72) and serves to assess parents' beliefs about AS and psychological control when parenting children. Parents answered each item on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from *Not at all in agreement* (1) to *Very strongly agree* (7). Higher scores indicate a more positive attitude toward AS. The French version of this scale was shown to have good internal consistency (α = .64 and .81; Joussemet, Mageau, & Koestner, 2014).

The PAS was developed by Grolnick and colleagues, who pioneered research on the concept of parental AS and greatly contributed to its definition and measurement (e.g., Grolnick et al., 1997; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Grolnick et al., 1991). Although the PAS has been validated mostly with parents of older children, all items pertain to attitudes (five items; e.g., "Children should always do what their parents say, no matter what," reversed) or behaviors (five items; e.g., "I find that listening to what my child has to say helps me reach a better decision"; "I do not like my child to disagree with me if my friends are around," reversed) that are relevant with children of any developmental stages. Its convergent validity has been established in laboratory studies (Grolnick, Price, Beiswenger, & Sauck, 2007; Gurland & Grolnick, 2005; Mauras, Grolnick, & Friendly, 2013). Specifically, higher scores on the PAS have been found to correlate with observations of more controlling and less autonomy-supportive parental practices. The PAS has also demonstrated high predictive validity; it has been found to relate to children's higher learning-oriented achievement goals (Gurland & Grolnick, 2005) and lower fear of negative evaluation in social situations (Grolnick et al., 2007). Finally, this scale also captured increases in autonomy-supportive attitudes when parents participated in a parenting workshop that taps into AS (Joussemet et al., 2014).

Child Rule Internalization

Parents were also asked to complete the "Internalized Conduct" subscale of the My Child Questionnaire, a measure of children's conscience development (Kochanska et al., 1994). This 20-item subscale is rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *Extremely untrue* (1) to *Extremely true* (7). It represents committed compliance, an early form of rule internalization, which Kochanska et al. (1994) describe as the spontaneous self-correction/self-regulation done by the child without surveillance (e.g., will spontaneously pick up toys, even without being asked; internal consistency: α = .90).

Results

Descriptive statistics of all continuous variables used in the principal analyses are presented in Table 1. First, an exploratory factor analysis using Maximum Likelihood (ML) with an oblimin rotation was performed to evaluate the factorial structure of the 26 parenting practices and the resulting scree plot suggested a one-factor solution. A second exploratory factor analysis using ML was thus conducted, forcing the 26 parenting practices into a one-factor model. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure was used to verify the sampling adequacy for the analysis. According to Hutcheson and Sofroniou (1999), the KMO value was considered good (KMO = .72), suggesting that the sample size was adequate for factor analysis. Furthermore, all KMO values for the individual items were above the acceptable limit of .5 (Field, 2009). Bartlett's test of sphericity, $\chi^2(325) = 999.36$, $p < .001$, indicated that correlations between items were sufficiently large for factor analysis. The one-factor model explained

18.64% of the variance in the 26 parenting practices. Table 2 shows the loadings of each of the practices on this factor.

Pearson product–moment correlations of each of the 26 practices and the PAS (Gurland & Grolnick, 2005) were also conducted to investigate which practices correlate positively with this well-known measure of autonomy-supportive parenting and attitude. Ten parenting practices were significantly positively correlated with the PAS (see Table 2).

Keeping only the practices that (1) obtained a factor loading above .40[1] in factor analysis and (2) showed a significant positive correlation with the PAS, a second exploratory factor analysis using ML was conducted to ascertain that these (eight) practices for making requests do form a single factor representing AS. Using ML estimation, the scree plot test's inflexion point justified the retention of one factor, which explained 36.29% of the variance in our retained parenting practices. Forcing the parenting practices into one factor, all practices had loadings above .40 and were retained in the final solution (see Table 3). These practices pertain to: offering short explanations, conveying why the requested task is important, describing the problem that needs to be solved, flexibly taking the toddler's desire into account when making one's request, modeling/behaving in congruence with

Table 2. Factor loadings for exploratory factor analysis of parenting practices and Pearson product–moment correlations between each practice and the Parent Attitude Scale.

Parenting Practice	Factor Loading	Correlation (*p* value)
1. Explain the reason(s) behind your request (i.e., say why it's important to do it) by giving a short explanation (e.g., "You have to put your boots on because it's cold") [a]	.58	**.18* (.02)**
2. Show your toddler that you understand that s/he is annoyed by your request [b]	.56	**.36* (.00)**
3. Take your toddler's desires into account when making your request (e.g., "I can see you still want to play but it's time for a bath. Why don't you take your toy with you") [a]	.54	**.22* (.00)**
4. If your toddler asks why s/he has to do it, explain why it's important [a]	.53	**.18* (.02)**
5. Describe the problem (e.g., "It is difficult to walk around with all these toys on the floor") [a]	.51	**.19* (.01)**
6. Show your toddler what you want him/her to do by doing it yourself as well (e.g., put your own hat on; wash your hands with him/her) [a]	.49	**.20* (.01)**
7. Try to understand why s/he is not listening (e.g., s/he must be tired, hungry, etc.) [b]	.47	.14 (.07)
8. Have your toddler do the same thing to their doll/teddy (e.g., wash his/her doll in the bath at the same time as him/her) [a]	.46	.07 (.33)
9. Hear your toddler out if s/he protests (i.e., listen to what s/he has to say) [b]	.46	**.26* (.00)**
10. Make your request by finishing with "please" [a]	.44	.11 (.15)
11. State the rule (e.g., "Toys belong in the toy chest") [a]	.44	.12 (.13)
12. Acknowledge your toddler's feelings (e.g., anger, fear, etc.) with a sound such as "Hmm…" and/or by naming the feeling [b]	.43	**.18* (.02)**
13. Make your request by beginning with "I would like… " [a]	.40	.12 (.11)
14. Describe what you feel (e.g., "It upsets me when I can't walk around because toys are all over the floor") [a]	.37	.14 (.07)
15. Use fantasy to show toddler that you understand his/her frustration (e.g., "I wish we had a magic wand so the room can be all cleaned up") [b]	.37	.06 (.44)
16. Warn toddler in advance about what's to be asked of him/her (e.g., "In 5 minutes, it's going to be time to pick up your toys") [a]	.36	**.24* (.00)**
17. Make your request by saying "It's time to …" (e.g., pick up the toys) [a]	.35	.05 (.48)
18. Make the task fun (e.g., pretend to be a truck transporting and dumping blocks) [a]	.34	**.18* (.02)**
19. Allow your toddler to decide how to perform the task [a]	.26	.13 (.10)
20. Explain the reason(s) behind your request (i.e., say why it's important to do it) by giving a long explanation (e.g., "You have to put your boots on because it's cold out, you can't walk outside without shoes. You would catch a cold if you didn't") [a]	.22	−.09 (.23)
21. Use make belief (e.g., pretend your toddler's hat is magical to make him/her put it on) [a]	.22	.15 (.05)
22. Sing a song (e.g., sing the "Clean-up" song) [a]	.21	.13 (.10)
23. Put on some music [a]	.20	.03 (.67)
24. Distract your toddler while you do it yourself (e.g., put your toddler's hat on while you show him/her something interesting) [b]	.19	−.04 (.60)
25. Make excuses (say that it's not his/her fault; e.g., toddler is not listening because s/he is tired) [b]	.15	.00 (.99)
26. Make your request by beginning with "Can you…" [a]	.11	−.04 (.64)

Notes. [a] Practices presented after the stem "When you ask your toddler to do something he/she doesn't like doing (e.g., getting dressed, taking a bath, picking up the toys), how often do you…?" [b] Practices presented after the stem "Once you realize that your toddler is not listening to your request, how often do you…?"

* $p < .05$.

Table 3. Factor loadings for exploratory factor analysis of eight autonomy-supportive parenting practices.

Autonomy-Supportive Parenting Practice	Factor Loading
1. Explain the reason(s) behind your request (i.e., say why it's important to do it) by giving a short explanation (e.g., "You have to put your boots on because it's cold") [a]	.65
2. If your toddler asks why s/he has to do it, explain why it's important [a]	.65
3. Hear your toddler out if s/he protests (i.e., listen to what s/he has to say) [b]	.53
4. Describe the problem (e.g., "It is difficult to walk around with all these toys on the floor") [a]	.51
5. Take your toddler's desires into account when making your request (e.g., "I can see you still want to play but it's time for a bath. Why don't you take your toy with you?") [a]	.50
6. Show your toddler that you understand that s/he is annoyed by your request [b]	.47
7. Acknowledge your toddler's feelings (e.g., anger, fear, etc.) with a sound such as "Hmm…" and/or by naming the feeling [b]	.43
8. Show your toddler what you want him/her to do by doing it yourself as well (e.g., put your own hat on; wash your hands with him/her) [a]	.41

Notes. [a] Practices presented after the stem "When you ask your toddler to do something he/she doesn't like doing (e.g., getting dressed, taking a bath, picking up the toys), how often do you…?" [b] Practices presented after the stem "Once you realize that your toddler is not listening to your request, how often do you…?"

requests made, and hearing, acknowledging, and accepting the toddler's feelings, even his/her irritation and protest. Their average correlated strongly with parents' mean score on the PAS, indicative of their attitude toward AS (r = .36, n = 176, p < .001).

Finally, we explored the relationship between the frequency with which parents used these eight identified practices and the level of rule internalization demonstrated by their toddler (Kochanska et al., 1994). The mean score of these practices was calculated prior to conducting the correlation. There was a moderate, positive correlation between the two variables, r = .27, n = 176, p = .001, with high levels of toddlers' rule internalization being positively associated with the frequency of use of these autonomy-supportive socialization practices.[2]

Discussion

The goal of the present study was to search for autonomy-supportive practices that parents use when they make requests to their toddlers. Specifically, using correlational and factorial analyses, we aimed to uncover some practices that positively related to parents' autonomy-supportive attitude and that loaded on a putative AS factor. We also explored how the group of retained autonomy-supportive practices correlated with toddlers' level of rule internalization, further assessing its validity. Though preliminary, this study is informative by identifying manifestations of AS in a request-making context. In addition, the finding that AS toward toddlers is positively associated with toddlers' internalization of rules is in line with SDT's notion that optimal development is related to the support of psychological autonomy (Chirkov, Ryan, & Willness, 2005; Deci et al., 1994; Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2008; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Joussemet et al., 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). This finding also suggests that AS is beneficial even with very young children, which corroborates the concept of AS being a universal psychological need (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001; Jang et al., 2009; Lynch et al., 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2002; Soenens, Vansteenkiste, & Petegem, 2015).

Retained Practices

A total of eight practices were retained. These practices were kept because they loaded on the final AS factor and correlated significantly with the PAS (Gurland & Grolnick, 2005), a well-known scale that measures parents' attitude toward AS. In line with the hypotheses made, four of these practices correspond to the concept of empathy (Hoffman, 2000): "Hear your toddler out if he/she protests (i.e., listen to what he/she has to say)," "Show your toddler that you understand that he/she is annoyed by your request," "Take your toddler's desires into account when making your request", and "Acknowledge your toddler's feelings with

a sound and/or by naming the feeling." It appears that the listening and acknowledging practices are tapping into a common concept similar to empathy, which has been related to positive child outcomes (Griffith & Grolnick, 2014). Empathy is also one of the main components of the classical definition of AS (Deci et al., 1994; Koestner et al., 1984).

In addition to conveying empathy by different means, parents who tend to strongly value AS also have a tendency to endorse the following practices: "Explain the reason(s) behind your request (i.e., say why it's important to do it) by giving a short explanation," "If your toddler asks why he/she has to do it, explain why it's important," "Describe the problem (e.g., It is difficult to walk around with all these toys on the floor)," and "Show your toddler what you want him/her to do by doing it yourself as well (e.g., put your own hat on; wash your hands with him/her)".

Giving toddlers the reason behind parental requests and explaining their value or importance appears to be pertinent to autonomy-supportive parents. These practices are in line with one of the components of the classical definition of AS: providing rationales (Deci et al., 1994). The results also suggest that giving *short* explanations as opposed to long ones were favored by autonomy-supportive parents. Indeed, providing a *long* explanation (item 20 in Table 2) was unrelated to the PAS and did not load on the AS factor (loading of .22). Long rationales are probably developmentally inappropriate for this age group and may be perceived as lectures or sermons (Faber & Mazlish, 2012). Sansone, Weir, Harpster, and Morgan (1992) also mention that meaningful rationales are important. In addition to an appropriate length (and probably language level), the degree to which the rationale starts from the toddler's perspective (vs. parental concerns and standards) should be investigated.

"Describing the problem" (e.g., "It is difficult to walk around with all these toys on the floor") was a putative autonomy-supportive practice inspired by SDT and applied work (Faber & Mazlish, 2012). It has also recently been included in the coding of parental AS during a clean-up task (Laurin & Joussemet, 2017). Koestner et al. (1984) explained that instructions delivered in an informational rather than controlling style (e.g., "Walls are not for drawing" vs. "You are messy") fosters children's internal (vs. external) locus of causality. Describing a problem without implying anything about the child is a form of non-controlling language, one of the main components of the classical definition of AS (Koestner et al., 1984) and it may also represent a good way to convey unconditional positive regard (Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004). Similarly, in their parenting book, Faber and Mazlish (2012) explain that informational and neutral descriptions help children better understand what needs to be done to remedy the problem. Hearing about a problem needing to be fixed as opposed to being accused of creating one is a lot easier to hear and may protect toddlers from painful feelings and backlash to their self-esteem. They have an easier time concentrating on the problem and it also gives them a chance to figure out what they can do to solve the problem themselves (Faber & Mazlish, 2012).

A modeling practice was also retained in the group of autonomy-supportive practices: "Show your toddler what you want him/her to do by doing it yourself as well" (e.g., put your own hat on; wash your hands with him/her). Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) has long emphasized that modeling is a powerful source of development. Perhaps modeling is also a way to minimize pressure, as parents who tend to value AS also tend to "practice what they preach" to emphasize the task's importance rather than their power ("do as I say, not as I do"). Perhaps by watching their parents enact a desired behavior, children see it as more reasonable and less compelling since parents also impose it on themselves.

Promising Practices

Two practices, "Warn toddler in advance about what's to be asked of him/her" and "Make the task fun," were not retained in the final solution despite the fact their positive correlation with the PAS was significant. Although they are interesting ways, for parents, to support their toddler's autonomy, their factor loadings fell below .40. Warning a child in advance and attempting to make the activity more pleasant may well correspond to the essence of AS. However, planning ahead and playing may

require more energy from parents. When making requests, parents may thus tend to convey empathy, give short rationales, model the request, and use an informational and neutral style more often than they tend to use these more effortful practices. We nevertheless consider these two practices promising because more autonomy-supportive parents tend to include them in their behavioral repertoire when making requests to their toddlers.

Five other practices had a marginally significant positive correlation with the PAS and as such might also deserve further investigation. Specifically, the more parents reported having a positive attitude toward AS, the more they tended to: try to understand why their child doesn't listen, describe how they feel, provide choices, use imagination and sing (task-related) songs (items 7, 14, 19, 21, and 22 in Table 2). Choice is one of the main components of the classical definition of AS (Grolnick et al., 2002). The fact that the provision of choice was embodied in a single item, "Allowing your toddler to decide how to perform the task," is a methodological limitation. In this specific case, the wording of the item could have indeed limited the correlation between this practice and the PAS. Letting the toddler decide *how to* perform a task probably seemed developmentally inappropriate for parents of toddlers. When being asked to do something, children of this age may need to be told precisely what needs to be done (i.e., to be provided with more structure) in order for the request to be, first and foremost, understood and then eventually internalized. It would have been valuable to include less open and more developmentally appropriate choices (e.g., "Do you want to pick up the cars or the trucks first?" "Do you want me to help you with this task?"). Alternatively, perhaps the requests in the questionnaire referred to specific and simple tasks for which giving choices may not have seemed pertinent. Future studies should explore the value of various ways parents can convey choice and support initiatives in the context of task requests.

Next, the more parents reported having a positive attitude toward AS, the more they tended to describe what they feel. Inspired from research on the familial context of emotional regulation (Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007) and on Faber and Mazlish's parenting book (2012), this practice allows parents to provide information about the importance of the task and/or the problem to be solved but without alluding to the child's character. Future research is needed to further explore this practice as well as its linkage with children's internalization process.

Using playful imagination and singing a task-related song also tend to be favored by parents who value AS. The latter practice was coded as autonomy-supportive in a recent study (Laurin & Joussemet, 2017) in which many parents sang a "clean-up song" (derived from a television show) during the clean-up task. It is possible that these practices support children's autonomy but they are not as strongly related to other practices because, as was the case for planning ahead and playing, they may require a lot of parental patience and energy. Indeed, knowing a song related to the request and finding the energy to sing it is probably relatively rare.

Finally, "trying to understand why the child is not listening" probably also deserves to be examined further. This reflexive stance, conceptually related to empathy, had a high factor loading on the AS factor and it was reported to be used by autonomy-supportive daycare educators in a recent qualitative study (Côté-Lecaldare et al., 2016).

Respectful Language

The factor analysis also suggests that parents who tend to use the retained autonomy-supportive practices also tend to begin their requests by saying "I would like you to…," to end their requests by saying "please," and to state the rules in an *im*personal way (e.g., "toys belong in the toy chest"; Faber & Mazlish, 2012; Koestner et al., 1984). These practices may simply model politeness that parents may wish to instill in their children. Since their positive correlations with the PAS are weak, such practices may also be used by more controlling parents. At the same time, a considerate tone was used as a defining feature of autonomy-supportive feedback in recent studies (Carpentier & Mageau, 2013). Future research on verbal and non-verbal consideration during requests seems warranted.

Non–Autonomy-Supportive Practices

In our exploratory analyses, we aimed to test a vast array of practices that may be used by parents who value AS. Results of the factorial and correlational analyses conducted suggest that in addition to offering long rationales, remaining practices in the list do not represent AS in a request-making context. For instance, "Distracting your toddler while you do it yourself" and "Have your toddler do the same thing to their doll/teddy" could represent manipulation. "Putting on music" was not retained either; it seems that using music in a request context was a poor example of a mood-setting technique (Ainsworth, 1969; Bretherton, 2013). Finally, making requests by beginning with "Can you…" and "Making excuses for toddlers" suggest that AS is unrelated to such permissive or unassertive formulations.

Summary

Autonomy-supportive parenting can best be described as the recognition and consideration of children's unique needs, feelings, and perspectives (Ryan et al., 2006). In the classical definition of AS (Deci et al., 1994; Koestner et al., 1984), the provision of empathy, rationales, choice, and the use of non-controlling language when making requests are key ingredients. According to the results of the present study, conveying empathy, giving personally meaningful (and age-appropriate) rationales as well as using a descriptive language seem pertinent when socializing toddlers. Future studies are needed to further explore other promising practices, especially providing choice as it may need to be presented in a more structured way, that is, by providing the child with a limited number of options (e.g., "It is time to get dressed; do you want your blue sweater or the red one?").

Limits and Future Directions

Although this study contributes to the literature on AS in the parenting context, there are several limitations that need mentioning. One limitation is that the putative AS factor only explained 36.29% of the variance in our retained parenting practices, leaving a large portion of variance unexplained. Perhaps parents who do value AS tend to use only a limited number of autonomy-supportive practices, which would limit their intercorrelations. Indeed, though some parents may strongly endorse PAS items that researchers identify as autonomy-supportive, they may not have a clear or complete idea of what AS consists of, and so probably do not use all possible autonomy-supportive practices. Different parents could also favor different practices. In addition, parents may also use other autonomy-supportive practices that this study was unable to tap into.

Next, relying on the frequency of use may not be the best way to establish whether the practices are autonomy-supportive, as frequency depends on numerous factors, such as the type of request, the parent's level energy, the toddler's and parent's mood, and the context (time pressure, public vs. private location), in addition to parental beliefs. Some practices may thus be very autonomy-supportive but used relatively infrequently, which at times could have reduced the observed correlations. Although our analytical approach was a helpful first step to identify which practices parents who strongly value parental AS tend to adopt with their toddlers, future research could pursue the investigation of parental AS toward toddlers by using a Likert-type scale that evaluates the extent to which different behaviors describe how parents typically act with their child (see Mageau et al., 2015).

The study's main limitation is the reliance on self-report measures for both parenting and child variables, which carries subjective bias. This also leads to a common method variance problem: variance that is attributable to the method of measurement rather than to the constructs the measures represent (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003) – and as such, the results should be interpreted cautiously. In addition, there was relatively little context provided in the formulation of practices. Indeed, using a questionnaire format precluded the inclusion of important nuances.

Qualitative, observational, and experimental methods would help explore how parents go about supporting their toddler's autonomy. For example, qualitative research would be helpful in understanding

what specific types of rationales and choices autonomy-supportive parents tend to favor. In a recent study, daycare educators were interviewed and provided rich discourse about, among other aspects of AS, how they explain rationales and provide some choices (Côté-Lecaldare et al., 2016). In addition, experimental work teaching parents how they may convey AS in request situations could test whether participants would broaden their "repertoire" and what effect these new behaviors would have on children.

Observational studies would also be needed to assess important nuances – such as the words chosen, and non-verbal aspects of communication – and examine each practice under study in context. One promising avenue would be to assess parental attitudes toward AS and, following Reeve and colleagues (Reeve, Bolt, & Cai, 1999; Reeve & Jang, 2006), observe parent–toddler dyads and code the way more autonomy-supportive parents tend to elicit compliance from their toddler, during a clean-up task for instance. Results from the present study could be useful in developing a coding scheme, but observing autonomy-supportive parents' socialization practices could help identify other potentially autonomy-supportive practices.

An important research area would be to observe how toddlers' rule internalization and well-being relate to potentially autonomy-supportive practices, in both the short and long term. For instance, Laurin and Joussemet (2017) observed parents and their 2-year-olds completing a clean-up task. AS (coded using classical elements such as rationales and others, such as describing the problem) was linked with greater improvements in committed compliance, observed 1.5 years later. Future studies could also examine parenting practices in a "don't" context, such as in a delayed-gratification task. It would also be important to include third-party reports in future studies, such as daycare educators, who have a different perception of toddlers and thus give new insight on their adjustment. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could track the long-term impact of autonomy-supportive practices on children's mental health and development.

Finally, the data was collected among highly educated French Canadians. It is therefore impossible to assume that similar results would be obtained in a less educated or more diverse sample e.g., higher-risk families. Other recruitment sources besides daycares could be used to favor a more heterogeneous sample in future research. Other more difficult socialization contexts such as families dealing with chronic illness (e.g., dealing with difficult/painful procedures, restrictions) could be studied. Exploring how parents support children's autonomy in such situations could enrich the literature on AS and parenting. Importantly, it could provide helpful tips to parents in similar situations and help them on a daily basis.

Despite these limitations, the present results suggest useful ways to support younger children's autonomy and as such, help shed light on the specific manifestations of autonomy-supportive parenting that are developmentally appropriate for toddlers. Importantly, this study presents preliminary, parent-reported information about autonomy-supportive parenting practices in socialization contexts which may serve well as a stepping-stone for future work on the measurement of AS toward toddlers. The findings also provide evidence for the universality of AS (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001; Jang et al., 2009; Lynch et al., 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2002, Soenens et al., 2015) as well as for its importance during toddlerhood. Finally, the present study contributes to the existing literature by providing concrete examples of autonomy-supportive practices parents can use in a determinant yet potentially challenging context.

Notes

1. Typically, researchers take a loading of an absolute value of more than 0.3 to be important. However, that depends on sample size. According to Stevens (2002), for a sample size of 200, a loading of more than 0.364 can be considered significant. In order to be conservative, we thus chose a factor loading of 0.40.
2. The role of toddlers' age and parents' education as potential covariates was explored although they did not correlate significantly with toddlers' internalization (r = .08, p = .29 and r = .04, p = .58, respectively). The pattern of results did not change, as partial correlations revealed a significant correlation between the parenting practices and toddlers' rule internalization above and beyond parents' level of education and toddlers' age, r = .26, p = .001.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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