



AUTONOMY SUPPORT

Autonomy support is a way of working with our children to help them understand values and principles, and internalise them.

There is a way of parenting and setting limits with our children that is associated with consistently good outcomes for our kids, and it is different to the way most of us think about boundaries and limits. It is not permissive, nor is it controlling. The research term we use is “autonomy supportive”.

This form of parenting is not about letting children do what they want. That is called permissiveness. Autonomy support is built on encouraging our children to act for themselves in volitional, harmonious and integrated ways. That means they choose for themselves in ways that reduce pressure and that are consistent with their values (and ideally, ours!). This is in contrast to more pressured, conflicted behaviour, where they are behaving a certain way because they feel they have to, or because they will feel alienated or isolated from us if they choose otherwise.

Unlike permissive or neglectful parenting, autonomy-supportive parenting is hard work. The key word is ‘pro-active’. To be autonomy-supportive for our children, regardless of whether they are 2 or 22, we need to work on the following four key elements.

1. Provide a clear explanation (or rationale) for what we are asking our children to do
2. Recognise the feelings and perspective of our child; see the world through their eyes
3. Offer choice and encourage initiative
4. Minimise the use of controlling techniques

These are not steps to be followed sequentially. This is not a technique or a process. Autonomy support is a way of working with our children to help them understand values and principles, and internalise them. And when we support our children’s autonomy, something interesting happens to them: we support the development of competence and foster healthy development – or resilience.

ACTIVITY 1: Reflection

Are there some things that your child could be deciding for themselves that you are currently maintaining control of? Are there other choices that you feel need to remain in the hands of the parent? Spend some time thinking about which decisions fall in to which category and write about it below.

ACTIVITY 2: Practice

This week, instead of letting your children do what they want, or instead of controlling them, begin the process of engaging with them in an autonomy supportive way. Talk with them about what you want. Offer gentle guidance. Seek to understand their perspective. Problem-solve together. And leave things up to them.

It can be very, very hard to let go of control – and in some cases it is inappropriate to do so. But you will be surprised by how responsive your children may be when you allow them the space to decide things for themselves.