

AUTONOMY SUPPORT AND ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION AMONG YOUNG ADOLESCENTS: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF SELF-ESTEEM

Oľga Orosová, Mária Bacikova-Sleskova, & Beata Gajdošová

*Department of Educational Psychology and Health Psychology, Faculty of Arts,
Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice (Slovak Republic)*

Abstract

Introduction: Research has shown that parenting styles that support autonomy are linked to numerous positive developmental outcomes, including higher self-esteem and fewer health-risk behaviors. Autonomy support from both mothers and fathers plays a critical role in their children's development; however, previous findings on this subject, irrespective of parent-child gender dyads, have been inconsistent. **Aim:** This study aims to explore the association between autonomy support from fathers and mothers, as perceived by young adolescents, self-esteem, and lifetime alcohol consumption among boys and girls. **Methods:** The research sample consisted of 1,125 young adolescents (mean age = 12.99 years, SD = 0.77), with 50.1% being girls. Mediation analysis was conducted separately for boys and girls using PROCESS (Model 4) in SPSS version 25.0. The independent variables were autonomy support from mothers and fathers, the dependent variable was lifetime alcohol consumption, and the mediator was self-esteem. Alcohol availability and descriptive normative beliefs about alcohol consumption were included as covariates. **Results:** Boys reported significantly higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of autonomy support from their fathers. Girls who reported no lifetime alcohol consumption demonstrated higher levels of self-esteem and received more autonomy support from both mothers and fathers. The mediation analysis revealed a significant indirect effect of autonomy support from mothers on reported alcohol consumption through self-esteem, but only among girls. Similarly, there was a significant indirect effect of autonomy support from fathers on reported alcohol consumption through self-esteem, but only among boys. This indicates that higher levels of maternal autonomy support, as perceived by girls, and higher levels of autonomy support from fathers, as perceived by boys, were each associated with an increase in self-esteem, which subsequently reduced the likelihood of reporting alcohol consumption—among girls in the first case, and among boys in the second. **Conclusion:** young adolescents' perceptions of autonomy support from both mothers and fathers were indirectly associated with alcohol consumption through self-esteem, with this effect varying by gender. These findings emphasize the importance of family-based programs that address young adolescent alcohol use, considering both the parent's and the child's gender.

Keywords: *Autonomy support, self-esteem, alcohol consumption, adolescents.*

1. Introduction

The autonomy orientation is characterized by a strong sense of choice in initiating and regulating one's behavior, allowing individuals to guide their actions based on personal goals and interests rather than external controls or constraints (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Studies from the 1970s–1980s found more parental autonomy support for boys, while those from the 1990s reported slightly more for girls. Although gender stereotypes may affect some families, a systematic review suggests minimal overall differences in the upbringing of boys and girls (Endendijk, Groeneveld, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Mesman, 2016). In another review, it is stated that gendered parenting influences behavioral differences between boys and girls, suggesting that parental responses are shaped more by stereotypes than by actual child behavior. While many parents try to minimize gender emphasis in child-rearing, there is limited research on the impact of parenting on gender role development, which is crucial for counselling and interventions (Morawska, 2020). Morawska's review of the literature suggested that parents' responses differ depending on the child's gender, which may affect their development.

Research has highlighted the vital role of parental autonomy support in children's mental health (Ma, Ma, & Wang, 2022). The authors examined the relationship between parental autonomy support and adolescents' mental health, including life satisfaction and emotional symptoms, while also exploring the mediating role of self-esteem. Their findings indicated that parental autonomy support was positively linked

to life satisfaction and negatively linked to emotional symptoms, with self-esteem partially mediating both associations. The child's self-esteem is the key mechanism driving the impact of parenting strategies (Yang, Schaninger, & Laroche, 2013). Self-esteem is crucial for understanding how individuals perceive, value, and evaluate themselves, providing insight into their behavior (Sarkova et al., 2006). During adolescence, teens may distance themselves from family to test their independence while relying on peers for self-definition and self-esteem. Despite craving independence, they also seek nurture and friendship, grappling with self-doubt, belonging, and self-image (Plummer, 2014).

Parental monitoring, autonomy support, and warmth are essential parenting dimensions that significantly impact adolescent health behaviors, although the mechanisms through which they exert influence may vary (Kwon & Wickrama, 2014). Delayed alcohol initiation was linked to parental modelling, restricted alcohol access, monitoring, relationship quality, involvement, and communication. Lower adolescent drinking levels were associated with parental modelling, restricted alcohol access, disapproval, discipline, monitoring, relationship quality, support, and communication (Ryan, Jorm, & Lubman, 2010). Previous studies indicate that the link between parental autonomy support and alcohol use is unclear, with variations in findings potentially due to differences in samples and measures (Wolff & Crockett, 2011). Additionally, the authors suggest a reciprocal relationship between autonomy granting and risk behavior—adolescents who avoid risks may receive more autonomy, while others use their autonomy to engage in risky behaviors. If these effects counterbalance each other, the overall association between autonomy granting and risk behavior may weaken.

Based on previous research findings this study aims to explore the association between autonomy support from fathers and mothers, as perceived by young adolescents, self-esteem, and lifetime alcohol consumption among boys and girls. We expect that self-esteem will mediate the effect of autonomy support from fathers and mothers on lifetime alcohol consumption among boys and girls.

2. Measures

2.1. Sample and procedure

The research sample consisted of 1,125 young adolescents (mean age = 12.99 years, SD = 0.77), with 50.1% being girls. The data was gathered using paper-and-pen questionnaires from seventh-grade adolescents attending primary schools in Slovakia during September and October 2017. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants. Twelve primary schools across various regions in Slovakia participated, aiming to represent schools from diverse areas and towns of varying sizes. At each school, all seventh-grade pupils took part in the study. The questionnaires were completed during two class periods in the presence of a trained research team member, with teachers absent to ensure confidentiality. The study received ethical approval from the university's ethics committee.

2.2. Measures

The Autonomy Support subscale of the Perceptions of Parents Scale (Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991) measured the extent of autonomy support provided by mothers (7 items) and fathers (7 items) as perceived by young adolescents. Participants completed the scale separately for each parent using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The Autonomy Support subscale demonstrated Cronbach's alphas of 0.64 for mothers and 0.70 for fathers.

Self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) (Rosenberg, 1965). The scale consists of 10 items that assess respondents' perceptions of themselves, such as "At times I think I am no good at all," "I feel that I am a person of value, at least on an equal plane with others," and "I take a positive attitude towards myself." The scale includes 5 positive and 5 negative statements, each rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree to 4 = strongly disagree). The total self-esteem score ranges from 10 to 40, with higher scores indicating greater self-esteem. Cronbach's alpha for RSE total score was 0.73.

Lifetime alcohol consumption. A simple question was used: "Have you ever consumed alcohol, even just one sip? (any beverage containing alcohol)". For the purposes of statistical analysis, the response scale was dichotomized into: 0 = No (No, never), 1 = Yes (I've tried it, I've consumed alcohol multiple times, I drink alcohol regularly, at least once a month, I drink alcohol regularly, at least once a week).

Descriptive normative beliefs was assessed using one item: "According to your estimation, how many of the pupils at your school use alcohol?" (Elek, Miller-Day, & Hecht, 2006). The item was scored on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 = almost none to 4 = most.

Perceived alcohol availability was assessed by asking respondents to rate its accessibility using the question: "How difficult do you think it would be for you to get alcohol if you wanted to?" Responses were recorded on a five-point scale: 1 = Impossible, 2 = Very difficult, 3 = Fairly difficult, 4 = Fairly easy, 5 = Very easy.

2.3. Statistical analyses

The chi-square test and Mann-Whitney U test were used to analyse the data. Mediation models were examined using the PROCESS macro Model 4 for SPSS, also performed separately for boys and girls. The bias-corrected 95% confidence interval (CI) was calculated with 5,000 bootstrap samples. A mediating effect was considered significant if the value zero was not included in the 95% CI. Statistical significance was defined as a two-tailed value of $p < .05$. The mediation analyses controlled for the covariates of descriptive normative beliefs and alcohol availability. All analyses were performed using SPSS 25.0.

3. Results

A chi-square test for independence indicated a significant association between gender and lifetime alcohol consumption, $\chi^2 (1, n = 1125) = 9.82, p = 0.002$. Specifically, 63.3% of boys and 54.1% of girls reported alcohol consumption.

A Mann-Whitney U test revealed: (i) no significant difference in the mother's autonomy support levels of boys ($Md = 3.86, n = 529$) and girls ($Md = 4.00, n = 547$), $U = 153,120, z = 1.66, p = 0.097$. (ii) a significant difference in the father's autonomy support levels of boys ($Md = 3.71, n = 445$) and girls ($Md = 3.86, n = 427$), $U = 103,951.5, z = 2.41, p = 0.016$. (iii) a significant difference in the self-esteem levels of boys ($Md = 2.80, n = 562$) and girls ($Md = 2.60, n = 560$), $U = 115,086, z = -7.81, p < 0.001$.

Boys, in comparison to girls, reported significantly lower levels of autonomy support from their fathers and higher levels of self-esteem.

A Mann-Whitney U test was conducted separately for boys and girls to determine whether those who reported no lifetime alcohol consumption differed from those who reported lifetime alcohol consumption in terms of maternal autonomy support, paternal autonomy support, and self-esteem. The results of the U test revealed: (i) a significant difference in maternal autonomy support levels among girls who reported no lifetime alcohol consumption ($Md = 4.00, n = 252$) and those who reported lifetime alcohol consumption ($Md = 3.86, n = 293$), $U = 30,986.50, z = -3.25, p = 0.001$. (ii) a significant difference in paternal autonomy support levels among girls who reported no lifetime alcohol consumption ($Md = 3.86, n = 188$) and those who reported lifetime alcohol consumption ($Md = 3.71, n = 238$), $U = 17,910.00, z = -3.55, p < 0.001$. (iii) a significant difference in self-esteem levels among girls who reported no lifetime alcohol consumption ($Md = 2.70, n = 258$) and those who reported lifetime alcohol consumption ($Md = 2.60, n = 300$), $U = 31,230.00, z = -3.94, p < 0.001$.

Girls who reported no lifetime alcohol consumption demonstrated higher levels of self-esteem and received more autonomy support from both mothers and fathers. In contrast, the results of the U test revealed no significant differences in maternal autonomy support, paternal autonomy support, or self-esteem between boys who reported no lifetime alcohol consumption and those who reported lifetime alcohol consumption.

The mediation analysis revealed a significant indirect effect of autonomy support from mothers on reported alcohol consumption through self-esteem, but only among girls (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Mediation model among girls.

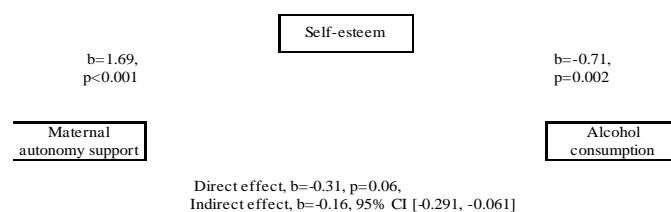
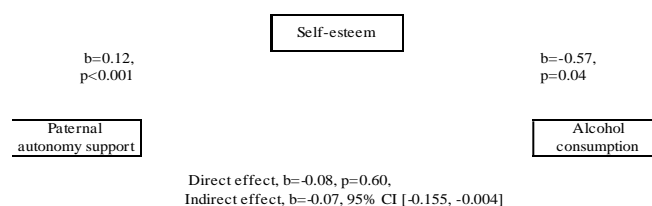


Figure 2. Mediation model among boys.



Similarly, there was a significant indirect effect of autonomy support from fathers on reported alcohol consumption through self-esteem, but only among boys (Figure 2).

This indicates that higher levels of maternal autonomy support, as perceived by girls, and higher levels of autonomy support from fathers, as perceived by boys, were each associated with an increase in self-esteem, which subsequently reduced the likelihood of reporting alcohol consumption—among girls in the first case, and among boys in the second.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Compared to girls, boys reported significantly lower autonomy support from their fathers. This finding contradicts self-determination theory (Vrolijk, Van Lissa, Branje, Meeus, & Keizer, 2020), which asserts that the need for autonomy is equally important for all individuals, regardless of sex, but women scored significantly higher than men in autonomy orientation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Compared to girls, boys in this study reported significantly higher self-esteem. Although girls' self-esteem declines during adolescence, the decrease is small and similar to that of boys (Twenge & Campbell, 2001). However, a meta-analysis by Orth, Erol, and Luciano (2018) found that self-esteem follows a systematic trajectory: it increases in childhood, remains stable during adolescence, and rises in young adulthood. While some studies report a slight self-esteem advantage for boys, others find no significant gender difference. Nonetheless, research suggests that gender is not a direct cause of self-esteem changes.

Girls who had never consumed alcohol reported higher self-esteem and greater autonomy support from both parents. In contrast, the results showed no significant differences in maternal or paternal autonomy support or self-esteem between boys who had and had not consumed alcohol. The psychosocial influences related to the onset of puberty may partly account for the differences in alcohol consumption and self-esteem between boys and girls (Glozah, 2014).

Evidence indicates that parenting may have different effects on boys and girls (Zheng & Chen, 2025). Leaper (2005) summarized previous findings, highlighting that adolescents' relationships with their mothers are more intense, involving both greater closeness and more frequent conflict. In contrast, father–daughter relationships tend to be distant, with daughters often seeing their fathers as detached authority figures. While sons seek support from their fathers more than daughters do, father–son relationships remain less intimate than those with mothers. Female adolescents viewed their parents as less controlling but also less supportive of autonomy, indicating possible gender differences in parenting practices between boys and girls, or a difference in how adolescents perceive these practices (Young & Tully, 2022). Similarly, potential gender differences support next finding, that the father-child relationship has a greater positive impact on reducing risk behaviors in male adolescents than in female adolescents and the results provides strong evidence of a connection between paternal involvement, parenting styles, and adolescent behaviour (Bronte-Tinkew, Moore, & Carrano, 2006). In this research, the mediation analysis showed a significant indirect effect of maternal autonomy support on alcohol consumption through self-esteem, but only for girls. Likewise, paternal autonomy support had a significant indirect effect on alcohol consumption through self-esteem, but only for boys.

Although the current study contributes to understanding the mechanisms through which parenting style influences drug use initiation (O'Byrne, Haddock, Poston, & Institute, M. A. H., 2002) and confirms the mediating role of young adolescents' self-esteem in this relationship, several limitations should be acknowledged. The self-reported measures of parental autonomy support and lifetime alcohol consumption limit a deeper understanding of the relationship between gendered autonomy support and health-risk behaviors in young adolescents.

The findings of this study emphasize the importance of family-based programs that address young adolescent alcohol use, considering both the parent's and the child's gender.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency, Contract No. APVV-23-0500.

References

- Bronte-Tinkew, J., Moore, K. A., & Carrano, J. (2006). The father-child relationship, parenting styles, and adolescent risk behaviors in intact families. *Journal of family issues*, 27(6), 850-881. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X05285296>
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). The general causality orientations scale: Self-determination in personality. *Journal of research in personality*, 19(2), 109-134. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0092-6566\(85\)90023-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/0092-6566(85)90023-6)

- Elek, E., Miller-Day, M., & Hecht, M. L. (2006). Influences of personal, injunctive, and descriptive norms on early adolescent substance use. *Journal of Drug Issues*, 36(1), 147-172. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002204260603600107>
- Endendijk, J. J., Groeneveld, M. G., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., & Mesman, J. (2016). Gender-differentiated parenting revisited: Meta-analysis reveals very few differences in parental control of boys and girls. *PloS one*, 11(7), e0159193. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0159193>
- Glozah, F. N. (2014). Exploring the role of self-esteem and parenting patterns on alcohol use and abuse among adolescents. *Health psychology research*, 2(3). doi: 10.4081/hpr.2014.1898
- Grolnick, W. S., Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (1991). Inner resources for school achievement: Motivational mediators of children's perceptions of their parents. *Journal of educational psychology*, 83(4), 508. DOI:10.1037/0022-0663.83.4.508
- Kwon, J. A., & Wickrama, K. A. S. (2014). Linking family economic pressure and supportive parenting to adolescent health behaviors: Two developmental pathways leading to health promoting and health risk behaviors. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 43, 1176-1190. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-013-0060-0>
- Leaper, C. (2002). Parenting girls and boys. In M. H. Bornstein (Ed.) *Handbook of Parenting: Children and parenting* (Vol. 1., pp. 189-225). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Ma, C., Ma, Y., & Wang, Y. (2022). Parental autonomy support and mental health among Chinese adolescents and emerging adults: The mediating role of self-esteem. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(21), 14029. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192114029>
- Morawska, A. (2020). The effects of gendered parenting on child development outcomes: A systematic review. *Clinical child and family psychology review*, 23(4), 553-576. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-020-00321-5>
- O'Byrne, K. K., Haddock, C. K., Poston, W. S., & Institute, M. A. H. (2002). Parenting style and adolescent smoking. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 30(6), 418-425. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1054-139X\(02\)00370-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1054-139X(02)00370-1)
- Orth, U., Erol, R. Y., & Luciano, E. C. (2018). Development of self-esteem from age 4 to 94 years: A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies. *Psychological bulletin*, 144(10), 1045. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000161>
- Plummer, D. (2014). *Helping adolescents and adults to build self-esteem: A photocopiable resource book*. London, England: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Rosenberg self-esteem scale (RSE)*. *Acceptance and commitment therapy/Measures package*, 61.
- Ryan, S. M., Jorm, A. F., & Lubman, D. I. (2010). Parenting factors associated with reduced adolescent alcohol use: a systematic review of longitudinal studies. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 44(9), 774-783. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048674.2010.501759>
- Sarkova, M., Nagyova, I., Katreniakova, Z., Madarasová, Geckova, A., Orosova, O., Middel, B, van Dijk, J. P., & van den Heuvel, W. (2006). Psychometric evaluation of the general health questionnaire-12 and Rosenberg self-esteem scale in Hungarian and Slovak early adolescents. *Studia Psychologica*, 48(1), 69-79.
- Twenge, J. M., & Campbell, W. K. (2001). Age and birth cohort differences in self-esteem: A cross-temporal meta-analysis. *Personality and social psychology review*, 5(4), 321-344. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0504_3
- Vrolijk, P., Van Lissa, C. J., Branje, S. J., Meeus, W. H., & Keizer, R. (2020). Longitudinal linkages between father and mother autonomy support and adolescent problem behaviors: Between-family differences and within-family effects. *Journal of youth and adolescence*, 49(11), 2372-2387. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-020-01309-8>
- Wolff, J. M., & Crockett, L. J. (2011). The role of deliberative decision making, parenting, and friends in adolescent risk behaviors. *Journal of youth and adolescence*, 40, 1607-1622. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-011-9644-8>
- Yang, Z., Schaninger, C. M., & Laroche, M. (2013). Demarketing teen tobacco and alcohol use: Negative peer influence and longitudinal roles of parenting and self-esteem. *Journal of Business Research*, 66(4), 559-567. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2012.01.004>
- Young, R., & Tully, M. (2022). Autonomy vs. control: Associations among parental mediation, perceived parenting styles, and US adolescents' risky online experiences. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 16(2). <https://doi.org/10.5817/CP2022-2-5>
- Zheng, J., & Chen, B. B. (2025). Parent-Adolescent Discrepancies in Perceiving Parental Psychological Control and Autonomy Support Predict Adolescents' Psychological Adjustment: Does Adolescent Gender Make a Difference? *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-025-02144-5>