

BAR – ILAN UNIVERSITY

**The Role of Prenatal Orientation and Parenting Practices in
Predicting Socioemotional Abilities of 3.5-year-olds:
Examining Self-Determination Theory from a Developmental
Perspective**

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Abstract

Autonomy-supportive and controlling parenting, as well as their associations with child development, have been extensively examined under the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT: Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Yet little is known regarding *prenatal* processes that may set in motion forms of parental autonomy support and control as early as toddlerhood and their consequences for young children's socioemotional development (Nachoum et al., 2021). This longitudinal investigation examines [1] first-time expecting mothers' (T1; $N = 294$) prenatal orientations for autonomy support and control as early markers of autonomy supportive and controlling parenting behaviors, respectively, 18 months postpartum (T3), [2] the unique effects of mothers' autonomy-supportive and controlling practices as reported by mothers at T3 on 3.5 year-old children's prosocial behavior and internalizing and externalizing problems (T4), respectively, and [3] whether mothers' autonomy-supportive and controlling practices at T3 mediate the associations between their prenatal orientations at T1 and their children's behavior at T4. All analyses reported here also controlled for child temperament as reported by fathers 8 months postpartum (T2). Last, in light of research demonstrating differential effects for external versus internal parental control, the model examined here simultaneously tested 3 types of parental control: negative conditional regard, positive conditional regard (both reflecting internally controlling practices), and material rewards (reflecting external control). We hypothesized that parental control that operates via internal pressure will be more destructive for children's development than parental control that operates via external sources.

Results reveal that expecting mothers' prenatal controlling orientation at T1 predicted maternal reports of all three types of controlling practices at T3. Reports of all three controlling practices at T3, in turn, predicted child internalizing problems at T4. Specifically, mothers' reports of positive conditional regard and negative conditional regard at T3 positively predicted child internalizing problems at T4, whereas mothers' reports of material rewards at T3 negatively predicted child internalizing problems at T4. Similarly, autonomy-supportive orientation at T1 positively predicted mothers' tendency to behave in an autonomy supportive manner at T3. Nevertheless, the effects of mothers' autonomy supportive practices at T3 on child prosocial behavior at T4 were significant only for mothers' T3 reports of their tendency to take children's perspective and to communicate empathically. Mothers' T3 reports of choice granting, openness to criticism, and accepting others' opinions had no significant associations with children's prosocial behavior at T4. Last, as hypothesized, all 3 types of maternal control at T3 mediated the associations between mothers' T1 controlling orientation and child

internalizing problems at T4. As for autonomy support, mothers' T1 autonomy-supportive orientation had an indirect effect on children's prosocial and empathic responses at T4, via mothers' perspective-taking and empathy at T3.

This study demonstrates the significance of early parenting antecedents and their potential role in shaping parenting styles and practices, and in children's socioemotional development.