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Autonomía: las voces de madres y padres

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Abstract

The debate between approaches that highlight decision-making and those that underscore social-relational dimensions has enriched the concept of autonomy, opening up new avenues of reflection and strengthening the field of research into educational strategies. In this context, the aim of this study was to explore conceptions of autonomy and parenting strategies in 272 parents with children aged between 10 and 14, and to analyze significant differences in accordance with their educational level, sex and their children's age. The design was descriptive, cross-sectional and mixed. The data were analyzed with the ATLAS-ti program, using a qualitative methodology with an inductive textual content analysis process. Next, the weight and significance of the dimensions found were analyzed, and the percentages and chi-squared values were calculated. The results revealed a conception of autonomy that is mainly oriented towards the development of personal habits aimed at taking care of oneself and one's things, but which also includes the assumption of responsibilities in the family and school contexts. Also present, although to a much lesser extent, were

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learning to think for oneself and social-relational dimensions (civic action, care of others, etc.), with emotional aspects and the use of technological resources being only marginally considered.

Giving children the opportunity to perform tasks and teaching them right from wrong were the strategies found to have most weight, while setting limits and controlling had less. Support was often oriented towards rewarding them when they did something well and giving advice, as opposed to other strategies outlined in psychopedagogic literature (stimulation, positive feedback, etc.). Parents of secondary school children were observed to attach greater importance to control strategies, while lower expectations were found in relation to children helping out at home. Significant differences were also found in relation to both the conception of autonomy and parenting strategies in accordance with parents' sex and educational level.

Keywords: personal autonomy, social autonomy, parents' attitudes, responsibility, decision-making, elementary school students, secondary school students, educational strategies, family life education

Resumen

El debate entre los planteamientos que subrayan la toma de decisiones y los que destacan dimensiones sociorelacionales ha enriquecido el concepto de autonomía, aportando, asimismo, elementos de reflexión en la investigación de estrategias educativas para potenciarla. En este marco de preocupaciones, el objetivo de este trabajo fue tanto explorar concepciones sobre autonomía y estrategias educativas, en 261 madres y padres con hijas e hijos entre 10 y 14 años, como analizar diferencias significativas, en función del nivel de estudios, el género y la edad de sus hijos. El diseño fue descriptivo, transversal y mixto. Los datos se analizaron con el programa ATLAS-ti, utilizando una metodología cualitativa, con un proceso inductivo de análisis de contenido textual. Posteriormente, se analizaron el peso y significatividad de las dimensiones halladas, calculando porcentajes y chi cuadrados. Los resultados mostraron una concepción de autonomía orientada, sobre todo, al desarrollo de hábitos personales de cuidado de uno mismo y de las cosas propias, pero también a las responsabilidades en el ámbito familiar y escolar. Tuvieron una presencia menor aprender a pensar y las dimensiones sociorelacionales (actuación cívica, cuidado de otros, etc), siendo marginal lo emocional o el uso de recursos tecnológicos. Dar oportunidades de hacer tareas y enseñar lo que está bien fueron las estrategias con más peso, mientras que poner límites y controlar aparecieron poco, al tiempo que el apoyo, a menudo, se orienta a premiar lo que se hace bien y dar consejos, frente a otras estrategias señaladas por la literatura psicopedagógica (estimular, feed-back positivo). Se encontró una mayor consideración de las estrategias de control en secundaria, así como una menor expectativa de contribución en las tareas de la casa. También se encontraron

diferencias significativas por género y nivel de estudios tanto en concepción de autonomía como en estrategias educativas.

Palabras clave: autonomía personal, autonomía social, concepciones de los padres, responsabilidad, toma de decisiones, alumnos de primaria, alumnos de secundaria, estrategias educativas, educación en la vida familiar.

Introduction

Towards an integrating concept of autonomy

Autonomy, understood as the capacity for independence and self-governance has been a fixture of Western culture for the last two hundred years, being deeply rooted in the ideas of Kant and the tenets of the subsequent humanist and Romantic schools which together make up the liberal democratic tradition (Pitt, 2010; Warnick, 2012). From this perspective, much emphasis has been placed on autonomy as the capacity to choose and direct one's own actions in the behavioral, cognitive and emotional fields.

Nevertheless, autonomy is not just independence or the freedom to do as one likes. Self-determination theory (Chen, Vansteenkiste, Beyers, Soenens & Van Petegen, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2006) shifts the core of the debate towards the way in which one makes one's own decisions, based on personal values. Thus, autonomy is viewed as the capacity to act in accordance with one's principles, without succumbing to either external pressure, from one's peer group, for example, or internal pressure, such as the desire to avoid feelings of guilt, shame or anxiety (Radel, Pelletier & Sarrazin, 2013).

Autonomy is also sensitivity and connectedness; as shown in a number of cross-cultural studies, it implies an awareness of and concern for the consequences of one's decisions on other people (Beyers, Goossens, Vansant & Moors, 2003; Kagitçibasi, 2007; Karreman & Bekker, 2012; Yeh, Bedford & Yang, 2009). Bearing this framework in mind, some authors (Keller, 2012) conceive autonomy as the ability to act in a self-controlled way in relation to fulfilling one's duties and obligations (helping out with household chores, for example). Finally, other authors highlight the importance of flexible control, stressing the relevance of often overlooked

dimensions such as creativity, spontaneity and leisure (Aviran & Yonah, 2004).

In this research project we adopt an integrating and multidimensional perspective. We believe that autonomy implies the capacity for self-governance, in accordance with what one thinks and feels, but we also hold that it implies consideration of others, as well as the assumption of personal, interpersonal and social responsibilities.

The debate on strategies that foster autonomy

Autonomy is something which is learned through experience and practice. In other words, one becomes autonomous through being given the opportunity to think for oneself, manage one's own affairs, be responsible, collaborate and find solutions to given problems. In this sense, there is broad agreement regarding the fact that being autonomous requires having the opportunity to make decisions in a variety of different contexts (Aviran & Assor, 2010; Marbell & Grolnick, 2013). Some authors highlight the role of practice in generating autonomous habits, or everyday behaviors that are engaged in without external control (Comellas, 2001), while others stress the importance of giving children responsibilities that enable them to gradually exercise their rights (Haase, Silbereisen & Reitzle, 2008) and observing their behavior before conferring greater freedom (Wang, Chan & Lin, 2012).

Methods known as positive autonomy-supportive strategies, such as providing guidelines and role models, offering feedback, describing things that have been done well and praising effort (Furtak & Kunter, 2012) are also the subject of broad agreement. Great importance is attached to dialog, explaining the rationale behind what is being asked, empathy and recognizing and accepting different points of view, even when this entails expressions of negative affect (Hoffmans-Gosset, 2000). Support is also seen as involvement in both children's school life and personal life, showing an interest in what happens to children at school and offering them intellectually stimulating activities (Grolnick, Kurowski, Dunlap & Hevey, 2000).

What is more controversial is the role of limits and control. It has been demonstrated that the use of coercive strategies, both physical (threats, punishment) and psychological (guilt induction, affection dependent on

the fulfillment of expectations), has a negative effect on autonomy (Froiland, 2011), as indeed does communication based on imperatives and orders, with few opportunities for reasoning, expression or choice. On the other hand, however, research has also shown that supporting autonomy should not be confused with permissiveness, and that control is necessary, as is the provision of a set of clear limits, with expectations, rules and clear consequences which offer children a safe space within which to learn to regulate their emotions and behavior (Savard, Joussemet, Pelletier & Mageau, 2013; Soenens et al., 2007). A structured framework of limits is not incompatible with support (Chua, Wong & Koestner, 2014) and indeed fosters autonomy when control strategies are used in conjunction with empathy and dialog (Nie & Lau, 2009).

Finally, some authors highlight the importance of fostering flexible control, which is defined as the capacity to slide between states of total control, with strong levels of self-regulation, and states with no control at all, in which going with the flow, spontaneity and creativity predominate in engagement in activities which are highly gratifying for personal wellbeing. From the perspective of parenting strategies, this implies fostering a wide variety of different experiences which provide opportunities for self-knowledge and spaces and times for free, undirected activities (Aviran & Yonah, 2004).

Age and sex in the development of autonomy

Studies focusing on sex and age differences in relation to autonomy have found more motivation and self-regulation (with the exception of anxiety) in girls than in boys (Vansteenkiste et al., 2012), and the results also suggest that the transition between elementary and secondary school is associated with negative changes, although with a great deal of variability (Gromlick et al., 2000). However, there is, as yet, no solid framework for understanding age differences (Daddis & Smetana, 2005). The role of these variables has also been studied in relation to perception of parental support (Inguglia, Inguglia, Liga, Lo Cocco & Lo Cricchio, 2014), with contradictory results being reported.

Aims and Method

Aims

The study of autonomy from parents' perspective must necessarily bear in mind the advances made and the debates held in relation to this topic within the field of psychopedagogic research. This is especially important when we take into consideration the role played by parents in the development of children's autonomy. The aim of this study was to explore parents' perspective in light of three specific objectives.

- To define, from a mainly qualitative and inductive perspective, the dimensions that make up both parents' conception of autonomy itself and the parenting strategies they believe are most important for fostering it.
- To analyze the weight of the dimensions identified in accordance with parents' sociodemographic variables (sex, educational level) and the age of their children, in order to identify any possible significant differences.
- To compare parents' perception of autonomy with that proposed by psychopedagogic research, in order to establish possible links and/or gaps.

Context, procedure and instruments

This study forms part of a broader educational research and intervention project on «autonomy and positive treatment» that was carried out in the Autonomous Region of the Basque Country with the participation of students, families and teachers. First of all a letter was sent to the school management teams and parents' associations of 200 public and semi-public schools. Subsequently, of the 25 schools that expressed an interest in the project, 12 were selected in accordance with the criteria of intentional sampling, the aim being to obtain a varied study sample. Four of the selected schools were located in towns or cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants; three were located in towns with between 10,000 and 100,000 inhabitants; and five were located in small towns with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants. In relation to socioeconomic context, the students

in the majority of schools came from middle-class families, with only two schools reporting high percentages of students from immigrant and low-income families. After selecting the schools, the research team administered the tests to students and gave them the parents' questionnaires in a sealed envelope, with instructions to return them, completed, within a fortnight. The principal instrument for gathering and analyzing the data presented in this paper was an open-ended questionnaire. A series of basic details were collected from parents, including sex and educational level, as well as the sex and age of their children. The questionnaire posed two basic questions: «How do you think children of the age of your child (the one who brought home the questionnaire) should behave in order to be considered autonomous?» and «What parenting strategies do you think should be used to foster children's autonomy? In other words, what should parents do to foster their children's autonomy?»

Participants

All parents from whom information was requested had a child aged between 10 and 14 in the last key stage of elementary school (fifth and sixth grade) or the first two years of secondary school. Of the 671 parents who participated in the research project, all of whom were aged between 29 and 59 ($M = 44.25$ and $SD = 4.56$), only the data for 261 were taken into consideration, since these were the only ones to provide information about conceptions of autonomy and strategies for fostering it. More parents of elementary students (171) handed in completed questionnaires than parents of secondary school students (90), and more mothers (177) completed the questionnaire than fathers (60), despite the fact that it was sent to even numbers of mothers and fathers. The remaining participants did not specify their sex. More respondents had a high educational level (98) than a medium (73) or basic one (26), although many respondents failed to specify this information (64).

Design

The design used in this study was descriptive, cross-cutting and mixed. It

was divided into two phases, with a mainly qualitative methodology that nevertheless contained some quantitative elements (Collins, Onwuegbuzie & Jiao, 2006). This mixed designed was chosen because, providing the sample group is large enough, this type of methodology enables more solid analyses to be conducted (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2002). The qualitative methodology was used to explore parents' ideas regarding how autonomy is conceived and what strategies should be used to foster it, with a series of categories and dimensions being extracted by means of a thorough inductive analysis of textual content. Subsequently, quantitative analyses were conducted as a complement to the qualitative work, with the aim of analyzing the weight and significance of the dimensions obtained.

Coding and quantification of the data

The content of the responses provided was analyzed and coded using a prioritization of the inductive methodology in the construction of categories (Boyatzis, 1998). In line with constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000; Sandin, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the aim was to ensure that it was the data provided by parents that guided the coding process, and that said process included a varied range of voices and experiences, although comparisons with the theoretical debate were made throughout (Demerath, 2006).

Three elements were taken into consideration in the qualitative process. Firstly, a textual analysis was conducted of the content. To this end, simple categories were defined, whose names reflected as literally as possible the expressions used by parents. During this stage no inferences were made and no ideas were excluded. This line by line textual analysis is particularly appropriate for coding responses to questionnaires containing open-ended questions (Ryan & Bernard, 2000), and involves assigning each sentence a code capable of reflecting its meaning, paraphrasing that stated by participants.

Next, a list of codes was drawn up and the codes sorted into thematic groups, with the aim of defining broader categories or dimensions of what parents consider important for their children's autonomy (for example, being responsible). Finally, families of documents were established to compare conceptions in accordance with the research

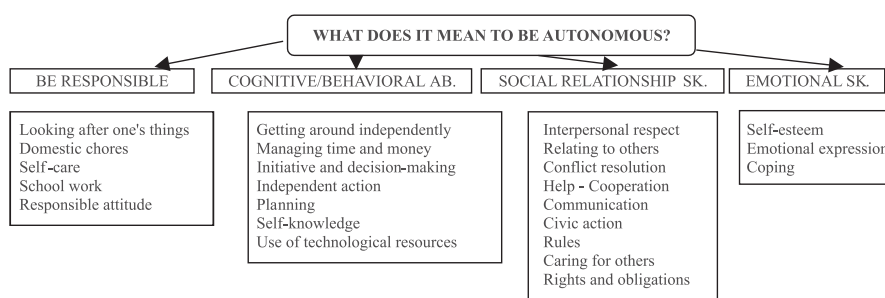
variables (children’s educational stage and parents’ sex and educational level). The full potential of the ATLAS-ti software was used throughout this whole process.

During the second phase of the study, percentages were established for every dimension extracted and the chi-squared values were calculated in order to analyze possible statistically significant differences between them, with the exception of those cases in which the requirements for comparison were not met.

Results

Dimensions of autonomy

FIGURE I. Dimensions in parents’ conception of autonomy



Responsibility emerged as a key element of autonomy in comparison with the cognitive-behavioral, social-relational and emotional dimensions.

The family environment was also highlighted as important. Looking after one’s things was found to include chores in the bedroom (making one’s bed, tidying up and cleaning), tasks related to caring for one’s clothes (finding them in the wardrobe, taking them out, hanging them up, putting them in the washing basket and organizing them, etc.) and sorting out one’s school bag (getting it ready for school, remembering what sports clothes are needed for that day, preparing a backpack for trips and then emptying it, etc.). In some cases other tasks were mentioned also, such as «using a key to get into the house» (P143:11) and

«feeding pets» (P161:16). Parents also stressed responsibilities that foster domestic harmony, underscoring the importance of giving children «small», «easy» or «very basic» tasks that can be grouped into four areas:

- responsibilities linked to kitchen tasks, such as «laying and clearing the table or helping to cook certain foods» (P162:11), «knowing how to use a microwave» (P112:25) and «putting their dirty dishes in the dishwasher» (P30:11).
- learning how to run small errands near the house, «shopping for basic groceries» (P137:10), or doing specific tasks like going to buy bread or the daily newspaper.
- tidying and cleaning («leaving the bathroom tidy after using it, putting things away and doing cleaning chores like sweeping or vacuuming» -PS62:9-, «cleaning up any mess they make and putting the things they use away» -P58:3-).
- using water and electricity responsibility and separating rubbish for recycling; something which in one case was linked to «being aware of what they consume» (P184:9).

Personal self-care responsibilities were grouped into three main categories: personal cleanliness («making sure they wash themselves» -P86:8-, -PS127:1- «assuming responsibility for their personal hygiene» -P171:5-), with specific actions such as «having a shower», «brushing their teeth», «brushing/combing their hair» and «changing their clothes» (P66:5). Parents also mentioned caring for one's clothes: «assuming responsibility for their clothes» (P203:6), «getting their clothes ready for the next day» (P49:7), «knowing how to dress appropriately in accordance with the weather and what activities they will be doing» (P162:8). Finally, food and cooking were also mentioned fairly frequently, with references mainly to preparing breakfast or afternoon snacks, with lunch («knowing how to cook some simple lunch dishes» -PS 28:7-, «knowing how to heat up their lunch» -PS24:9-) and dinner being mentioned less often. Occasionally, in addition to being able to prepare their own food, some parents also mentioned food quality («eating well» -P144:16-) and self-control, i.e. complying with the tenets of a healthy diet («accepting recommendations regarding diet and sticking to them as much as possible» -P90:13-).

Responsibility in relation to school work was mentioned in generic terms («doing homework responsibly», -P21:4-), with certain independent

attitudes being underscored («being aware of what they have to study» -P20:1-, developing «good work and study habits» -P127:3-), although this does not exclude the need for «minimum supervision» (P136:4). Other traits of autonomy were organizing their homework («doing homework in accordance with a -study schedule-» -P35:2-, «doing their homework immediately when they arrive home» -P39:4-) and, although mentioned only a few times, looking after school material («looking after their schoolbooks and other school objects» -PS 61:3-).

Management of time and money was another key aspect in parents' conception of autonomy. The most commonly mentioned attribute was being able to organize and plan one's time: «assuming responsibility for their activities, timetables, etc.» (P27:6-), «waking up and getting up by themselves» (P176:14), «organizing their free time and study time» (P141:2), «assuming responsibility for their timetables: bus, sport, music, etc.» (PS 81:3), «getting what they need ready in accordance with the activities of the next few days» (P3:5). Some parents valued punctuality («getting home at the time they were told to» -P3:4-), while others stated that it was they themselves (as parents) who should establish their children's timetables and their children's responsibility was to be aware of, accept and abide by them, as a key element in the smooth running of family life. Finally, some parents referred to showing initiative and the ability to enjoy themselves when organizing their free time («knowing how to play or entertain themselves in their free time» -P90:5-), even without electronic devices or screens («knowing how to entertain themselves, without screens, even if it is only sometimes» -P156:7-). Management of money was mentioned much less often. When it was, however, attention focused on managing income, which consisted not only of money («managing their pocket money», -PS 144:9-) but of other resources also such as buss passes or mobile phone balances. In some isolated cases parents mentioned controlling their spending, as a means of administrating their affairs, through ensuring correct use of their telephones or «saving up» their money (P49:5).

Making decisions involves «knowing what they want at any given moment» (P87:4) and «making their own choices, individually, without any help from anyone, in response to the different situations they face» (P157:3). Comments regarding decision-making focused on both material elements, such as choosing clothes or food, and on aspects such as studying, extracurricular activities and friends. The conditions highlighted

by parents were that they should be «small decisions» (P23:8), appropriate to the child's age («knowing how to or trying to make decisions alone, in accordance with their age» -P107:5-); and they should also be gradual («capacity to decide more» -P40:3-). As regards the quality of the decisions made, some parents alluded to reflexive decisions («knowing how to make considered decisions» -P122:2-). Showing initiative was hardly mentioned at all, or was only referred to in generic terms. Occasionally a specific field was mentioned («showing initiative in relation to leisure activities» -P166:7-) or the importance of this trait in the development process was highlighted («greater initiative to follow their chosen path» -P125:5-).

Independence was described as doing things in accordance with one's own criteria («coping on their own, with age-appropriate behavior» -P44:1-, «having their own identity and criteria» -P79:3-, «acting in accordance with their beliefs instead of being slaves to outside criticism» -P8:3-). Gaining a degree of independent action implies «not asking for so much help that they are then unable to cope with their problems on their own (P165:5) and is reflected in day-to-day life («being able to cope with basic everyday things» -P142:5-). It is also a gradual process («gradually distancing themselves from their family - parents - as regards space/time/activities» -P199:9-). Knowing how to be without their parents is another form of coping by themselves («being at home alone for a few hours» -P23:10-).

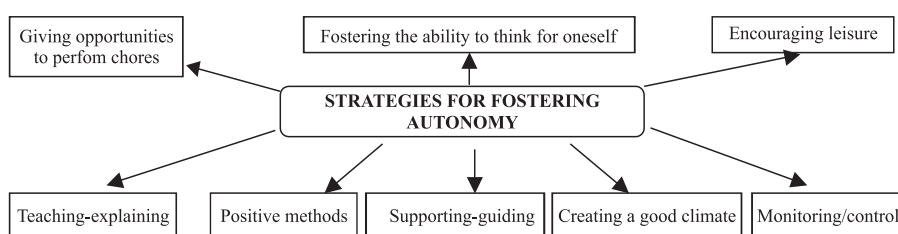
Planning was another capacity mentioned, with parents stressing children's cognitive ability to «analyze what they have to do». Some gave more specific details in relation to this: «learning how to plan by using a diary» (P219:6) and «distinguishing between what they want to do and what they can do» (P94:4). Some also highlighted quality and improvement, mentioning the importance of knowing how to «value results» (P219:8) or organize oneself in order to ensure a job well done.

Finally, parents referenced relational and social aspects, such as interpersonal respect and one's relationship with one's friends. Communication was mainly mentioned by mothers and parents with a high educational level. Other relevant aspects, such as help-cooperation and caring for people, were hardly mentioned at all. The few references made to emotional autonomy focused on self-esteem and emotional expression, although it should be stressed that these references had only a very marginal presence in the different dimensions of autonomy analyzed.

Parenting strategies for fostering autonomy

Giving children opportunities to perform everyday tasks was the most frequently mentioned strategy for fostering autonomy, followed by teaching-explaining strategies. The other strategies were mentioned less often and were grouped into eight categories.

FIGURE II. Strategies for fostering autonomy



In the vast majority of cases, parents underscored the importance of giving children tasks and jobs, referring in generic terms to «assigning them specific chores» (S114:1) and «giving them specific responsibilities» (P117:12) «in keeping with their abilities» (S 97:1) and «appropriate to their age» (P90:23). The school context (both elementary and secondary) was mentioned as a source of assigned jobs and tasks, while other frameworks of responsibility related to domestic chores were mentioned only a few times and only in relation to elementary students. The social scenario («foster participation in local cultural groups» -P42: 27-) was only mentioned by one parent. A few respondents highlighted the fact that children learn autonomy by «not having everything done for them» (P 114:10), by parents letting them «do that which they are capable of» (S37:3), «allowing them to make mistakes» (P173:22) and avoiding overprotective attitudes («not protecting them so much at home» -P31:15- and «not being on top of them all the time» -P57:13-). Along similar lines, some responses stressed the importance of leaving them to work by themselves as a means of «fostering personal work» (S 20:1) and «avoiding helping them too much with their work» (S108:2).

After giving them opportunities to perform chores, teaching or explaining was the second most frequently mentioned parenting strategy. Communication was an important component here, with parents highlighting the need to «talk to them» (P104:16), «talk to them about how they should behave» (P47:10), «respect their opinions» (P3:21), «provide opportunities for them to express concerns and discuss problems» (P16:13) and «teach them what they need to know to take care of themselves» (P135:11). Values also constituted a basic element here, with parents referencing the importance of «teaching them right from wrong» (S2: 6), «teaching them respect» (P138: 8) for both themselves and others and «treating them the same, whether they be boys or girls» (S127:1).

In relation to fostering the ability to think for themselves, a number of different parenting strategies were mentioned. Parents consider their role to be to help their children think before they act or plan their actions, fostering their ability to «regulate their activities, obligations and work» (P23:16), «encouraging them to show initiative» (P163:16) and letting them choose (clothes, friends, etc.). The aim is to «foster opportunities for them to learn to make important decisions during their work, so that they learn to value the results obtained in accordance with what they decided» (S 55:2) and to «set them new tasks and allow them to make mistakes» (S31:1). Some parents underscored the importance of helping them learn how to resolve conflicts and «not always providing solutions to their problems immediately; letting them think about it for a while» (P112:36).

The use of positive methods was also mentioned through a number of different strategies. Most parents referred to the strategy of rewarding, praising and extolling, a strategy known in the literature as positive reinforcement. In this sense, parents highlighted the importance of rewarding children when they do something well, or in other words: «congratulating them on a job well done» (P173:21) and «assessing successes positively» (S22:1). A smaller number of parents mentioned techniques that can be defined as stimulation strategies. The mentions made of these strategies focused specifically on the importance of taking small steps and of «staggering tasks and helping children climb the ladder one small rung at a time, praising their achievements» (P86:12). In relation to stimulation strategies, there was an isolated mention of the fact that «effort is necessary» (S34), valuing the need to «encourage children when they make an effort» (S54:3) and underscoring the fact that mistakes are not important because you can learn from them.

Parents considered creating a positive family climate to be important to autonomy. This requires offering children an «agreeable milieu» (P7:9)

with «appropriate space and environment» (P120:16) from the physical perspective, but it also entails «conveying a sense of security» (P13:5) and generating good relationships, expressing affection, being patient and being flexible in relation to time and freedom, not always saying no to everything. Many comments focused on the need to show trust and confidence in children in order to help them become more autonomous and improve their self-esteem.

Helping, advising and providing guidelines were three of the strategies mentioned by parents, and are considered by the literature to be support strategies. Help is materialized through «parents always being close by, but being very aware that it is the children themselves who have to take the necessary steps» (P2:14); parents should provide support when necessary, especially «when children are having difficulty» (P7:11). «Advising them in their everyday lives» (P 122:9), «offering resources so they can learn how to behave in different situations» (P145:13) and «creating situations and then watching how they cope, then later on providing feedback about what they did right and what they did wrong» (P 48: 13) all illustrate the role of guidance within the parenting strategies mentioned by parents. Finally, parents highlighted the importance of «providing guidelines» (P130:7), «acting as guides» (S 40:1) and «providing children with instruments to enable them to learn from a good role model» (P 152:15).

In relation to monitoring and control, a number of different strategies were mentioned. The most common were supervision of tasks, which involves «letting them do things, but with a certain degree of supervision» (P87:8), «imagining and creating situations in which children have to react, and then assessing their reaction» (S53:), «monitoring them at first» (P176:17) and «checking they have done what they are supposed to do» (S5:2). Three aspects should be highlighted in relation to establishing rules as a strategy for fostering autonomy. Firstly, parents mentioned that it is necessary to set clear limits and make sure children are aware of them. Secondly, sometimes, rules are used as a means of regulating behavior: «not letting them watch television until they've finished their homework/chores» (P39:20). And thirdly, a few parents mentioned the need to enforce rules, stressing the importance of ensuring that «failure to abide by rules or do their chores has consequences» (S109:1), with some isolated references being made to «ensuring discipline at all times» (P112: 35) or «telling them off when they deserve it and punishing them» (S 54: 2).

Some strategies, such as fostering spontaneous and creative activities and encouraging collaborative work with peers were mentioned only occasionally in parents' comments,

Quantitative analysis of the dimensions of autonomy

TABLE I. Percentages of the dimensions of how autonomy is perceived

	TOTAL	SCHOOL STAGE OF CHILDREN		EDUCATIONAL LEVEL			SEX	
		Elementary	Secondary	Basic	Medium	High	Mother	Father
RESPONSIBILITY								
Looking after one's things	78.1	73.7	86.6	34.6	31.5	96.0	81.3	63.3
Domestic chores	59	63.7	50.0	53.8	43.8	80.6	62.1	38.3
Self-care	55.5	62.0	43.3	27.0	39.7	92.8	61.6	35.0
School	47.1	42.0	56.6	23.1	38.3	50.0	46.9	25.0
General responsibility	24.9	21.6	31.1	19.2	30.1	12.2	18.6	31.6
COGNITIVE-BEHAVORAL								
Getting around independently	28.7	33.9	18.9	-	20.5	43.9	30.0	20.0
Management	26.8	29.8	21.1	11.5	17.8	41.8	30.5	10.0
Decision-making	21.4	19.9	24.4	7.7	9.5	18.4	8.4	8.3
Independent action	14.5	11.1	21.1	26.9	11.0	5.1	8.4	8.3
Planning	11.8	5.8	23.3	7.7	20.5	10.2	8.4	6.6
Self-knowledge	6.1	12.7	4.4	-	8.2	5.1	5.1	6.6
Use of technological resources	3.1	4.1	1.1	-	5.5	4.1	4.5	-
SOCIAL-RELATIONAL								
Interpersonal respect	17.2	17.5	16.6	19.2	12.3	14.3	18.6	10.0
Relating to others	17.2	17.0	12.2	15.4	13.7	18.4	13.5	13.3
Conflict resolution	10.3	12.3	4.4	15.4	11.0	11.2	11.3	6.6
Help-cooperation	10.0	13.0	4.4	3.8	6.8	16.3	11.8	6.6
Communication	8.8	12.3	2.2	-	8.2	17.3	13.5	-
Civic action	7.6	10.0	3.3	7.7	4.1	6.1	6.7	5.0
Rules	6.1	5.8	6.6	7.7	6.8	5.1	7.3	3.3
Caring for others	3.4	4.1	2.2	7.7	2.7	12.2	8.4	13.3
Rights and obligations	0.8	1.2	-	-	-	-	-	-
EMOTIONAL								
Self-esteem	5.4	4.1	7.7	-	5.5	5.1	5.6	1.6
Emotional expression	2.3	3.5	-	-	2.7	10.0	1.7	-
Coping	1.9	1.8	-	7.7	2.7	-	2.2	-
OTHERS								
Restricted autonomy	6.9	4.6	11.1	-	5.5	3.1	1.7	8.3
Not always being on top of them	12.6	19.2	-	-	-	-	-	-

Based on the chi squared values calculated, statistically significant differences were found between the perceptions of parents of elementary and secondary school students in the following dimensions: looking after one's things ($\chi^2 = 5.82, p <,01$), domestic chores ($\chi^2 = 4.50, p <,05$), self-care ($\chi^2 = 8.31, p <,01$), school ($\chi^2 = 5.02, p <,05$), getting around independently ($\chi^2 = 6.0, p <,01$), independent action ($\chi^2 = 4.74, p <,05$), planning ($\chi^2 = 17.22, p <,001$), conflict resolution ($\chi^2 = 5.16, p <,05$), help-cooperation ($\chi^2 = 5.66, p <,05$) and communication ($\chi^2 = 7.42, p <,01$). As regards parents' educational level, significant differences were found for general responsibility ($\chi^2 = 8.44, p <,05$), looking after one's things ($\chi^2 = 86.48, p <,001$), domestic chores ($\chi^2 = 25.59, p <,001$), school ($\chi^2 = 6.79, p <,05$), self-care ($\chi^2 = 69.99, p <,001$), getting around independently ($\chi^2 = 23.46, p <,001$), independent action ($\chi^2 = 10.31, p <,01$), management ($\chi^2 = 16.15, p <,001$) and communication ($\chi^2 = 7.34, p <,05$). Finally, as regards parents' sex, significant differences were found in all aspects of responsibility: general responsibility ($\chi^2 = 4.44, p <,05$), looking after one's things ($\chi^2 = 8.17, p <,01$), domestic chores ($\chi^2 = 10.32, p <,01$), school ($\chi^2 = 8.86, p <,01$) and self-care ($\chi^2 = 12.79, p <,001$). Significant sex differences were found also in management ($\chi^2 = 9.97, p <,01$) and communication ($\chi^2 = 9.05, p <,01$).

TABLE II. Percentages of the dimensions of parenting strategies.

	TOTAL	SCHOOL STAGE OF CHILDREN		EDUCATIONAL LEVEL			SEX	
		Elementary	Secondary	Basic	Medium	High	Mother	Father
Opportunities to do chores	53.0	53.7	50.0	55.5	56.8	57.3	57.9	40.2
Teaching-explaining	31.2	25.7	53.7	44.4	35.0	40.2	43.6	33.8
Fostering thinking for oneself	24.3	28.0	9.2	18.5	13.6	35.0	23.6	26.0
Positive methods	22.4	21.1	27.8	25.9	22.7	23.9	25.2	15.6
Creating a good climate	18.0	18.8	14.8	18.5	22.7	17.1	17.9	18.2
Supporting-guiding	17.6	17.4	18.5	14.8	19.3	15.4	19.0	14.3
Monitoring-control	12.9	10.5	22.2	3.7	12.5	13.7	13.9	10.4
Leisure	3.7	4.6	-	-	-	-	3.1	5.2

As regards strategies used to foster autonomy, significant differences were found in accordance with children's educational stage in teaching-explaining ($\chi^2 = 15.81$, $p < .001$), monitoring-control ($\chi^2 = 5.26$), $p < .05$) and fostering the ability to think for oneself ($\chi^2 = 8.25$, $p < .01$). The difference between mothers and fathers in giving opportunities to perform chores ($\chi^2 = 6.96$, $p < .01$) was significant, while it was marginally significant in relation to using positive methods ($\chi^2 = 2.89$, $p < .1$). Differences between those with different educational levels were only significant in relation to fostering the ability to think for oneself ($\chi^2 = 12.96$, $p < .001$).

Discussion and conclusions

Participants in the study reported a conception of autonomy strongly focused on responsibility, with many comments centering on self-care habits and looking after one's things. Children's age seems to be a modulating element in relation to what is expected of them in order to be considered responsible. Thus, self-care in relation to hygiene, health, eating habits and clothes seems to be of greater concern among parents of elementary school children, a finding which is logical to a large extent, given that it is during this stage that these habits are consolidated. However, what is striking is that found in relation to what some authors consider to be key responsibilities for the development of autonomy (Keller, 2012), both at home and at school. The results of our study suggest that secondary school children are expected to help out less at home, while expectations regarding responsibility in relation to schoolwork increase during this stage. It should not be forgotten that educational level is associated with the type of responsibilities considered to be most important. Thus, in our study, almost all parents with a high educational level refer to looking after one's things, self-care, household chores and, albeit less frequently, responsibility in relation to schoolwork, while those with medium or basic educational levels mention these factors significantly less often. Mothers tended to underscore more the importance of fulfilling everyday obligations in all areas.

Greater importance was attached by parents of secondary school children to the capacity for independent action, along with other aspects of cognitive autonomy, such as the capacity to plan (particularly in

relation to school activities), while being able to get around independently was mentioned less often. In this sense, our results coincide with those of other studies on expectations of greater self-governance during adolescence (Daddis, 2011; Collins & Laursen, 2004). In relation to parents' sex, mothers mentioned the ability to organize one's time and money significantly more often as a key element of autonomy. Also, aspects such as showing initiative and decision-making (Ryan & Deci, 2006; Swaine, 2012) were mentioned less often in comparison with everyday obligations, although they were referred to more frequently by parents of secondary school children, especially those with a high educational level.

Aspects related to what is known as social and relational autonomy, which has been the object of much attention over recent decades, appeared less frequently, a finding which is consistent with that suggested by some cross-cultural studies regarding the little value attached to this dimension in urban cultures (Chen et ál., 2013; Kagitçibasi, 2007). This trend, which is evident among parents of elementary school children, is even more striking among parents of secondary school students, particularly in the communication, help-cooperation and conflict resolution dimensions. Care for others was also mentioned very little by parents of both elementary and secondary school children. In relation to sex, no results were found in this study to indicate that concern over social-relational dimensions is more characteristic among women. Indeed, the only significant differences observed between mothers and fathers were found in communication, and in any case seem to be more related to having a high educational level than to sex.

Finally, three other findings are worth highlighting. Firstly, some key dimensions were mentioned only rarely. For example, the emotional dimension of autonomy was mentioned only occasionally by parents of elementary school children and hardly at all by parents of secondary school children, with the exception of self-esteem, which was mentioned more often by parents of children in this higher educational stage. Given that expectations of autonomy increase as children grow older, intensifying the possibility of conflict, it is surprising that the emotional dimension is not mentioned more often. Secondly, it is paradoxical that parents living in such an intensely technological society make so few references to autonomy in the use of technological resources. Finally, the references made to restricted autonomy («they're still too young») are also

worth highlighting. These comments are more frequent among parents (especially fathers) of elementary school children who have a medium or high educational level, with no parents with a low educational level making any comments of this kind. From an educational perspective these comments are concerning, since they may mask a certain degree of overprotection which clashes with children's need to experience and practice autonomy from a very early age (Hoffmans-Gosset, 2000).

As regards parenting strategies for fostering autonomy, the most common references in this sense were to giving children the opportunity to practice being independent. The importance attached to providing contexts in which children are able to shoulder responsibilities was particularly relevant here. Indeed, this strategy was mentioned by half of all participants (parents of both elementary and secondary school children), with no predominance of those with a particular educational level, although more mothers referred to this strategy than fathers.

Encouraging children to learn to think for themselves, giving them opportunities to show initiative and make decisions, is a strategy mentioned by only one quarter of all participants. The content analysis also revealed that in the majority of cases, parents' responses focused more on providing children with opportunities to choose (clothes, friends) than on decision-making itself, as a means of fostering the ability to think for oneself. If the differences between parents' responses are analyzed in accordance with children's age, the results reveal that this strategy is mentioned significantly less often by parents of secondary school children, despite the fact that one might expect it to be more prevalent during this developmental stage. Moreover, parents' educational level seems to be a key variable here, with this strategy being mentioned much more often by those with a high educational level.

While mentioned by parents, certain nuances were detected in relation to positive autonomy-supportive strategies that clash with that proposed by educational research. Firstly, it seems that using positive methods is considered a strategy focusing mainly on the use of rewards. The qualitative analysis revealed that in the majority of cases, parents refer to reinforcing and rewarding things that their children do well, i.e. celebrating their successes, with references to stimulation strategies, with emphasis on effort and small achievements, being much less frequent. Secondly, the use of guidelines and feedback was hardly mentioned at all and although the strategy of offering help was referenced, it was

mainly linked to the idea of giving advice. Nevertheless, the strategy of teaching, understood as talking to children and explaining the difference between right and wrong was mentioned fairly frequently, and surprisingly, was referenced significantly more often by parents of secondary school students than by parents of younger children. On the other hand, references to controversial strategies related to setting limits and controlling children's activities were fairly infrequent, and, consistently with that found in other studies (Grolnick et al., 2000), were more common among parents of secondary school students.

Limitations and future research

Although all the mothers and fathers of the students participating in the autonomy and positive treatment program were asked to collaborate in the study, only a small number of fathers completed the questionnaire. This is, without doubt, a limitation, since it prevents us from accessing the whole range of different perspectives. Mothers' tendency to engage and collaborate more is a phenomenon that is observed fairly frequently in research into families and in the future it is important to try and approach fathers more directly, through interviews, for example, in order to corroborate the results of this study, which indicate sex differences in relation to the conception and fostering of autonomy.

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