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## How Do Parents Support the Autonomy of Toddlers?

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this article is to explore how the parents of toddlers attending day care define, understand, and support children's autonomy within the family environment. The research is framed within the constructivist–interpretive paradigm, in which reality is conceived as plural, socially constructed, and context-dependent. From this perspective, toddler autonomy is understood not as an objective and universal given, but as a phenomenon that manifests and acquires meaning differently according to interactions, cultural contexts, and parental representations. A qualitative, ethnographic design was chosen, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of parental practices and the meanings they attribute to the phenomenon under investigation. A total of 92 parents, representing 46 families (46 mothers and 46 fathers) of toddlers attending two day care centers in Bucharest, participated in three photovoice workshops conducted in June 2024. The findings indicate that parents do not conceptualize toddler autonomy as a singular ability, but rather as a complex and multidimensional process constructed within everyday and relational contexts. The analysis of the identified dimensions—practical and functional autonomy, emotional, cognitive, and relational autonomy, participation in family life, environmental exploration, and risk-taking—confirms the specialized literature regarding the progressive and interactional nature of early autonomy.

**Keywords.** Autonomy, parent, toddler, encouragement, supervision

### 1. Introduction

At birth, the human being is in a state of complete dependence on adults, and for a long period the toddler is not and cannot be autonomous. Physical survival and psychological development depend on the proximal environment, most often represented by the family. In recent decades, the status and role of parents—including physical, psychological, social, cultural, and economic responsibilities—have undergone significant transformations under the influence of technological and informational progress, as well as the diversification of educational models, leading to the constant acquisition of new skills and competencies; in this regard, “today’s family is the mirror of contemporary times” (Vrăsmaș, 2014).

Research in psychology, sociology, education, neuroscience, and anthropology demonstrates that the essential factor for shaping children’s behavior and the development of the future adult is the way in which they are received, cared for, socialized, loved, and supported, especially during the first years of life. Toddler development is a dynamic process of growth and refinement of the capacity to carry out daily activities, supported by the optimal

functioning of the organism. Childhood is not a single event but rather a gradual period of transformation, marked by the acquisition of motor, linguistic, and social skills that facilitate interaction with the surrounding environment. From the perspective of children's rights, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) has generated multiple debates regarding the restructuring of intergenerational relations within families (Alanen, 2001). Current challenges concern the redefinition of boundaries and power relations between parents and children, reflected in the themes of autonomy, control, and family participation. These tensions become even more complex when intersecting with the ideology and process of "familization," which, by emphasizing parental responsibility, places families in a continuous balance between "emancipation" and "participation" (Qvortrup et al., 1994). The concept and reality of family are constructed, among other things, through the participation of its members in shared life and through continuous processes of negotiation. A dynamic balance is thus shaped between parents' intention to harmonize care with the exercise of control and children's efforts to assert their autonomy and gain recognition. Within this framework, both children and parents develop individual or collective strategies to resist pressures and to reconfigure the unequal distribution of power.

Although the international literature on supporting children's autonomy in the family is substantial, most studies focus on school-age children and adolescents, analyzing the relationship between parenting styles, autonomy support, and the development of motivation or self-regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Joussemet, Koestner, & Lokes, 2005).. For toddlers (0–3 years), research is far more limited and primarily addresses the link between parental sensitivity and the early development of self-regulation and executive functions (Bernier, Carlson, & Whipple, 2010). Moreover, comparative studies have shown that parental autonomy support is culturally shaped, distinguishing between an orientation toward individual autonomy, typical of Western societies, and relational autonomy, specific to collectivist contexts (Rudy & Grusec, 2006; Chirkov, 2009).

In the Romanian context, the body of literature on children's autonomy is still in its early stages. Contributions such as those by Farcaș (2019) address the development of preschool children's autonomy and the family–institution partnership in fostering it. Nevertheless, these studies do not directly examine everyday parental practices that support the autonomy of toddlers under the age of three.

Within this framework, the present research represents an original contribution by exploring the ways in which parents conceptualize and support toddlers' autonomy at the level of their expressed representations and values.

## **2. Research Methodology**

### **2.1 Epistemology**

The research is situated within the constructivist–interpretive paradigm, in which reality is conceived as plural, socially constructed, and context-dependent (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). From this perspective, toddler autonomy is understood not as an objective and universal given, but as a phenomenon that manifests and acquires meaning differently depending on interactions, cultural contexts, and parental representations. A qualitative, ethnographic design was chosen, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of the practices and meanings that parents attribute to the phenomenon under investigation (Stake, 2005).

## **2.2 Data Collection Methods**

We employed the photovoice method to foreground parents' perspectives, offering them the opportunity to visually represent and discuss how they understand toddler autonomy. Participants were invited to take a photograph that, in their view, illustrates the way their own toddler expresses autonomy or a situation they considered representative of their toddler's autonomy. The images produced served as starting points in the workshops for collective discussions, during which parents presented and interpreted the photographs, constructing narratives about family and educational experiences.

## **2.3 Data Collection**

Three photovoice workshops were conducted in June 2024 with the parents included in this study, held in the day care centers attended by their toddlers. The discussions were facilitated in a participatory and reflective setting, each workshop lasting approximately 150 minutes. During the sessions, parents had the opportunity to comment on their own photographs as well as to reflect on the images presented by others, a process that stimulated collective learning and the exchange of perspectives. Within the workshops, we used a series of open-ended and clarification questions, designed to stimulate parents' reflection and to bring their everyday experiences to the forefront. Some of the questions addressed the meaning that parents attribute to autonomy and its manifestations in their toddler's daily life, while others were formulated ad hoc, depending on the narrative context presented, in order to elaborate on particular situations.

## **2.4 Participants**

The participant sample consisted of 92 parents, representing 46 families (46 mothers and 46 fathers) of toddlers attending two day care centers in Bucharest. The inclusion criterion for the study was being the parent of a toddler enrolled in one of the two early childhood education institutions. In terms of the children they had, the balance between girls and boys was nearly perfect (24 vs. 26).

## **3. Research Results**

### **3.1 Socio-demographic characteristics of the Participant Sample**

An analysis of the distribution of the number of children in the families participating in the study shows that the majority of families (almost 60%) were having their second child, including two cases of twins without other siblings. Approximately 20% of families had only one child, while 15% were on their third child, with this child being enrolled in day care. Particular situations—families with triplets and the family with a fifth child—appeared in isolation, each representing approximately 2% of the sample.

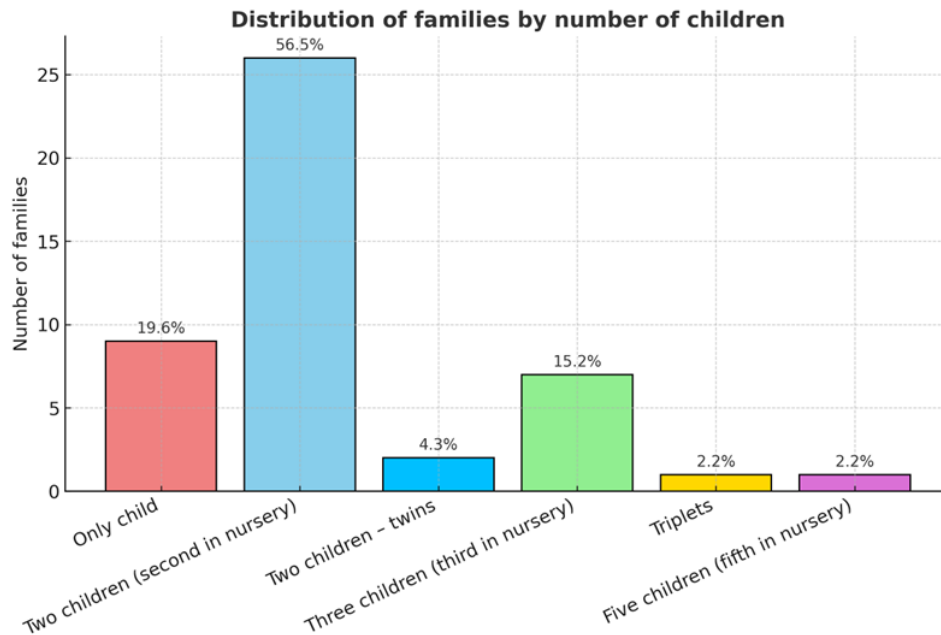


Figure 1. Distribution of families according to the number of children (N = 46 families).

This structure highlights the fact that most parents included in the research already have prior parenting experience, which may influence how they perceive and support toddler autonomy. The specialized literature shows that the experience accumulated with the birth of the first child leads to adjustments in parenting style for subsequent children (Bornstein, 2015, Volling, 2012). In general, parents tend to be more protective and anxious with their first child (Kowal & Kramer, 1997), whereas with the second or third child they adopt more flexible practices and may encourage autonomy earlier, given the need to divide attention among siblings (Fitzgerald, Howie, Wicks, & Dalenberg, 2006). In families with twins or triplets, parenting strategies are adapted to the simultaneous management of multiple children of the same age, which generates practices of mutual support among siblings and an autonomy constructed within a collective framework (Thorpe et al., 2003). Thus, the research sample is relevant not only for the diversity of family situations but also for its potential to analyze differences in parental representations and practices regarding toddler autonomy, depending on accumulated parenting experience and the child's birth order.

The age distribution of the parents in the sample highlights a profile of mature adults, situated in life stages characterized by professional and family stability. For mothers, the distribution shows a strong concentration in the 35–39 age group, which includes 56.5% of participants. Another 19.6% of mothers are between 30 and 34 years old, while 21.7% fall into the 40–44 age category. Only a marginal percentage of 2.2% exceeds the threshold of 45 years, while none of the mothers are under 30 or over 50. For fathers, the distribution is more heterogeneous, though the 35–39 age group also predominates (43.5%). A significant proportion falls into the 40–44 age group (34.8%), while 8.7% are between 30 and 34 years old. Older fathers are represented by 10.9% in the 45–49 age group and 2.1% over 50.

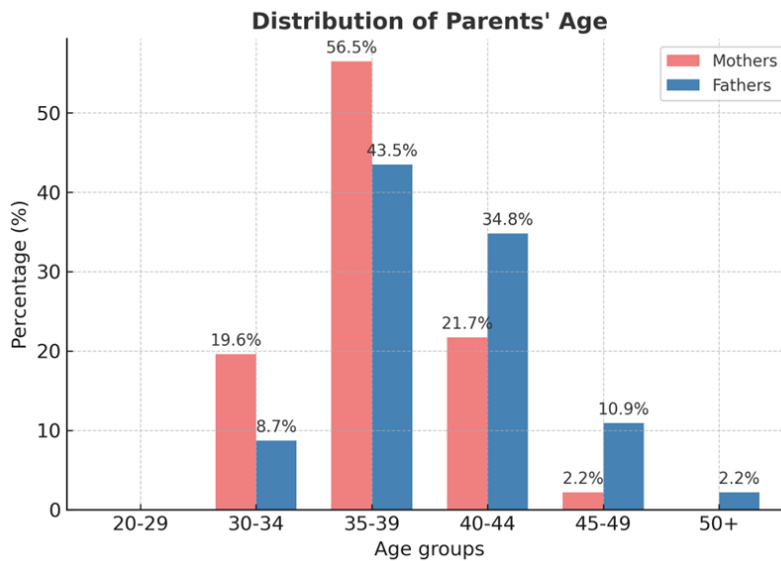


Figure 2. Distribution of parents' age

The analysis of education level and occupational fields reveals a high and relatively homogeneous socio-professional profile of the participating parents. All mothers (100%) had completed higher education, while among fathers, 97.8% held a university degree, with only one exception (2.2%) at the secondary level. This distribution indicates a high educational capital, characteristic of the urban environment and of social categories with access to informational and professional resources.

From an occupational perspective, mothers were most frequently represented in health (physicians) (21.7%) and finance/accounting/banking (15.2%), but also in fields such as legal/administrative, IT, management/entrepreneurship, or education/research (each 6.5%). A significant proportion (37%) were active in other sectors such as industry or recycling. Among fathers, the most common occupations were in IT/technology (26.1%), management/entrepreneurship (17.4%), and finance (13.0%), along with professions in health, education/research, and legal/administrative (2–6%). Approximately one third (32.6%) were engaged in various other professional activities within the field of engineering.

It is evident that the parents included in the sample largely belong to the urban professional and managerial class, characterized by access to educational, financial, and cultural resources. The concentration of most mothers in the 30–34 age group, and of fathers in the 35–39 age group, suggests a parental model characterized by planning and the assumption of the parenting role within a framework of maturity and stability. The specialized literature shows that parents with a high level of educational and socio-professional capital tend to value autonomy, encourage exploration and personal initiative, and employ reflective educational practices centered on the development of psychosocial competencies (Lareau, 2011; Bornstein, 2015; Joussemet & al., 2005).

At the same time, the relative homogeneity of the sample limits comparisons across different social categories but provides interpretive coherence and highlights how toddler autonomy is defined and promoted within family contexts with high socio-educational capital. This characteristic must be taken into account in the analysis of parents' responses from the photovoice workshops, as it represents a specific socio-professional framework that is not necessarily generalizable to the entire population of parents in Romania.

### **3.2 Results of the Photovoice Workshops**

The photovoice workshops were manually anonymized, fully transcribed, then compiled and analyzed with the support of MAXQDA software. The process of analyzing and interpreting the ethnographic data followed the model proposed by LeCompte and Schensul (2013). Within the thematic analysis, toddler autonomy was examined through a series of subcategories shaped both by the specialized literature and by the empirical data. The three workshops provide a nuanced perspective on parental representations, each bringing to the forefront specificities related to the child's age, previous parenting experience, and the parents' educational and socio-professional background. Beyond these differences, the comparative analysis makes it possible to identify recurring themes as well as variations in how autonomy is perceived, understood, and valued.

The presentation of results is structured workshop by workshop, through the description of selected images, parents' comments, and the corresponding analytical interpretation. Subsequently, a cross-cutting synthesis will highlight the central themes that emerged across all three workshops and the ways in which they relate to the specialized literature.

#### **3.2.1 The First Photovoice Workshop**

The analysis of the data collected during the first photovoice workshop with parents highlights that autonomy is a complex, multidimensional concept, with definitions that range across functional, emotional, social, and exploratory registers. The photographs captured various everyday situations—from self-care routines and involvement in household tasks to the expression of emotions, decision-making, or engagement in risky activities. In discussions, parents identified these contexts as relevant moments in which their toddlers' autonomy visibly manifests. To understand how parents define toddler autonomy, we analyzed the photographs they selected during the workshop along with the explanations that accompanied them. From the analysis of the workshop transcripts, a series of reflections emerge that illustrate the concrete ways in which parents define and experience toddler autonomy. Following the logic of the Photovoice method, the photographs and associated comments served as starting points for discussions, enabling parents to translate the abstract notion of "autonomy" into everyday situations and examples. In what follows, these reflections are presented and thematically organized to illustrate the multiple dimensions of autonomy as understood within parental experience.

#### **Autonomy as the Fulfillment of Basic Needs**

A first recurring definition of autonomy refers to the toddler's ability to independently satisfy immediate needs: eating, drinking, using the toilet, choosing clothes. This form of autonomy is valued even if the actions are not carried out perfectly and coexist with moments of dependence. Parents perceive it as a natural transition from dependence to independence, in which they accept imperfection and daily fluctuations. In general, parents recounted with pride the moments when their toddler managed to take essential steps without direct support: *"They can satisfy a basic need on their own. They manage from start to finish to fulfill a primary need. That's how I would define it in one sentence."* Other parents also gave concrete examples: *"Thirst, hunger, going to the bathroom, I need that toy, I absolutely want to wear that T-shirt. For me, that is autonomy."* *"He washes himself in the morning and evening, he already knows the steps."* *"He puts away his toys after finishing, without me having to tell him."* *"He makes his own bed, even if it's not perfect, but I let him."*

These observations show that parents view autonomy as a process of progressive self-care, even if the outcome is not always flawless. What matters to them is the toddler's gesture of trying and assuming the task independently. At the same time, parents also describe moments when toddlers ask for help or refuse to act on their own, which indicates the ambivalence typical of early age. One mother said: *"At mealtime he insists on eating by himself, but when it comes to getting dressed he still asks for help. It depends on the moment."* Through these accounts, parents reveal that autonomy as the fulfillment of basic needs is not an end point but rather an oscillating process, influenced by context, the child's disposition, and the adult's willingness to relinquish control. This form of autonomy is valued even if the actions are not executed perfectly and coexist with moments of dependence. Parents perceive it as a natural transition from dependence to independence, in which they accept imperfection and daily fluctuations. This perspective is consonant with the literature on functional or basic self-care autonomy, which constitutes the foundation upon which the socio-emotional and cognitive dimensions of autonomy are later built (Steinberg, 2002). Moreover, research in early childhood development shows that the acquisition of these self-care skills is a key indicator of progress toward independence (Erikson, 1963; Côté-Lecaldare, Joussemet, & Dufour, 2016).

#### **Autonomy as "Managing on One's Own" Under Supervision**

For many parents, toddler autonomy is not equivalent to being left entirely alone, but rather to trying to do things independently while having the parent nearby. This idea recurred in several discussions, accompanied by concrete examples from everyday life. One parent explained: *"Learning to manage on his own to do certain things... while the parent supervises closely."* Another mother added a reflection on the balance between freedom and protection: *"Autonomy doesn't necessarily mean letting him do whatever he wants. (...) When he is curious, you encourage him to try, but without intervening too much."* Parents recounted that they often choose to let their toddlers manage on their own, even if this involves minor risks, while at the same time remaining attentive and ready to step in: *"We let him eat on his own, even if some falls on the floor, but we are there to help if he chokes or can't continue."* The same attitude was described for other activities: *"We let her dress herself, but we supervise her, because sometimes she gets stuck with the buttons and becomes frustrated."* or *"For me, autonomy means letting him try on his own, but with us close by, so he doesn't get hurt or become too frustrated."*

Within the workshop, most parents defined toddler autonomy not as complete independence but as learning to manage on their own under supervision. They agreed that children must be allowed to try and make mistakes, but parents remain close to ensure physical and emotional safety. This attitude confirms the view that autonomy is a relational process, constructed at the intersection between the child's initiative and the adult's willingness to provide space for attempts. This definition resonates with the Vygotskian socio-constructivist perspective on the "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978), where the adult's role is to provide "scaffolding" (Bruner, 1983)—that is, calibrated support—to enable the child to become increasingly competent and autonomous.

#### **Autonomy as the Assumption of Rules and Limits**

An interesting aspect highlighted by parents was the idea that autonomy does not mean unlimited freedom but rather a freedom guided by rules. They acknowledged that for a toddler to be autonomous, they need not only space for action but also clear boundaries adapted to their age and developmental level. One parent explicitly formulated this view: *"We widen the safety*

zone in which you can be autonomous, depending on age.” This idea was reinforced by another mother, who emphasized the role of the adult: *“Their degree of autonomy grows in proportion to how much we are willing to let them be autonomous.”*

In discussions, parents recounted that the purpose of setting rules is not to limit autonomy but, on the contrary, to make it possible within a framework of safety. A frequently mentioned example was crossing the street or going to the park: *“We let them walk alone, but only up to the curb. They know to stop there and wait for us.”* Parents described how rules gradually became part of the child’s behavior: *“We always tell him to stop at the curb, now he does it on his own, without us saying it.”* Parents perceive their toddlers’ autonomy not as *“doing whatever they want,”* but as the ability to act within the limits of internalized rules, which provide safety and predictability. One father summarized this tension between freedom and control: *“We let him be free, but within clear limits. Otherwise, it’s not autonomy, it’s chaos.”*

In conclusion, parents define autonomy also through the assumption of rules imposed by adults. The child’s freedom is understood as freedom within safety boundaries, which gradually expand with age and maturity. Autonomy thus becomes a negotiated process between child and adult, in which external limits are internalized and transformed into self-regulation. The specialized literature confirms that autonomy is not synonymous with unlimited freedom but entails learning self-regulation within the frameworks imposed by parents and the environment (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). Contemporary approaches to early childhood education emphasize that a framework of clear rules supports both the development of self-esteem and the internalization of social values (Reeve, 2009).

### **Autonomy as the Expression of Desires and Emotions**

For several parents, toddler autonomy is not reduced to *“doing things alone,”* but begins with the ability to express desires and feelings. This dimension was stated directly by one of the participants: *“First of all, his autonomy means being able to express what he wants.”* Another parent added: *“I believe autonomy begins with this: the ability to express feelings.”* Thus, parents understand autonomy not only as a functional competence but also as an act of authentic communication. They recounted everyday situations in which toddlers chose to say what they wanted, what they did not want, or what they felt, even when these expressions were not convenient for adults: *“She says very clearly ‘I don’t want to wear this sweater’ or ‘I want a different toy.’ And for me that is also a form of autonomy.”* Some parents noted that these emotional expressions were accompanied by intense gestures or reactions: *“He rejoices, screams, laughs out loud... I think this too is part of autonomy, to show his emotions without fear.”* At the same time, reflections on context also emerged. Freedom of expression is more easily accepted in open or familiar spaces: *“In the park we let them shout as much as they want, but during a visit they have to hold back a little.”* This nuance shows that parents recognize the importance of emotional expression but see it in tension with social norms and the context in which the child is situated. This perspective emphasizes the communicative and emotional dimension of autonomy, a point supported by self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which places the need for autonomy in close relation to the expression of preferences and emotions. Recent studies show that supporting the child in expressing feelings reduces frustration and facilitates the development of socio-emotional resilience (Joussemet et al., 2008).

### Autonomy as Participation in Everyday Life

A recurring theme in parents' discussions was the idea that autonomy does not only mean doing things for oneself, but also contributing to family life through daily tasks and activities. This participation is perceived as a way of fostering responsibility in the child and giving them the feeling of having an active role in the family. Parents listed numerous examples: "Making their own bed." "Helping in the kitchen, even if they spill or break things." "Putting away their toys after finishing." The photographs presented illustrated these situations, and parents proudly recounted episodes in which their toddlers were involved in cooking activities. One father shared his experience with preparing pancakes: "She said she wanted a pancake. I said, fine, let's make a pancake. What do we need? She says what we need: flour, egg, milk. Where do we put them? Here, in the bowl. What do you need now? An egg, give me an egg. She takes the egg, cracks it herself, mixes it herself. At the end, I stir the lumps. At one point she sees the lumps won't go away and says, Daddy, help me. But otherwise, for the pancake, muffins, pound cake, and doughnuts, she knows the recipe." He added: "It doesn't matter if she spills flour on the table or if I have to clean up afterwards. What matters is that she feels she has done something herself and comes proudly to show me: 'Look, Daddy, I did it all by myself!'" Another family recounted a barbecue, where the child wanted to be an active part of the process: "Daddy let them stay next to him at the grill. He asked them to turn the mici [traditional meat rolls] or bring salt and pepper. They were very excited to participate, even if they didn't do everything perfectly. At the end, when we ate, they told us: 'These are the mici I made with Daddy!'"

Participation in everyday life is also linked to family traditions. One mother recounted how, at Easter, the children dyed and peeled eggs: "We let them dye and peel the eggs, even if they get dirty and make a mess. What matters is that they feel they did something themselves. Last year they even argued over who would crack more eggs, each wanted to show they could manage. Even though I had more cleaning to do afterwards, it was wonderful to see how involved they were." Thus, parents show that autonomy as participation is not only a practical exercise but also a source of joy, pride, and belonging. Children seek recognition of their contribution: "S. asked me: Mommy, are these the dumplings I made?" and parents confirm that such moments give them confidence and strengthen their motivation to participate. In some situations, parents also noticed differences in how mothers and fathers manage children's involvement. One mother admitted: "With Daddy they manage to do more things. I am more protective and sometimes let them do less, because I worry they might get hurt. He lets them do more, even peel vegetables with a small knife or put wood on the fire for the grill. And then the children learn differently, they feel grown-up."

Autonomy through the child's active involvement in daily life—cooking, tidying, household chores, traditions—even if these activities involve disorder and extra effort for adults, is valued by parents as an opportunity for the child to learn, to contribute, and to develop confidence. Autonomy is thus understood not only as personal independence but also as belonging to the family community, where the child has a recognized role. This type of autonomy—sometimes referred to as "practical autonomy"—reflects both the acquisition of functional skills and the child's assumption of responsibility within the family (Rogoff, 2003). In the anthropological tradition of learning through participation (Rogoff, Paradise, Arauz, Correa-Chávez, & Angelillo, 2003), children's involvement in household tasks is considered a natural way of transmitting culture and developing social competence.

### **Autonomy as Freedom of Choice**

Another aspect discussed by parents was the daily choices children make, especially regarding clothing and activities. Many emphasized that it is essential for children to have a say, even if the final decision is limited by the framework set by the adult. One mother described how she proceeds with her child when it comes to getting dressed: *“The first reaction is: I don’t want to wear that. First, we go to the closet to choose clothes. Sometimes it takes him a very long time to decide, so I try to give him only two or three options. If there are too many, he gets lost, he doesn’t know what to do. But if there are just two or three things to choose from, he gives in relatively quickly and is happy that he made the choice.”* Another parent described the same type of strategy: *“We let him choose his shoes or T-shirt. It doesn’t matter if they don’t match, what matters is that he feels he chose by himself. If it were up to him, he would wear the same pants every day, but we try to guide him discreetly, without canceling his choice.”*

In some families, freedom of choice is considered even more important than the practical outcome. One mother explained: *“I don’t care if the sweater is blue or red, but it is very important for him to feel that I didn’t impose it. When he chooses by himself, he gets dressed faster and is more cooperative afterward.”*

There are also tense situations in which the child insists on an inappropriate choice, and parents negotiate: *“He wanted to go to day care in house slippers. I tried to explain why that wasn’t possible. In the end, we agreed that he could put the slippers in his backpack and that at home he could wear them as much as he wanted. This way I reconciled both his need for choice and the rules.”* From parents’ accounts, it is clear that they use mediation strategies—providing limited options, negotiating, compromising—to maintain a balance between the child’s desire to decide and the adult’s need to preserve order and rules. Autonomy is thus defined as a process of negotiating freedom, in which the child experiences the power of decision-making while the parent learns to partially relinquish control. The specialized literature shows that offering limited choices supports intrinsic motivation and the development of self-determination while avoiding overburdening the child (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999). Thus, autonomy is not perceived as absolute freedom but as a process of negotiation between the child’s desires and the structure imposed by the adult.

### **Autonomy as Exploration and Pushing Boundaries**

For parents, toddlers’ autonomy is also expressed through the courage to try new things and to test their limits. For the participating parents, toddler autonomy was strongly expressed through environmental exploration and boundary-pushing. Riding a bicycle without support, diving, discovering the water fountain, or stopping at the curb before crossing the street were interpreted as key moments in which the child demonstrated initiative, courage, and the capacity for self-regulation. One mother proudly recounted the moment when her daughter gave up training wheels: *“She got on the bike without training wheels and rode. She didn’t tell me, she didn’t ask for help. She just tried. I was there, close by, but I let her try on her own. When she succeeded, she came to me with a big smile and said: ‘Did you see, Mommy, I can do it by myself!’”* Another parent observed how the child’s reaction depended on the adult’s presence: *“If he doesn’t see me, he gets up on his own after falling and keeps going. But if he sees me watching, then he starts to cry and comes to me. I think his autonomy is also about how he feels self-confident, but also about how he checks on us to see if we are there.”*

Another family recounted their experience at the pool: *“L. started putting her head under water and then diving on her own. We were watching, but we didn’t say anything. We let her see how far she could go. She came up and said: ‘One more time!’ She was very proud of*

*succeeding. And she was confident also because her older sister was always nearby.”* A father humorously yet carefully described how his son tried to drink from a water fountain on his own: *“We suddenly realized he was gone—he had run to the fountain. He was thirsty and didn’t tell us. He stuck his head in there and struggled until he managed to drink. On the one hand I was upset that he ran off alone, but on the other hand I thought: look, he managed, he found the solution by himself.”* Crossing the street was another frequently discussed example: *“We let them walk by themselves up to the curb, on the bike or on foot. They know to stop there and wait for us. Now they do it on their own, without us telling them. We always told them that the curb is the limit. It’s our way of teaching them the rules but also giving them freedom.”* Another parent added: *“If you don’t expose him to risks, he will never understand. You can’t always hold his hand. You have to teach him the rules and then let him follow them on his own.”*

From parents’ accounts, autonomy is thus perceived as freedom within conditions of safety, a process in which the child learns to manage risk and to assert self-confidence. Gradual exposure to challenging situations is considered a catalyst for motor and psychological autonomy. Through these examples, parents describe autonomy as a balance between the child’s desire to explore and their own responsibility to ensure safety. Children are allowed to try, fall, and make mistakes, but within a supervised framework and with clear rules. This type of definition is congruent with the literature on early exploration and *risk-taking play* (Sandseter, 2009), which emphasizes the role of controlled risk experiences in developing confidence and self-esteem.

### **The Influence of Older Siblings on Toddler Autonomy**

A recurring theme in parents’ discussions was the role that older siblings play in the development of toddler autonomy. Most participants emphasized that the presence of an older brother or sister accelerates the acquisition of autonomous behaviors through imitation, modeling, and the family’s prior experience. Several parents observed that the second child reached autonomy milestones earlier compared to the first: *“The second child reached many autonomy milestones much faster than the first, because he already had role models and learned along the way.”* This accelerating effect was attributed especially to direct imitation: *“At one year and one month he started asking to go to the toilet on his own because he had seen his older sister.”* These observations correspond with theories of learning through modeling (Bandura, 1977), which argue that children adopt behaviors by observing those close to them and imitating their actions. At the same time, Vygotsky (1978) showed that interactions with more competent individuals—including siblings—constitute the core of the “zone of proximal development,” through which the child can reach higher levels of autonomy than they could achieve alone. However, the influence of the older sibling is not described uniformly, but is mediated by age and personality differences. When the age gap is large, the impact is reduced, whereas when children are closer in age, parents report that *“they team up”* and stimulate each other’s autonomy. At the same time, parents also noted cases where the younger child became more complacent, relying on the sibling’s help: *“He was lazy, complacent. He relied on his sister to do things for him and therefore did not get involved.”* These accounts confirm that learning through imitation and modeling is selective: children adopt behaviors depending on their motivations and interests (Rogoff, 2003). Furthermore, the literature on birth order suggests that younger siblings benefit from a more stimulating context but sometimes also from the overprotection of older siblings, which may delay certain achievements (Luo, Song, & Chiu, 2022).

Situations in which the older sibling refuses to continue providing help become opportunities for the younger child's autonomy to develop. One mother recounted: *"At first his sister served him breakfast, but when she refused to help anymore, he had to serve himself, and since then he manages on his own."* Thus, the withdrawal of the older sibling's protection forces the younger child to become more responsible and to take on tasks. Imitation is not limited to functional activities but also extends to behaviors and social roles. One parent observed: *"He imitates him when telling stories or when playing, but not when it comes to work,"* showing that the process of learning through modeling is mediated by context and by the child's interest. In addition, parents distinguish between the objective influence of the older sibling and their own more relaxed parenting with the second child. The accumulated experience makes them less rigid and more willing to let the child try on their own: *"The second child grows up more relaxed because we already know what to do and we don't intervene as much."* This idea aligns with the literature on parenting styles and how they affect autonomy (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989).

In conclusion, older siblings are perceived as catalysts of autonomy through modeling, imitation, and relational dynamics. However, parents stress that their effect is not mechanical: it depends on the age gap, the younger child's temperament, and the parents' attitude. In some cases, the older sibling helps the younger one reach autonomy milestones earlier, while in other situations they "hinder" them through overprotection or by serving them, thus delaying autonomy.

### **3.2.2 The Second Photovoice Workshop**

From the analysis of the transcripts and photographs from this workshop emerges a set of reflections that illustrate how parents give meaning to toddler autonomy in everyday life. Autonomy is not viewed as a unitary category, but rather as a set of complementary dimensions activated in concrete life situations. The images captured varied daily contexts: the toddler eating alone, climbing and descending stairs without protective barriers, participating in kitchen tasks, engaging in fine motor activities such as threading pasta, playing with household objects, exploring a scale in a public space, and independently crossing a small bridge. Their comments showed that they anchored the concept of autonomy in lived experiences and concrete situations. Thematically, the following dimensions of toddler autonomy were identified:

#### **Autonomy in Self-Care and the Fulfillment of Basic Needs**

In this workshop, parents first spoke about toddler autonomy in the most concrete terms, related to the fulfillment of basic needs. Independence was primarily defined as the toddler's ability to eat alone, dress independently, use the toilet, or manage personal hygiene. One parent summarized this perspective by saying: *"To put on his shoes by himself, to get dressed by himself, to eat by himself, to drink by himself. On the one hand, the basic things."* The accounts also highlighted moments when toddlers claimed autonomy even if the results were imperfect. One mother spoke about her daughter: *"She wants to eat with a fork, she doesn't eat well, she drops food on the floor. We controlled ourselves, we didn't get upset. We said: very good, keep going."* This example clearly shows that parents recognize the value of intention and initiative, even if the action is not fully accomplished. Getting dressed and putting on shoes were frequently mentioned as moments through which the child demonstrates independence. The ability to choose and wear clothes independently or to put on their own shoes was interpreted as a natural step toward autonomy. The same meaning was attached to using the toilet, considered a milestone of maturation: *"To get out of bed at night to go to the toilet. The more he starts to do these things, the more autonomy he has."*

Another example provided by parents was related to personal hygiene. Toddlers were encouraged to climb on a stool to reach the sink and wash their hands, face, or teeth on their own. *“She has a stool that she can climb on. And since she was little, we taught her: if she wants to climb, she can climb. She washes her hands, her face, her teeth. All the minimum autonomous things.”* This account shows how parents adapted the environment to make it possible for toddlers to practice independence in meeting basic needs. Thus, parents primarily define toddler autonomy through acts of self-care—eating, dressing, toileting, hygiene—which they consider the clearest markers of the transition from dependence to independence. These reflections confirm what the specialized literature emphasizes: self-care skills are the first visible forms of autonomy and play a fundamental role in shaping the sense of competence and control over one’s own body (Whitebread et al., 2012; Montessori, 1967/2017).

### **Emotional Autonomy – Expression of Desires and Emotions**

A second dimension is emotional autonomy, strongly associated by parents with confidence, initiative, and the child’s ability to express desires and emotions. For some participants, autonomy does not begin with the action itself but with the confidence that makes it possible. One parent stated: *“First comes confidence and then autonomy. And I think that, in fact, it’s confidence, initiative, and then autonomy.”* From this perspective, autonomy is seen as an inner process in which the child acquires the courage to try and to act independently. Parents also noticed the intense joy children experience when they succeed on their own. One mother remarked: *“She was so happy and tried to show us that she could do it by herself.”* In such moments, autonomy is experienced not only as a skill but also as a source of personal satisfaction and pride.

Thus, the emotional dimension of autonomy acquires formative value: the child not only learns to act independently but also to rejoice in the outcomes of their actions. Another aspect highlighted was the expression of the desire for independence through firm words and the rejection of adult assistance. The phrase *“No Daddy, no Mommy, me”* was cited as an example of how the child clearly asserts intentions and desires. In these situations, emotional autonomy is expressed through verbalization and the need to be recognized as the actor of one’s own action. Emotional autonomy was also described as the child’s ability to spend time alone without anxiety. One parent emphasized: *“Autonomy can also be seen in the child’s ability to spend time alone, within healthy limits, feeling safe even if the parents are not nearby.”* This observation shows that emotional independence involves not only the assertion of the desire for autonomy but also the ability to manage separation from the adult in a balanced way. Thus, in parents’ discourse, emotional autonomy is inseparable from the expression of desires and emotions. It manifests through initiative, the joy of success, the verbal claim of independence, and the capacity to be alone. The specialized literature confirms these reflections: self-determination theory shows that the expression of personal desires and emotions is a fundamental form of autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2017), while the Eriksonian perspective emphasizes the importance of early achievements for consolidating self-confidence and avoiding feelings of shame and doubt (Erikson, 1963). The data extracted from this workshop confirm the importance of parental support in building the child’s emotional confidence. Recent research shows that maternal autonomy support in the early years positively influences developmental trajectories up to school age, reducing withdrawal behaviors and emotional difficulties (Zeytinoglu, Calkins, & Leerkes, 2018). Thus, emotional autonomy is not only an individual milestone but also an indicator of the quality of the parent–child relationship and of the support provided by the adult in the process of separation and individuation.

### **Autonomy as Participation in Everyday Life**

On a social level, parents described autonomy as a form of active participation in family life. One father proudly recounted his child's involvement in household chores: *"He really likes to help his mother when she cooks. He gets upset if we intervene: No, I'll do it."* This account shows that parents interpret the child's desire to engage in domestic activities as a form of independence and responsibility. Parents also mentioned that experiences from day care transfer to the family and lead children to participate more in daily life: *"This stronger spirit of independence came after the first six months at day care. What he does at day care has a very good impact at home."* In addition, examples were given of games and household tasks taken on by children: using the vacuum cleaner, helping with the laundry, or setting the table. Parents noted that these activities seem to be perceived by children as more attractive than conventional toy play: *"We asked ourselves: why did we buy so many toys? The children play more with pans and with the vacuum cleaner."* For some of the parents attending the workshop, participation in everyday life is a central dimension of early autonomy. It is not reduced to *"doing things alone"* but to being recognized as a social actor within the family community. Parents confirmed that autonomy is valued when the child becomes a co-participant in daily tasks and claims an active role in the family. The literature supports this interpretation: Rogoff et al. (2003) and the theory of guided participation show that children's involvement in real family activities (cooking, house care, community tasks) fosters a sense of belonging and responsibility and highlight in ethnographic studies that participation in household activities strengthens both practical skills and emotional autonomy, as it allows children to perceive themselves as useful and competent. Salminen (2017) discuss childhood as a space of *"social co-production,"* where autonomy is constructed through children's integration into everyday practices, not only through specially designed child-focused activities. In the European context, the European Commission document (2019) on the quality of early childhood education emphasizes that children's autonomy is stimulated through authentic everyday activities and through continuity between experiences at home and those at day care.

### **Autonomy as the Assumption of Rules and Limits**

Almost all parents stressed that autonomy cannot be understood as absolute freedom, but rather is gradually formed through the learning and internalization of clear rules. The situations they recounted illustrated how children are allowed to act independently while at the same time receiving precise guidelines for safety and the development of self-control. One example was the stairs, a domestic space that carries both attractiveness and danger. One parent said: *"We also have a rule: never run on the stairs. If he says he's going upstairs, I tell him: slowly, don't run."* Another explained the decision not to install safety gates, precisely to help the child learn the rules through direct experience: *"I thought about it, did some research, and then decided, let's not put up gates. Because later it will be very difficult to transition when we remove that gate and leave him free, since he will be used to it being there."* The same type of reflection also appeared in relation to exploration in public spaces. One mother explained: *"One limit is her real safety. If there could be a risk of going in front of a car, we set a limit."* In all these examples, parents show that they acknowledge the child's need to experiment and practice independence, while also recognizing the adult's responsibility to construct a framework of rules that prevent real dangers, along with discreet adult supervision, intervening only when safety is truly at risk. This perspective is consistent with the specialized literature, which emphasizes that autonomy does not mean the absence of rules but develops within clear and explicit boundaries. Grolnick and Pomerantz (2009) argue that parents who combine autonomy

support with the establishment of coherent rules facilitate the development of self-regulation and responsibility. More recently, Castelo et al. (2022) conceptualized autonomy support as multidimensional: it involves not only providing freedom of choice but also adapting tasks to the child's needs, offering suggestions in a positive tone, and adult flexibility. The examples shared by parents in the workshop reflect precisely this type of approach: setting simple rules ("we don't run on the stairs"), adapting the environment (removing gates). Thus, in parental discourse, autonomy is also defined as a process of assuming rules and limits, through which the child learns to regulate behaviors in relation to the environment and to others. This regulated autonomy does not reduce the child's independence but, on the contrary, provides a framework of safety within which initiative and curiosity can flourish. In this sense, the child's freedom and adult control are not opposites but complementary, jointly building the foundations for the development of responsibility and self-efficacy.

### **Autonomy as Exploration and Pushing Boundaries**

In the workshop discussions, parents also spoke about their children's desire to explore the environment and to try new things, interpreting these behaviors as clear expressions of autonomy. In their view, autonomy is not limited to meeting basic needs or practicing self-care skills but is also manifested through curiosity to discover and the natural tendency to push beyond the limits imposed by context. One father remarked on his child's fascination with various household objects, in contrast to purchased toys: "*He prefers to use household or natural objects more than to play with toys.*" This example shows that, for the child, exploring the real environment is an opportunity for authentic learning and for asserting independence. Another moment recounted was the discovery of a luggage scale in a public space, the airport. The parent described with surprise his daughter's initiative: "*She is very curious and discovers things that we don't notice.*" This curiosity is perceived as a form of cognitive autonomy, in which the child relates to the world not as a passive backdrop but as a space full of possibilities. Autonomy as boundary-pushing is also visible in physical experiences. Crossing a small bridge was described by one parent as a moment of pride: "*I know there were some issues with this (balance), she had a period, not as we expected, and for me it represents a victory. And the fact that I saw her so happy that she could do it by herself, to climb on that little bridge on her own and keep going, keeping her balance, because the bridge wobbles a bit, and she made it to the end, I don't remember exactly what was there. She was so happy and tried to show us that she could do this on her own, without any help. We took the picture in our yard, she showed us. I felt that she was happy, and through her happiness we, of course, were glad that she could do these things on her own. We were certainly nearby, but the fact that she was managing better and better physically—and automatically, if physically then also mentally, because without mental strength you can't succeed in many things. Now she does more things and succeeds.*" Such experiences demonstrate that autonomy is not only a practical skill but also an intense emotional experience through which the child asserts competence and the desire for recognition. However, parents acknowledged that these attempts come with risks and that firm boundaries are necessary. One mother explained: "*One limit is her real safety. If there could be a risk of going in front of a car, we set a limit.*" This balance between freedom and safety reflects how parents constantly negotiate between the child's need for exploration and the adult's responsibility to protect them. These reflections confirm the importance of exploration as a form of autonomy.

Recent research shows that daily autonomy-supportive practices, even through small actions (offering choices, flexibility, a positive tone), have cumulative effects on children's

behavior and the family climate (Neubauer et al., 2021). The specialized literature confirms the relevance of these observations. Piaget (1952) described the child as a “*little scientist*,” learning through trial and error, and studies on risky play have shown that exposure to moderately risky situations stimulates self-regulation and self-confidence (Sandseter, 2010)). In turn, Gopnik (2020) considers childhood a privileged period for exploration, in which autonomy is formed through free experimentation with the environment. More recently, Castelo et al. (2022) showed that autonomy support is expressed through the provision of opportunities for exploration, flexibility, and the setting of clear boundaries—elements reflected in the parents’ accounts from this workshop. Therefore, autonomy as exploration and pushing boundaries is experienced by both parents and children as a positive process, rich in emotion and meaning. Children express their curiosity and competence through simple daily activities, by discovering new objects and spaces, or by taking on physical challenges. At the same time, parents contribute to this development by establishing reasonable boundaries that allow freedom of exploration while ensuring safety.

### **The Influence of Older Siblings on Toddler Autonomy**

A particular focus of my research was to understand how parents perceive the influence of older siblings on toddlers’ autonomy. The theme did not emerge spontaneously in their discussions but was prompted through my questions. When asked about it, parents reflected and acknowledged that the relationship with older siblings has a significant impact on the pace and forms through which younger children acquire independence. One father summarized this idea as follows: “*The youngest looks at the oldest, and of course there is an influence.*” Other parents recounted that younger siblings tend to imitate the behaviors of older ones, which accelerates the learning process: “*First of all, I have more experience, and I see that the second wants to copy his brother: he eats alone, leaves alone, climbs on the couch.*” In another case, a mother observed that the younger daughter wants to do everything her older sister does: “*She copies her older sister in everything. She wants to keep up with her.*” Even though he did not elaborate much on the topic of siblings, the father of five children acknowledged clear differences between the first and the subsequent ones. He said: “*The first enters life as if into a jungle. The others have a well-trodden path.*” This metaphor suggests that the eldest child must manage without close-in-age family models, while the younger siblings benefit from the example of the older ones and from the parents’ accumulated experience. In other accounts, the parent emphasized that “*the younger ones watch the older ones*” and adopt their self-care and autonomy behaviors. Although parents did not spontaneously bring up this theme, their responses confirm the idea that the presence of older siblings functions as a catalyst for autonomy. Younger children learn through observation and imitation, take on tasks earlier, and seek to push their limits in order to rise to the level of their siblings. At the same time, parents admitted that their accumulated experience with the first child allowed them to be more relaxed and to grant more freedom to the second, which contributed to a smoother path toward autonomy. These reflections show that autonomy is not only an individual or exclusively parental process but also a relational one, constructed through sibling interaction.

### **3.2.3 The Third Photovoice Workshop**

From the analysis of the transcripts and photographs, it emerges that parents give meaning to toddler autonomy by referring to concrete everyday situations—family meals, outdoor play, sibling relationships, risky explorations, and so on. They define autonomy less as

an abstract concept and more as a visible, lived, and negotiated process: the child insisting on eating alone, undressing when wet in the park, playing like the older sibling, expressing desires, or testing limits. Autonomy thus appears as a relational experience, constructed in child–adult interaction and shaped by the family and social context. In this workshop as well, several dimensions of toddler autonomy can be distinguished.

### **Practical Autonomy and the Child’s Will**

In the workshop, parents frequently associated autonomy with practical gestures and the manifestation of the will to do things independently. For many of them, this is the first image of independence: the child insisting on eating alone, getting dressed, cutting food, peeling an egg, or choosing objects by themselves. One parent described this perspective very clearly: *“For me, autonomy means independence. But independence at his level. That is, to try to eat with a spoon, to put on a sock even if it’s upside down, to take a pair of pants, to dress in a sweater even if it’s inside out. But for him to try to do it on his own.”* This account captures how parents value the child’s effort and intention, even if the result is not perfect. The conception echoes Montessori’s ideas (1967), for whom “practical life” activities—feeding, dressing, hygiene—are the foundation through which the child gains self-confidence and builds willpower. Other parents confirmed the same tendency: *“What he has managed to learn up to that point. How he manages on his own, without help. Left, supervised, but not helped.”* In parents’ statements we again find what the literature calls parental autonomy support, as opposed to excessive control (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Studies show that parents who supervise discreetly, without intervening constantly, stimulate self-regulation and intrinsic motivation (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Joussemet & Mageau, 2021). Still, parents also acknowledged the tensions that practical autonomy brings into everyday life. One mother recounted with a dose of humor: *“Too much autonomy—sometimes I would just like to feed her myself and be done... She wants to peel the egg, she wants to cut the meat with a knife, she wants to cut dumplings with a knife, and she needs time. But I don’t have it.”* The mother’s statement reveals the contrast between the child’s rhythm and the adult’s rhythm. The child needs repeated attempts and time, while the adult is pressed by the efficiency of the daily schedule. As Vuorisalo and colleagues (2018) show, children’s autonomy is always conditioned by time, space, and interaction. Beyond feeding, parents recounted other practical gestures through which toddlers assert their will: *“M. insists on dressing herself: Me, me, me! She screams until we let her.”* *“D. wanted to go down the spiral staircase on his own, with his arms full, and he said: No, I’ll hold them.”* *“She said she wanted to take a big cup, to hold it firmly. She doesn’t want the small cup, and she manages without spilling.”* In these examples, autonomy is expressed not only through the action itself but also through opposition to the adult and the insistence on making one’s own choice. This is what recent research (Castelo et al., 2022) considers essential in autonomy support: providing real options and respecting the child’s decisions, even when they do not coincide with the adult’s recommendation. Practical autonomy is also closely linked to the self-regulation of physiological needs. Parents proudly shared stories about children who recognize and clearly express their needs: *“She tells me clearly: I can’t anymore. What I like about her is that she knows when she’s hungry and when she’s full.”* Thus, autonomy is not only an observable behavior (feeding oneself) but also an emerging awareness of one’s own body and its limits. Kopp (1982) described this process as the beginnings of self-regulation, fundamental for the later development of self-control. From parents’ accounts, it emerges that toddlers’ practical autonomy and will are defined by a set of seemingly banal everyday gestures—eating alone, dressing, choosing objects, expressing bodily needs. For parents, these

gestures are expressions of the will to do things independently and mark the transition from total dependence to independence. At the same time, they are also sources of tension—between the child’s rhythm and the adult’s rhythm, between freedom of choice and parental limits.

### **Cognitive Autonomy and Initiative in Learning**

In parents’ accounts, autonomy is not only about eating, dressing, or moving freely, but also about exploring the world of ideas, language, and knowledge. Their photographs and comments capture children’s interest in letters, words, “grown-up” objects, and the desire to understand what they see around them. One parent described his daughter: *“Somehow she knows how to read words... on this board we bought for her, she chooses the letters and places them. I arranged them a bit better for her, but she recognizes them and puts them there.”* This fragment shows that initiative comes from the child, who chooses the activity and assumes the role of “author,” while the parent only facilitates. From Vygotsky’s perspective (1978), the child acts within the zone of proximal development: she cannot write on her own, but she has control over choosing the letters and directing the process. Montessori (1967) would call this moment part of the “sensitive period for language,” when interest in letters and words arises spontaneously and must be supported. The parent also noted the child’s tendency to prefer the role of “director” of the activity: *“She prefers to tell me what to write rather than writing herself. But she chooses the words.”* Here we see how cognitive autonomy combines with the adult–child relationship: the child does not yet have the technical skill but retains decision-making control over the content. It is a mediated, yet real, autonomy. Another parent described his child: *“A., having an older brother eight years older, knows about homework, knows about math, knows about reading... he wants to do grown-up things.”* This account illustrates cognitive autonomy as aspiration toward the other’s world, where the toddler does not limit himself to age-appropriate tasks but seeks to imitate and understand what older siblings do. In the logic of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), the desire to access “grown-up things” is an essential mechanism for development. Such initiatives show that cognitive autonomy is expressed not only through curiosity but also through intrinsic motivation to learn. Recent studies demonstrate that adult support for autonomy—by offering choices and respecting the child’s interests—increases engagement and joy in the learning process (Arvanitis, Barrable, & Touloumakos, 2023). Moreover, Ke (2023) argues philosophically that even very young children can manifest authentic forms of autonomy, not only through practical gestures but also through cognitive and symbolic choices. In conclusion, parents describe cognitive autonomy and initiative in learning as the child’s desire to explore the symbolic and intellectual world, to imitate what older siblings do, or to direct learning activities. These accounts show that cognitive autonomy is not a “future skill” but a present reality, constructed through curiosity, intrinsic motivation, and social interaction.

### **Relational Autonomy and Learning Through Imitation – The Role of Older Siblings**

A common thread running through many parents’ accounts is that younger children “grow up faster” when they have older siblings. Parents observed that their toddlers’ autonomy emerges earlier in a relational context, where the older sibling becomes both a model and a challenge. One parent said: *“They grow faster. They learn faster to do things, clearly. By example. By mimicry.”* This observation confirms what Bandura (1977) calls social learning through observation: children develop skills by imitating those around them, especially those

with whom they strongly identify. Parents also noted the emotional and negotiative dimension of the relationship with an older sibling. The child builds autonomy not only through copying but also through differentiated positioning toward the older sibling: *“She decides whether to get upset or not with her brother. Whether to move on. Sometimes she does the same as him, sometimes she decides to be more mature than he is.”* This example shows that relational autonomy does not mean merely “copying” but also choosing when to align and when to differentiate. Classic psychoanalytic literature (Mahler, 1975) speaks of the process of separation–individuation, in which the child gradually asserts identity through closeness to and distance from significant others. In addition, parents highlighted the pride children feel when they succeed in initiating games that also engage the older sibling: *“When he manages to initiate a game that the older one enjoys, that is his greatest success.”* This testimony shows that relational autonomy is linked to recognition and validation in relation to others, not only to individual independence. In conclusion, parents view autonomy as a deeply relational process, in which older siblings play a central role. Younger children’s autonomy is accelerated through imitation but also refined through emotional negotiation and differentiation. From the perspective of early childhood education, this confirms that autonomy is not an isolated attribute but a social and familial process constructed in interaction.

### **Autonomy Through Risk and Courage**

In many parents’ accounts, children’s autonomy is associated with the desire to test their limits and to confront situations perceived as dangerous. These behaviors were described with both admiration and fear. Several parents’ accounts highlight children’s desire to explore risk: *“I climbed alone on her brother’s bike and was very proud.” “When it comes to autonomy, I understand it differently: it’s their decisions that contradict ours. That’s what autonomy means. That is, I do what I want, even if you tell me it’s not good, I need to find out for myself. At least I. is that kind—if you tell him he finds a shard on the ground, ‘Look, Daddy, a shard on the ground. Don’t pick it up, Daddy, you’ll cut yourself.’ ‘I want to see. Let me see.’ He even tested burning a few times until he was convinced it wasn’t okay. He touched the grill, the light bulb, and several other things. Now he doesn’t touch them anymore.” “David wanted to go down the spiral staircase on his own, with his arms full. I asked him: Do you want me to help you? He said: No, I’ll hold them myself.”* One episode shared by a parent is relevant for showing how discreet support can turn a child’s initial fear into an experience of autonomy and courage. At the child’s first interaction with a horse, the parent described how the boy *“felt fear, he started to cry,”* which reminded him of his own childhood experiences, when he had been taught that *“you have to be careful with horses, they are big, dangerous, they can hurt you.”* Instead of avoiding the situation or addressing it with coercion, the parent chose a strategy of calibrated autonomy support: he offered the child clear options and the assurance of retreat if needed—*“Come on, Daddy is coming, look, let’s try. If something happens, I’ll take you down. If you’re scared, I’ll hold your hand.”* With his father’s support, the child moved from fear to enthusiasm, insisting on continuing the activity: *“After that, he didn’t want to get down anymore. He kept saying: I want more, I want more, I want more.”* This transition from anxiety to joy shows how emotional co-regulation and adult proximity can facilitate the child’s move toward independent action. In addition, his example became a model for his two siblings (the parent reporting has triplets), confirming the imitative and collective nature of autonomy (Bandura, 1977). In such situations, autonomy is not reduced to practical gestures but is expressed through the assumption of challenges. Children claim the right to try on their own, even when real risks are present. From a theoretical perspective, these accounts align with what

the literature calls *risky play*—play that, although involving controlled dangers, is fundamental for the development of resilience and self-confidence (Sandseter, 2009). Risky play is associated with greater well-being and deeper engagement in exploratory activities. Moreover, recent studies (Armstrong et al., 2025) confirm that parents' attitudes toward risk shape children's autonomy: parents who accept risk as part of development foster independent mobility and the child's courage.

These experiences can also be interpreted through Erikson's (1963) developmental theory, in which the stage of autonomy involves balancing initiative and guilt: the child tests what they can do, and the adult's reaction shapes whether this courage will be valued or sanctioned. Beyond the practical, cognitive, or emotional dimensions, the workshop also brought forward a distinct theme: autonomy as a collective experience lived by parents. The final discussions showed that parents did not only speak about their children but also about themselves, as part of a community of adults facing similar challenges. A first effect of sharing was the normalization of daily difficulties. One parent said with relief: *"I found out that it's the same for everyone. It's not noisy only in our house."* This statement illustrates how family experiences, often perceived as problematic or *"exceptional,"* gain new meaning when shared. Hearing that others go through similar situations, parents acquire a sense of belonging and validation. The same idea was reinforced by another participant, who explained that the workshop functioned as a space of mutual recognition of effort: *"We validated each other that it's not just you struggling and going through hard stages, but that these are normal."* The narrative thread of the discussions thus shifted from capturing concrete moments of children's autonomy to acknowledging that parenting is a difficult process, and that positive comparison with others helps diminish feelings of guilt or inadequacy. Another mother described the workshop atmosphere in deeply emotional terms, comparing it to a psychological support setting: *"It was like group therapy—it really helps to see that everyone faces all sorts of things and that perfection doesn't exist in raising children."* This comment suggests that the collective experience itself becomes a resource of parental autonomy: being able to speak freely, to be listened to, and to recognize that difficulties are universal are important steps in building a more secure parental identity. In the logic of *communities of practice* (Wenger, 1998), the workshop functioned as a space of mutual learning in which parents shared not only observations about their children but also their own emotions. In this sense, children's autonomy is understood not only as an individual outcome but as a phenomenon embedded in a network of social relationships and experiences, through which parents discover and validate one another.

#### **4. Conclusions and Discussion**

To capture how parents define and experience toddler autonomy, we conducted a cross-analysis of the three Photovoice workshops, each bringing to the forefront everyday experiences and parental reflections on the process of early independence. In line with the method, the photographs and associated comments functioned as starting points for discussions, enabling parents to translate the abstract notion of *"autonomy"* into concrete life situations. The table below synthesizes the main dimensions of autonomy identified across the three workshops and the ways in which these were articulated by parents. Their comparison highlights both recurring elements—such as practical autonomy, participation in everyday life, or the importance of rules—and the distinctive emphases brought by each group: the focus on emotional expression and confidence (Workshop 2), the emergence of cognitive autonomy (Workshop 3), or the relevance of older siblings as relational models (Workshops 1 and 3).

Thus, the comparative analysis provides an integrated and nuanced picture of toddler autonomy as a multidimensional process, negotiated within the family and social context.

**Comparative Table (Workshops 1–2–3)**

Dimension	Workshop 1	Workshop 2	Workshop 3	General Observations
Functional / Practical Autonomy (self-care, practical life)	Eating, hygiene, dressing, bed, toys; acceptance of imperfection	Eating, toileting, hygiene; adapted environment (stool)	Eating with utensils, dressing, cutting food, expressing bodily needs	Present in all: foundation of autonomy; effort and intention valued, even if imperfect
Emotional Autonomy (confidence, expression of desires, emotional self-regulation)	Expression of desires and emotions; 'I don't want this sweater'; contextualization (home vs. visits)	'First comes confidence and then autonomy'; joy of success; 'No, me'; ability to be alone	'Me, me, me!'; opposition to adults; recognition of needs (hungry/full)	Increased emphasis in Workshops 2 and 3 on confidence and will as emotional preconditions
Cognitive Autonomy	— (does not appear explicitly)	Exploration of real objects; curiosity; scale, small bridge (more sensorimotor)	Interest in letters, words; initiative in learning; aspiration toward 'grown-up things'	Clearly emerges in Workshop 3 → focus on intellectual autonomy and cognitive initiative
Participation in Everyday Life	Cooking (pancakes, barbecue), traditions (Easter); active family role	Household chores: cooking, vacuuming, laundry, setting the table; transfer day care-home	Cooking, cleaning, daily involvement; tensions with adult rhythm	Present in all → seen as responsibility and sense of belonging
Rules and Limits	Curb when crossing street, simple rules → self-regulation	Explicit rules (stairs), safety limits; no gates	Limits around risk (e.g., horse, dangerous objects), negotiation between child's desire and adult protection	All workshops show autonomy as freedom within clear boundaries

Exploration and Risk	Bike without training wheels, diving, water fountain; acceptance of falling	Small bridge, curiosity about objects (scale); moderate risk	Bigger bike, shards, grill, horse → shift from fear to courage	Risk accepted as an engine of autonomy, with discreet supervision
Influence of Older Siblings	Emerges spontaneously: acceleration through imitation; sometimes overprotection	Theme introduced by researcher: confirms imitation and 'well-trodden path'	Central: imitation, negotiation, differentiation; success = validation from older sibling	A transversal theme; in Workshop 3 it becomes relational autonomy
Autonomy as a Collective Experience (Parents)	—	—	Final discussions = validation and mutual support, 'like group therapy'	Emerges only in Workshop 3 → shows Photovoice also fostered parental autonomy

Parents define toddler autonomy not as a single ability but as a complex and multidimensional process, constructed in everyday and relational contexts. The analysis of the highlighted dimensions—practical and functional autonomy, emotional, cognitive, and relational autonomy, participation in family life, environmental exploration, and risk-taking—confirms the specialized literature regarding the progressive and interactional nature of early autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Rogoff, 2003; Sandseter, 2009).

### 1. Autonomy as an Everyday and Relational Experience

Parents illustrated autonomy through simple gestures—eating, dressing, hygiene, participation in household chores—valuing the child’s intention and effort more than the perfection of the act. These practices correspond to the Montessori approach to “*practical life activities*” and indicate parental support oriented toward the process rather than the outcome. At the same time, autonomy is recognized as a relational experience: children assert their desires in opposition to adults, negotiate rules, and imitate older siblings, which confirms the role of social interactions and modeling in the acquisition of independence (Bandura, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978).

### 2. The Balance Between Freedom and Safety

In all workshops, parents emphasized that autonomy does not equal unlimited freedom. It develops within clear, age-appropriate boundaries, while adults provide discreet supervision and calibrated intervention. This perspective reflects recent conceptualizations of autonomy support as a multidimensional practice, which includes flexibility, offering choices, and setting explicit rules (Smetana, 2017).

### **3. The Importance of Emotions, Confidence, and Risk**

Autonomy was also defined through the expression of emotions, the joy of success, and the desire to test limits. Parents recounted situations of moderate risk (bicycles, stairs, encounters with a horse) in which children built courage with the discreet support of the adult. These experiences confirm the role of *risky play* in the development of resilience and self-esteem (Sandseter, 2009).

### **4. The Role of Older Siblings and Family Dynamics**

Older siblings were consistently recognized as accelerators of younger children's autonomy, either through imitation or relational negotiation. At the same time, parents with multiple children admitted that their accumulated experience makes them more relaxed, allowing the younger ones greater freedom. This finding is consistent with the literature on the influence of birth order on development (Howe, Recchia, & Kinsley, 2023).

### **5. Autonomy as a Parental and Community Phenomenon**

Especially in Workshop 3, parents experienced the group setting as a space of validation and normalization of difficulties. Sharing experiences reduced feelings of guilt and strengthened a sense of belonging to a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Thus, Photovoice did not only capture children's autonomy but also facilitated a form of parental autonomy through recognition and mutual support.

The three workshops show that toddler autonomy is a multidimensional reality—practical, emotional, cognitive, relational, and social—constructed at the intersection of the child's initiative, the adult's discreet support, the rules of the family framework, and the influence of siblings. Autonomy is valued by parents as a dynamic, oscillating, and contextual process, where imperfection, trial, and controlled risk are accepted as necessary steps toward independence and responsibility. The conceptual map of toddler autonomy dimensions synthesizes the results of the three Photovoice workshops, highlighting the interconnected and multidimensional nature of this process. At its center lies the general idea of autonomy, radiating into multiple thematic directions.

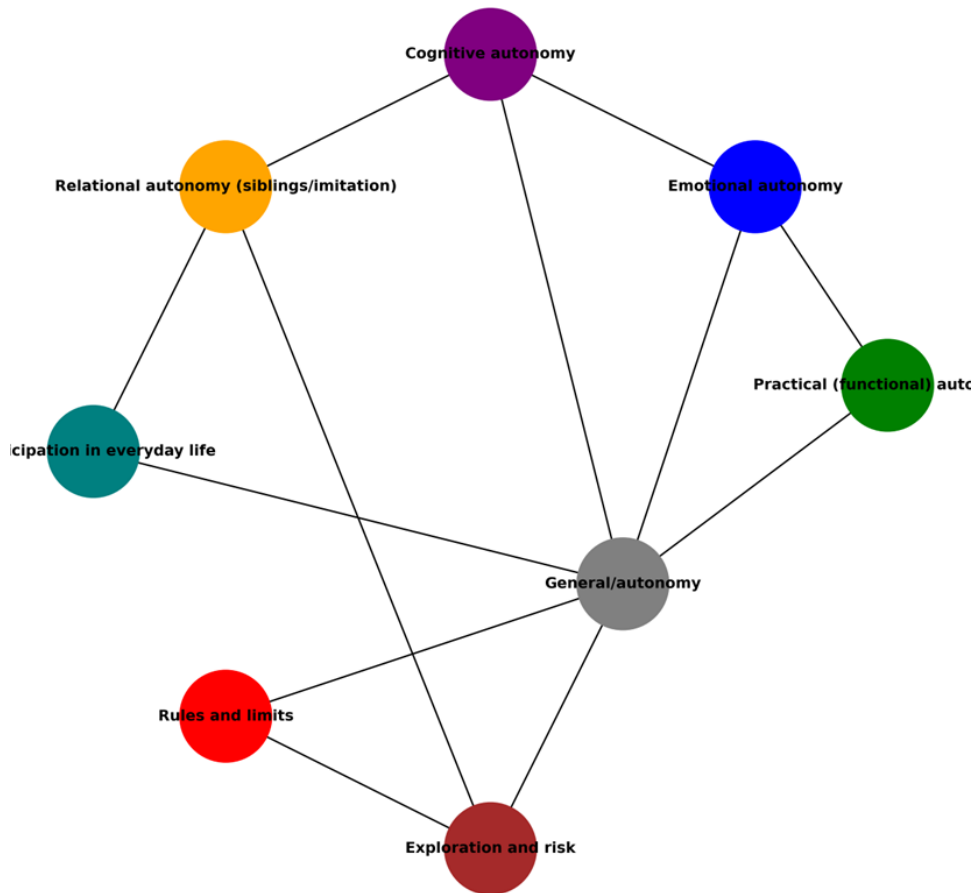


Figure 3. Concept map illustrating the dimensions of young children's autonomy (Synthesis of the 3 Photovoice Workshops).

Practical (functional) autonomy constitutes the foundation and connects with emotional autonomy as well as with participation in everyday life. Thus, simple self-care gestures (eating, dressing, hygiene) become both sources of confidence and emotional joy, and entry points into household tasks and social roles.

Emotional autonomy connects to cognitive autonomy, since confidence and the expression of desires support initiative in exploring ideas, language, and knowledge. In turn, cognitive autonomy is accelerated through interaction with older siblings, illustrating the importance of modeling and imitation relationships.

The relational dimension extends into the area of exploration and risk, where children test their courage and limits, often in parallel with the experiences of siblings. Yet these exploratory behaviors inevitably encounter rules and limits, set by adults to ensure safety and self-regulation. At this point, the central dialectic becomes visible: the child's freedom develops within boundaries of protection and negotiation.

Thus, the map shows that toddler autonomy is not a straight line of progress but a network of connections: practical ↔ emotional ↔ cognitive ↔ relational ↔ exploration/risk ↔ rules and limits. All dimensions intersect and mutually reinforce each other, shaping

autonomy as a complex, relational, and contextualized process, in line with socio-constructivist theories and the literature on early autonomy support.

### Discussion

The structure of the sample—parents predominantly between 35–44 years old, with higher education and mostly raising a second child—directly influences these results. Their high educational level explains their familiarity with pedagogical concepts (choice, self-regulation, intrinsic motivation), while their accumulated experience with multiple children explains their tolerance for imperfection and their appreciation of moderate risk. At the same time, the perspectives of younger parents, those with lower educational levels, or those from rural environments are missing, which limits the generalizability of the findings.

Given the relatively homogeneous profile of the parents included in this research, future directions of exploration could involve including more diverse groups in terms of education, socio-economic background, and culture. Such an expansion would allow for a more comprehensive picture of the multiple ways in which early autonomy is defined and encouraged in different family contexts.

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