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Autonomy of Toddler-Age Children in the Nursery and the Family

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Abstract. Autonomy in early childhood is frequently addressed in the scholarly literature in a reductive manner, being predominantly associated with functional independence or early behavioral acquisitions. The present article proposes a conceptual and theoretical clarification of autonomy in the 0–3 age range, arguing that it represents an emergent, relational, and deeply contextual process. The analysis integrates contributions from developmental psychology, the sociology of childhood, and motivational theories, with a particular focus on Self-Determination Theory, in order to highlight the multidimensional nature of autonomy (functional, socio-emotional, relational, and motivational). The article examines autonomy as the outcome of children's everyday interactions with their primary developmental contexts—the family and the nursery—emphasizing the role of attachment relationships, self-regulatory processes, social participation, and the educational climate in shaping autonomous behaviors. Within this framework, autonomy is conceptualized not as the opposite of dependence, but as the product of sensitive relationships, predictable routines, and contexts that recognize and support children's initiative. Through this integrated approach, the article provides a coherent theoretical framework for interpreting young children's autonomy and argues for moving beyond an instrumental–functional perspective in the analysis of early childhood education.

Keywords. young children's autonomy, early childhood education, toddler (0–3 years), family, nursery (crèche), Self-Determination Theory

1. Introduction

Understanding autonomy in early childhood requires a carefully calibrated conceptual and theoretical approach, as young children's autonomy is not a unitary construct but an emergent process situated at the intersection of neuropsychological development, early relationships, sociocultural dynamics, and the ways in which educational and family environments are organized. The scholarly literature demonstrates that autonomy cannot be reduced to functional achievements or behavioral independence; rather, it encompasses diverse forms of initiative, self-regulation, participation, and relating to others, which develop simultaneously but through distinct mechanisms. Consequently, a rigorous mapping of the theoretical foundations is essential for establishing the conceptual framework within which the autonomous manifestations of toddler-age children in nursery and family contexts will be analyzed.

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The present article aims to clarify these foundations through an integrated approach articulated around four major directions. First, it examines contributions from developmental psychology, which provide a stage-based perspective on autonomy and define the functional, socio-emotional, relational, and self-regulatory dimensions that structure young children's behavior. Second, the sociology of childhood offers a relational and contextual perspective, in which autonomy is understood as a negotiated process emerging from everyday interactions and shaped by generational order and by children's real opportunities for participation. Third, motivational theories—particularly Self-Determination Theory—explain the psychological mechanisms that support or inhibit autonomy through the affective climate and adults' socialization styles. Finally, viewing autonomy as a contextual phenomenon allows these dimensions to be integrated into the analysis of children's concrete living environments—the nursery and the family—thus providing an interpretative framework necessary for subsequent empirical studies.

At the same time, the article proposes an integrated analysis of studies examining how the nursery and the family contribute to the configuration of autonomy in toddler-age children, highlighting how its multiple dimensions—functional, socio-emotional, relational, and motivational—are constructed and articulated within these contexts. Overall, the theoretical perspective developed here provides a coherent and necessary framework for the empirical analysis presented in the subsequent sections of the thesis, ensuring continuity between the conceptual level and the interpretation of field data.

Conceptual clarification of autonomy also requires distinguishing it from two notions that are frequently associated with it in the scholarly literature—independence and self-regulation—which nevertheless denote distinct processes from both a theoretical and a developmental perspective. Traditionally, independence has been understood as the child's ability to carry out certain tasks alone, without the direct support of an adult, such as eating, dressing, manipulating objects, or orienting oneself in space. This perspective has its roots in cognitive developmental theory (Piaget, 1952), in which the child progressively constructs autonomous action schemes, as well as in Erikson's (1963) psychosocial theory, which identifies the 1–3 age period as a critical stage for the assertion of bodily control and personal will. At the cultural level, independence is valued differently across societies: Western cultures tend to privilege early functional achievements, whereas other cultural contexts emphasize interdependence and co-participation (Keller et al., 2004). Thus, independence primarily represents a behavioral competence, characterized by visible and readily observable manifestations.

By contrast, autonomy refers to a deeply psychological and motivational dimension. Within Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), autonomy does not mean doing things alone, but rather experiencing one's actions as self-initiated, self-endorsed, and congruent with the child's own intentions, preferences, and pace. A child may be autonomous even when receiving assistance, provided that the action is experienced as voluntary and its meaning is internalized; conversely, a child may be independent without being autonomous if their behavior is driven by external commands or expectations. Autonomy is therefore a subjective experience of self-determination that emerges within relationships with adults, rather than a technical skill.

The third notion, self-regulation, refers to the process through which the child gradually organizes behavior, emotions, and attention, moving from adult-assisted regulation to internal control. The stage-based model proposed by Kopp (1982) and confirmed by subsequent longitudinal studies (Sroufe, 2005) shows that self-regulation is initially

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externalized—regulated by the adult—and later becomes internalized through practices of co-regulation, predictable routines, and parental sensitivity. Self-regulation thus constitutes the neurological and behavioral foundation of autonomy, but it does not overlap with it: a child may display a high level of behavioral control without exhibiting motivational autonomy if their actions are driven by conformity or fear of sanction.

2. Conceptual Framework of Autonomy

The concept of autonomy has a complex conceptual history, marked by significant transformations in both its meaning and its domains of application. Etymologically, the term derives from the Greek autonomos, formed from autos ("self") and nomos ("law"), and originally denoted the capacity of a city-state or political collective to govern itself in accordance with its own laws. In this original sense, autonomy was a strictly political category, referring to the independence of a community and its right to establish norms without external interference; it was an attribute of political entities rather than of persons. A major conceptual transformation emerged during the Enlightenment, particularly in the eighteenth century, through Kantian moral philosophy. In Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals and Critique of Practical Reason, Kant develops a theory of moral autonomy, defined as self-legislation in accordance with the moral law formulated universally by reason. For Kant, an agent is autonomous not when acting according to personal desires, but when acting in accordance with a moral principle that could be willed as universally valid (Kant, 1785/2007). This reconceptualization marks the moment when autonomy acquires a normative meaning as moral self-legislation, in opposition to heteronomy—that is, submission to impulses, interests, or external authorities.

However, individual autonomy in a psychological or social sense does not become firmly established until the nineteenth century, when the term begins to be used—gradually and unevenly—to denote a person's capacity to make decisions, to orient their actions, and to exercise control over their own life (Darwall, 2006). This shift is linked to the emergence of modern individualism, the development of psychology as a discipline, and the increasing emphasis on subjectivity, personal freedom, and the formation of the will. During this period, autonomy comes to be understood as a psychological property, not merely a moral one, and is associated with notions such as will, intentionality, individual responsibility, and self-determination. The twentieth century marks a significant expansion of the concept, alongside the emergence of psychological and sociological theories of human development. In psychology, autonomy is reinterpreted as a developmental process, connected to neurocognitive maturation, the transition from dependence to active participation, and the formation of identity. Psychoanalysis, developmental psychology, learning theories, and more recently motivational theories—such as Self-Determination Theory—redefine autonomy as a multidimensional construct that goes beyond the simple distinction between dependence and independence. Autonomy thus becomes the individual's capacity to initiate actions, to regulate behavior, and to coordinate intentions in accordance with the relational and social environment.

In parallel, the sociology of childhood introduces another conceptual shift by situating autonomy within power relations, social participation, and the status of the child as a competent social actor. From this perspective, autonomy is not a predefined internal property but the outcome of processes of interaction, recognition, and negotiation within the social space.

In recent decades, autonomy has become an interdisciplinary framework concept, with applications in education, medicine, applied ethics, law, and childhood studies. Its contemporary meaning integrates these multiple dimensions: autonomy is understood both as

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moral self-determination (in the Kantian tradition), as a psychological capacity to initiate action, and as a social right to participation and recognition. The historical evolution of the concept of autonomy thus highlights a shift from a politico-legal notion to a moral one, then to a psychological construct, and finally to a socio-relational understanding. This trajectory accounts for the diversity of its current meanings and underscores the need for conceptual clarification in any academic inquiry that employs the concept.

3. Theoretical Perspectives on Autonomy

3.1 Autonomy from a Developmental Psychology Perspective

In developmental psychology, autonomy is conceptualized as an emergent and gradual process that is constructed through the interaction between neuropsychological maturation, early caregiving experiences, and diverse social contexts. In contrast to traditional views that equated autonomy with physical independence or with the absence of dependence on adults, contemporary approaches define autonomy as the child's capacity to initiate, organize, and regulate actions in accordance with their own intentions and needs, within the context of secure attachment relationships and environments that provide appropriate opportunities for participation and exploration (Sroufe, 2005; Thompson, 2011). Autonomy is thus understood as an evolutionary process rather than a final product, reflecting a gradual transition from assisted self-regulation to internal self-regulation.

3.2 Autonomy as a Stage-Based Developmental Process: Piaget and Erikson

One of the earliest formulations of autonomy in developmental psychology is attributed to Piaget (1952), who describes how, during the sensorimotor stage, the child moves from reflexive actions to intentional schemes and to the coordination of means and ends. This emergence of intentionality constitutes the first level of functional autonomy: the child becomes capable of initiating actions independently, correcting errors, exploring the environment, and demonstrating active curiosity. From a Piagetian perspective, autonomy is closely linked to cognitive development and is supported through direct action on the environment and the continuous restructuring of mental schemes. Erikson (1963) offers another fundamental contribution by placing autonomy at the center of the second psychosocial stage, "autonomy versus shame and doubt," corresponding to the 1–3 age period. Here, autonomy is not conceptualized in cognitive terms, but rather as the assertion of will through bodily control, self-care, and exploration. The child experiences an emerging sense of will ("I can") when adults provide space for independent action and validate the child's initiatives. When adults are excessively intrusive, critical, or restrictive, the child internalizes experiences of shame, which may later affect feelings of efficacy and self-determination. In Erikson's view, autonomy is inseparable from the relational context that supports it.

3.3 Dimensions of Toddler Autonomy

To move beyond reductive interpretations that associate autonomy exclusively with behavioral independence, the developmental psychology literature proposes a nuanced understanding of autonomy as a complex and stratified phenomenon. Autonomy in toddler-age children cannot be reduced to the ability to "do things alone," but instead encompasses interconnected processes involving motor, emotional, relational, and motivational development, all of which emerge through everyday interactions with adults and with the environment. This multidimensional approach makes it possible to capture the diverse ways in which young children initiate, regulate, and coordinate actions in relation to their own

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intentions, as well as in response to the support, sensitivity, and structure provided by developmental contexts. Within this framework, distinguishing between different facets of autonomy becomes fundamental for the analysis of early developmental processes.

For this reason, the analysis of autonomy development requires distinguishing between functional autonomy, related to independent actions and self-care; socio-emotional autonomy, associated with emotion regulation and the expression of preferences; and relational autonomy, which is formed through interactions with others via participation and negotiation. In the scholarly literature, these dimensions of autonomy are viewed as interdependent processes that develop simultaneously, yet through mechanisms specific to each level.

Functional autonomy refers to the child's capacity to carry out self-care activities and independent exploration—such as eating, dressing, manipulating objects, or orienting in space—competencies that are grounded in the sensorimotor development described by Piaget (1952) and in the assertion of will characteristic of Erikson's (1963) stage of "autonomy versus shame and doubt." During this stage, the child gradually constructs the action schemes necessary for performing everyday tasks, moving from involuntary gestures to deliberate, goal-directed actions. Active exploration of the environment becomes the primary driver of functional development, as repeated attempts enable the child to discover causal relationships, refine coordination, and develop initiative in relation to surrounding objects and spaces**.** Functional autonomy is also supported by the accessibility of the environment: adapted furniture, objects that are easy to manipulate, predictable routines, and sufficient time to practice self-care tasks all contribute to strengthening the child's sense of competence. In this respect, educational approaches such as Montessori emphasize the importance of the "prepared environment," in which the child can act autonomously without intrusive adult intervention, and materials are designed to invite exploration, repetition, and self-correction. This framework allows the child to practice fine and gross motor movements, adjust intentions in response to feedback from objects, and develop an active relationship with the physical environment—elements that are essential for the formation of solid functional autonomy.

The development of functional autonomy is also closely linked to the support provided by adults. Sensitivity, an adapted pace, and non-intrusive guidance are crucial in ensuring that the child's initiatives are encouraged rather than replaced by adult action. When children are given the opportunity to try on their own, to make mistakes, and to try again, they strengthen both their motor skills and their sense of personal efficacy, thereby creating the psychological foundation for more complex forms of autonomy in subsequent years.

Socio-emotional autonomy refers to the ways in which the child expresses preferences, manages frustration, tolerates separation, and gradually regulates emotions; this dimension is deeply rooted in the quality of attachment relationships and in early co-regulation processes (Ainsworth, 1979; Sroufe, 2005; Thompson, 2011). In the first years of life, children do not yet possess stable internal mechanisms of emotional regulation and therefore depend on adults to help organize their affective responses and to learn appropriate ways of managing emotional intensity. Sensitive, available, and predictable adults function as an external regulatory system that alleviates the child's distress, validates emotional states, and supports a return to an optimal level of functioning. Through repeated experiences of co-regulation, children gradually internalize self-regulatory strategies that they can later employ in the absence of direct adult support. A child with secure attachment, as demonstrated in Ainsworth's (1979) work, shows a greater capacity for exploration and increased tolerance of separation, because the child knows that the adult is available and responsive. By contrast, relational insecurity may lead to heightened or inhibited emotional expressions, thereby affecting the quality of

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autonomous behaviors. Sroufe (2005) emphasizes that the development of socio-emotional autonomy depends on how children have experienced emotional regulation within early relationships: a caregiving climate that provides comfort, predictability, and guidance helps children develop the capacity to manage frustration, anger, anxiety, or joy in a coherent and contextually appropriate manner.

At the same time, socio-emotional autonomy also includes the child's ability to express preferences in a clear and age-appropriate manner, as well as the capacity to negotiate small decisions or to indicate a desire for a particular object, activity, or play partner. Practicing these behaviors represents a crucial stage in the transition from total emotional dependence to flexible and self-regulated emotional functioning. Daily routines in both the family and the nursery provide a privileged context for the expression of socio-emotional autonomy: transitions, mealtimes, free play, and interactions with other children create situations in which the child can learn to tolerate waiting, manage conflicts, express boundaries, and accept alternatives.

The development of socio-emotional autonomy is therefore possible only within caregiving relationships characterized by sensitivity, acceptance, and support. Adults do not merely "allow" autonomy; they actively shape it through their own emotional responses. Tone of voice, pacing, affective expression, and the willingness to withdraw or intensify support directly influence the child's capacity for self-regulation. Socio-emotional autonomy is thus not an individual attribute, but a relational process co-constructed through repeated and meaningful interactions.

Relational autonomy highlights the fact that the development of autonomy does not occur outside of relationships, but is constituted within them: children negotiate routines, participate in interactions, cooperate, and gradually assert their own perspectives within sensitive and supportive relationships, in line with sociocultural theories of guided participation (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2003). From this perspective, autonomy is not opposed to dependence, but rather emerges from relationships that provide emotional security, validation, and opportunities for participation. Children become autonomous not through isolation from adults, but through joint participation with them in everyday activities, where they learn to express their intentions, interpret the intentions of others, and co-construct solutions.

In early interactions, autonomy is expressed through behaviors such as initiating play, actively requesting help, expressing refusals through emotional or nonverbal cues, and taking on roles within group activities. These behaviors reflect the deeply relational nature of autonomy: children act upon the environment and upon others, but always within a network of relationships that shapes their intentions, pace, and opportunities for action. In Rogoff's (2003) view, children participate in "communities of practice" in which emergent autonomy is formed through co-construction, imitation, collaboration, and the adaptation of initiatives to group dynamics. At the same time, relational autonomy also entails the capacity to negotiate limits, to cooperate, and to adjust behavior in response to others' reactions. Young children learn, for example, to wait their turn, to share objects, to respond to invitations to play, or to protest when a rule appears unclear to them. These interactions are not merely social exercises, but moments in which children learn to articulate their perspectives and to sustain their intentions in socially acceptable ways.

Because each relationship offers different opportunities for participation, relational autonomy develops in differentiated ways, depending on adults' availability and interaction styles, the socio-emotional climate of the group, and the institutional rules that structure everyday life. Relationships characterized by sensitivity, dialogue, reciprocity, and openness facilitate the affirmation of children's autonomy, whereas relationships marked by excessive

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control, haste, interruption of initiative, or lack of responsiveness constrain the development of this dimension. Relational autonomy is thus a profoundly contextual process, dependent on the quality and structure of the interactions in which the child is involved.

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An essential concept for understanding relational autonomy within the sociocultural tradition is the zone of proximal development (ZPD), defined by Vygotsky (1978) as the distance between the child's actual level of development—what the child can accomplish independently—and the potential level of development, which is accessible only with the support of a more competent other. Emergent autonomy develops precisely within this dynamic zone, where the child, supported by a sensitive adult or an older child, succeeds in completing tasks that could not be accomplished independently. Appropriate support (scaffolding) enables the child to gradually internalize action strategies, rules of participation, and modes of social coordination, thereby transforming assisted competence into autonomous capacity. In this sense, autonomy does not represent an immediate step toward independence, but rather the outcome of a sequence of activities carried out within the ZPD, in which adult support is progressively reduced as the child acquires the necessary competencies. Participation in shared activities—such as meal preparation, dressing, transitions, and rule-based games—provides a privileged context for these processes, as children learn to interpret others' intentions, adjust their own actions, and collaborate in a coordinated manner. By integrating the concept of the ZPD, relational autonomy can be understood as a process through which children gradually expand their capacities through guided participation, progressively internalizing forms of action, social rules, and modes of collaboration, thereby transforming external supervision into self-regulation and personal intentionality.

These three dimensions should not be viewed as separate entities, but rather as complementary expressions of a unified developmental process through which the toddler gradually learns to coordinate actions, emotions, intentions, and relationships in a coherent and contextually appropriate manner.

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3.4. Autonomy and Attachment Theory: The Secure Base for Exploration

Attachment theory brought a major shift in the understanding of autonomy by demonstrating that independence is not opposed to dependence, but rather derives from a secure relationship with the attachment figure. Ainsworth (1979) empirically showed, through the Strange Situation study, that securely attached infants explore their environment more actively, display greater persistence in tasks, and regulate stress more effectively, using their caregiver as a "secure base" for exploration. This secure base represents not merely a physical presence, but above all an emotional resource: securely attached children can move away from their attachment figure to explore the world, knowing that they can return to that figure in moments of discomfort, fear, or uncertainty.

Bowlby (1988) emphasizes that autonomy is possible only when early dependence is met with sensitivity, predictability, and consistency, as this relational security enables the child to tolerate frustration, venture into new situations, and take moderate risks. In the absence of secure attachment, the child may either become excessively dependent on the adult, avoiding exploration, or adopt a form of apparent independence that is rigid and defensive, resulting from a lack of emotional support. Autonomy therefore does not develop through distancing from the adult, but through a relationship of trust that provides the child with the psychological freedom necessary for initiative. Early co-regulation processes are essential for understanding this dynamic. In the first months of life, children regulate their emotions through adults' responses: tone of voice, pacing, soothing gestures, and behavioral consistency become the means through which distress is reduced and well-being is restored. Repeated experiences of this kind lead to the internalization of emotional regulation strategies, allowing the child to gradually transition from assisted self-regulation to autonomous self-regulation (Sroufe, 2005). Within this process, autonomy is not conceptualized as a rupture from the adult, but as an expansion of the child's capacities within a supportive relationship calibrated to the child's needs.

Moreover, secure attachment facilitates the development of self-confidence, a sense of self-efficacy, and the capacity to manage challenging situations. Children who benefit from a stable relational environment are more likely to initiate play, accept moderate challenges, tolerate frustration, and persist in difficult tasks. All of these behaviors are indicators of emergent autonomy. Attachment theory therefore provides a fundamental perspective on autonomy in early childhood: the development of autonomy is a consequence of relational security, and independent exploration becomes possible precisely because early dependence has been managed in a sensitive and responsive manner.

3.5 *Autonomy as an Emergent Form of Self-Regulation*

From the perspective of contemporary developmental psychology, autonomy is understood as the outcome of a progressive process of internal organization of behaviors, emotions, and intentions, a process referred to as self-regulation. Kopp (1982) conceptualizes self-regulation as a construct that develops in stages, describing a three-stage process: dependent regulation, in which the adult provides almost complete behavioral control; self-control, when the child can inhibit actions in response to adult requests; and self-regulation, when the child initiates, maintains, and terminates behaviors in the absence of direct supervision. Autonomy begins to take shape in the transition from the second to the third stage and is closely linked to the child's ability to organize emotions, attention, and behavior. In the first months and years of life, children regulate emotional states and behavior only through external adult support; over time, as co-regulatory strategies are repeatedly experienced, they

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are gradually internalized, enabling children to initiate, maintain, and inhibit behaviors without direct supervision.

The perspective proposed by Kopp is reinforced by Sroufe's (2005) Minnesota longitudinal study, which demonstrates that self-regulation is not an exclusively internal mechanism, but rather a relational construction that develops through repeated experiences of emotional regulation within caregiving relationships. Autonomy thus does not result from the child's isolation or from a reduction in adult support, but from a gradual transition from co-constructed regulation to the independent management of emotions, attention, and behavior. This developmental process enables the child to progressively internalize emotion-regulation strategies, moving from assisted self-regulation to autonomous emotional control. The quality of adults' responses—sensitivity, predictability, and emotional availability—decisively influences both the timing and the manner in which children become capable of organizing their actions in accordance with their own intentions.

Thompson (2011) argues that this transition depends to a large extent on adults' sensitivity and the consistency of routines, which provide children with predictability, security, and opportunities to practice simple decision-making. Autonomy is therefore inextricably linked to the quality of early interactions, parenting styles, and the emotional climate in which the child develops.

Within this framework, autonomy becomes a multifaceted process: functional autonomy—self-care, independent manipulation of objects, and exploration; socio-emotional autonomy—the expression of preferences, emotion regulation, and gradual separation from the adult; relational autonomy—participation, negotiation, and cooperation within relationships; and motivational autonomy—acting in accordance with one's own intentions, initiative, and intrinsic motivation. Such a multidimensional conceptualization provides a robust analytical framework for the study of autonomy in early childhood, enabling a nuanced identification and interpretation of the diverse ways in which autonomy is expressed in everyday situations within the nursery and the family.

4. Autonomy from a Sociology of Childhood Perspective

The sociological perspective on childhood proposes a reconceptualization of autonomy, viewing it not as an internal characteristic of the individual, but as a relational process that emerges from the child's positioning within social structures and from their role as a competent social actor. Within this approach, biological mechanisms or intrapsychic processes are not considered sufficient to explain autonomy; instead, the emphasis shifts to the ways in which children construct autonomous capacities through everyday interactions, participation in group activities, and the dynamic negotiation of relationships with adults and with other children.

Alanen (2001, 2009) introduces the concept of generational order, which describes the ways in which societies structure relationships between children and adults in terms of power, responsibility, and the distribution of rights. From this perspective, children's autonomy depends on their positioning within the generational relationship: access to autonomy is conditioned by the status of being a "child" in a given culture, by social norms regarding obedience and adult authority, and by values related to children's participation. In societies where children are viewed as competent members of the community, autonomy is encouraged through participation in decision-making, shared activities, routines, and responsibilities; in societies characterized by more rigid structures of authority, autonomy is more strongly constrained.

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An essential point of departure is the recognition of the child as an active social subject, an idea central to Corsaro's (2018) work. He argues that autonomy is constructed through processes of interpretive reproduction, that is, through the ways in which children appropriate, interpret, and transform adults' social practices and norms within their own contexts of interaction. Children are not passive recipients of culture, but participants who contribute to the social world in ways specific to childhood. From this perspective, autonomy is not the result of individual abilities alone, but emerges from children's participation in the social world, from their capacity to influence everyday interactions, and from their ability to negotiate meanings and rules in relationships with others.

Mayall (2002) makes a significant contribution by analyzing the child as a "subject of rights" and as a competent social agent, emphasizing that autonomy cannot be understood outside the institutional contexts in which children live—family, school, nursery, and community. Through their rules and practices, institutions shape children's opportunities to participate, to make decisions, and to influence the activities in which they are involved. Autonomy thus becomes an emergent construct arising from the interaction between institutional structures, power relations, and the dynamics of everyday interactions.

The introduction of the concept of agency in the sociology of childhood produced a significant epistemological reorientation away from traditional models in which the child was predominantly described as dependent, underdeveloped, or oriented exclusively toward the future. The sociology of childhood proposed a paradigm shift by portraying the child as a social actor who participates, initiates, interprets, and transforms the interactions in which they are involved. This perspective has profoundly influenced the way autonomy is understood in early childhood, as agency provides the conceptual framework necessary to analyze the child not merely as a recipient of socialization, but as an active participant in the construction of their own social life. Although the terms autonomy and agency are sometimes conceptually conflated, they refer to distinct constructs. In the sociology of childhood, agency refers to the child's capacity to act intentionally, to influence situations and people around them, and to negotiate meanings in everyday interactions (James & James, 2004). Autonomy, by contrast, represents the form of agency that is recognized, legitimized, and accepted within a given social or institutional context (Mayall, 2002). While agency denotes the child's potential to act, autonomy refers to the expression of that potential under conditions of permission, support, and openness provided by adults and institutions. From this perspective, autonomy depends on the sociocultural context, the structure of child–adult relationships, and the norms that regulate children's status across different living environments.

Recent literature has substantially expanded the understanding of children's agency, moving beyond the classical interactionist framework. A decisive contribution is provided by the work of Spyrou (2018, 2019), Warming (2019), and Huf and Kluge (2021), who argue that agency cannot be reduced to children's intentionality or individual abilities. Instead, they propose a relational perspective in which agency emerges from the interaction between the child, other actors, the material environment, objects, sounds, affects, and everyday routines.

This approach is closely connected to Karen Barad's (2007) theory of agential realism, which posits that agency is not an individual property but an emergent effect of entanglements between the human and the non-human—bodies, spaces, objects, rhythms, and atmospheres. From this perspective, agency does not reside "within the child," but is produced through the child's relationships with their world. Applied to early childhood, this framework offers a far more nuanced understanding of how young children express themselves, explore, and negotiate everyday situations. In the first months or years of life, agency can be observed in gestures,

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gazes, and bodily movements; in the reconfiguration of play spaces; in subtle or explicit forms of resistance to routines; in solidarities among children; and in the creative transformation of objects and materials.

Research on early childhood (Degotardi & Page, 2017) shows that infants and young children actively contribute to the social structure of the group and influence adults' behaviors, even in the absence of verbal language. The authors emphasize that infants are not passive recipients of interactions, but competent participants who are able to express their intentions through nonverbal means such as gaze, facial expressions, gestures, bodily rhythm, or the ways in which they manipulate objects. These early forms of communication shape adults' responses and configure recurrent interactive patterns within caregiving relationships.

Moreover, their studies show that infants are sensitive to adults' affective availability and are able to adjust the intensity of their signals—such as smiling, vocalizations, reaching out, or withdrawal—in order to initiate, maintain, or interrupt interactions. In this sense, agency does not depend on verbal language, but is expressed through the child's capacity to orient adults' attention, to invite participation, or to establish boundaries. Complementary research (Trevarthen, 2011; Murray & Trevarthen, 2016) supports this perspective, demonstrating that from the very first months of life children engage in forms of primary intersubjectivity, in which rhythmic, expressive, and affective exchanges become the foundation of complex social relationships. Within these interactions, young children influence the rhythm, emotional tone, and direction of communication, indicating a form of emergent agency that is deeply relational. In addition, the work of White and Redder (2015) shows how young children use objects and spaces to structure interactions: they pull objects along with them to invite an adult, position themselves strategically to gain visibility, or engage in play characterized by shared intention. In this way, materiality becomes an agentic resource rather than an inert background.

The study conducted by Ulrich Hygum and Hygum (2023) in Romanian nurseries provides a detailed empirical illustration of young children's agency. Moving beyond traditional classifications, the authors show that agency is consistently expressed in everyday situations such as floor play, mealtimes, transitions between activities, waiting, outdoor time, and peer relationships. Children transform spaces, test boundaries, form solidarities with one another, seek or avoid adults' attention, negotiate the pace of activities, and reinterpret objects in ways not anticipated by adults. The perspective of the article is deeply relational: agency emerges at the intersection of children's intentions, institutional rules, educators' availability, the materiality of space, group dynamics, and soundscapes. The authors further demonstrate that early autonomy is not the outcome of individual competence alone, but of an institutional environment that either provides—or constrains—children's opportunities for action. Thus, the study not only documents agency, but also highlights that young children's autonomy results from continuous negotiation between children's initiatives and the institutional structures within which these initiatives unfold.

All of this convergent literature demonstrates that agency in early childhood is a bodily, affective, and sociomaterial process through which children contribute to the organization of group life, negotiate attention and emotional regulation, and generate forms of participation that are adapted to their age-related competencies.

5. Autonomy in Motivational Theories – Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Ryan and Deci (2000, 2017), represents one of the most influential and robust contemporary theories of motivation, development, and optimal human functioning. Within this theoretical framework, autonomy is

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one of three universal psychological needs, alongside competence and relatedness. These needs are considered essential for healthy development, intrinsic motivation, and psychological well-being.

- **Autonomy** refers to experiencing one's actions as self-initiated and self-endorsed.
- **Competence** involves a sense of effectiveness and the ability to influence outcomes.
- **Relatedness** entails meaningful emotional connections and a sense of belonging.

For Ryan and Deci, autonomy does not refer to unlimited freedom or the absence of constraints, but to the quality of subjective experience: children feel autonomous when their actions are experienced as initiated and supported by their own will, rather than imposed from external sources. From an SDT perspective, autonomy is inseparable from the social context, as its development depends decisively on adults' behaviors. Interactions with parents and educators can either support or inhibit children's autonomy, depending on the characteristics of the relational climate. An autonomy-supportive context is one in which adults provide children with real choices, validate their emotions and perspectives, explain the meaning of rules in simple terms, and maintain a warm, predictable, and non-directive affective atmosphere. Such practices allow children to feel understood, competent, and involved, thereby fostering initiative, exploration, and the internalization of rules. By contrast, a controlling climate—characterized by reliance on sanctions, external pressure, rigid directives, or conditional rewards—constrains autonomy by leading children to act out of conformity or fear of disapproval rather than from internal conviction. Research shows that controlling styles are associated with reduced intrinsic motivation and poorer self-regulation (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989).

Self-Determination Theory also conceptualizes autonomy as a process of the gradual internalization of social values and rules. Children become autonomous not through distancing from adults, but through the meaningful and progressive integration of the motives underlying their actions. When rules are justified, when children are consulted, and when their needs are acknowledged, they come to perceive these rules as reasonable and relevant. Internalization facilitates the transition from passive compliance to self-regulation, thereby consolidating autonomy as a mode of psychological functioning. In the absence of such a process, children's behaviors remain dependent on external pressures and do not develop into stable autonomous competencies.

In early childhood, autonomy is expressed in age-appropriate forms, and Self-Determination Theory provides a theoretical framework for interpreting these manifestations. In toddler-age children, autonomy does not involve complex choices or elaborated verbal self-determination, but is reflected in the initiation of actions, independent exploration, the expression of preferences, resistance to intrusive adult interventions, and active, intentional participation in daily routines. Research indicates that an autonomy-supportive climate fosters children's task persistence, emotional flexibility, cooperation, and exploratory curiosity (Joussemet et al., 2005).

The benefits of supporting autonomy are confirmed by numerous empirical studies. Children who grow up in autonomy-supportive contexts display higher levels of intrinsic motivation, greater emotional self-regulation, higher-quality relationships with adults, and deeper engagement in learning (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Bernier et al., 2010). By contrast, educational or family contexts characterized by excessive control, rushed routines, or the interruption of children's initiatives can inhibit the development of autonomy and create difficulties in behavioral and emotional regulation.

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In early childhood education settings, the application of SDT principles has direct implications for the organization of space, the management of routines, and the ways adults interact with children. An accessible, balanced, predictable, and participation-oriented environment provides children with the necessary framework for expressing intentionality. Offering age-appropriate choices, encouraging initiative, allowing sufficient time during transitions, listening to children's perspectives, and providing non-intrusive guidance are educational practices that support autonomy and, implicitly, the development of autonomous motivation.

6. Autonomy as a Contextual Process

6.1 The Role of the Family in Children's Development

The family represents the child's first and most influential developmental context, the space in which the earliest forms of autonomy, self-regulation, and participation take shape. In the first years of life, relationships with parents profoundly shape the ways in which children express their intentions, manage emotions, and learn to coordinate their actions in accordance with the rules and values of their immediate social environment. The scholarly literature emphasizes that parenting practices—such as sensitivity, emotional availability, the organization of daily routines, communication styles, and expectations regarding independence—directly influence the development of early autonomy (Bornstein, 2015; Joussemet et al., 2008; Bernier et al., 2010). In this sense, autonomy is not merely an outcome of children's maturation, but a relational and contextual process, co-constructed through everyday interactions between children and adults. The family provides both the emotional security necessary for exploration and the concrete opportunities for participation, choice-making, assumption of responsibilities, and understanding of rules. Consequently, examining the role of the family is essential for understanding how the different dimensions of autonomy are formed and expressed in early childhood.

Autonomy and Rule Internalization in Toddlerhood

The internalization of rules—the process through which children come to adopt socially desirable behaviors or to inhibit prohibited behaviors in the absence of direct supervision—represents a central component of social integration and psychosocial adjustment in early childhood (Joussemet et al., 2005; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Roth et al., 2009). From a developmental perspective, parents seek for young children to cooperate and to comply with family and social rules; however, research shows that promoting absolute conformity or rigid obedience can have negative effects on children's individuality, the development of autonomy, and psychological well-being (Dix et al., 2007). Consequently, the way adults formulate requests, limits, and prohibitions becomes essential: the challenge lies in simultaneously fostering children's cooperation and autonomy, while avoiding both excessive permissiveness and intrusive control.

In the literature grounded in Self-Determination Theory, autonomy support is described through four fundamental mechanisms that facilitate the internalization of rules and the responsible adoption of behaviors (Deci et al., 1991). The first mechanism involves providing meaningful rationales, which enable children to understand the purpose of a rule and its personal relevance. For example, explaining that toys left on the floor may become damaged or could cause someone to get hurt transforms the rule into a reasonable standard rather than an arbitrary constraint. The second mechanism is empathy, defined as the recognition and validation of children's emotions and desires (Koestner et al., 1984). When children feel that their perspective is acknowledged, resistance to requests decreases and willingness to cooperate

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increases. A third mechanism involves offering choices, through which children can decide between possible alternatives within the same task, thereby encouraging initiative and a sense of control (Deci et al., 1991). This does not entail unlimited freedom, but rather the opportunity to choose how a requirement is fulfilled—for example, "Do you want to put the toys in the blue box or in the green one?" Finally, the fourth mechanism concerns the way requests are formulated, namely the tone and vocabulary that can either intensify pressure ("you must," "do it now because I say so") or support autonomy through cooperative, respectful, and non-intrusive communication. This latter category also resonates with the notion of agency articulated by Ulrich Hygum and Hygum (2023), who define children's action as a "dynamic relationship between emotions, intentions, and actions within specific domains."

The process of internalization typically begins with an explicit request formulated by the parent and gradually evolves into the transformation of the rule into an internal standard of behavior (Forman, 2007). In early childhood, internalization is often assessed through types of compliance (Blandon & Volling, 2008; Feldman & Klein, 2003). A central indicator is committed compliance, in which the child voluntarily aligns with the adult's expectations without reminders or additional pressure, thereby establishing the foundation for the autonomous acceptance of rules (Kochanska & Aksan, 2006).

The quality of parent–child interactions plays a decisive role in supporting internalization. Positive guidance—characterized by explanations, encouragement, suggestions, and open-ended questions—directs the child toward understanding the meaning of actions and toward active participation in tasks. By contrast, negative control, defined by critical, corrective, or intrusive interventions (Deater-Deckard, 2000), inhibits children's initiative and leads to superficial compliance that remains dependent on the adult's presence. A classic example—the adult taking a LEGO piece from the child's hand in order to place it "correctly"—illustrates how excessive control undermines the child's intentionality and reduces opportunities for autonomous exploration. According to Soenens et al. (2007), low levels of negative control constitute an indicator of autonomy support. A parental climate in which rigid directives, criticism, and physical constraints are rare allows children to perceive adults' requests as reasonable and compatible with their own intentions, thereby facilitating the internalization of rules. In such contexts, children are more likely to develop autonomous motivation, to display initiative, and to cooperate without external pressure.

Another crucial aspect is parental responsiveness, defined as sensitivity to children's signals, prompt responding, and adjustment to their intentions (Baumrind, 1991; Merz et al., 2017). Responsive parents attend to both children's verbal and nonverbal communications (Deater-Deckard et al., 1997). For example, when a child expresses a desire to build something, a responsive parent does not merely acknowledge the intention ("Okay!"), but expands it through an open-ended question ("What kind of animal?"), inviting the child to clarify and extend their initiative. Overall, research consistently demonstrates that autonomy support facilitates deep internalization of rules and the development of self-regulation, whereas excessive control and a lack of relational sensitivity generate fragile compliance, resistance, and difficulties in self-regulation.

The model of autonomy as internalization thus provides an important explanatory framework for analyzing parenting practices and for interpreting variations in the development of autonomous behavior in early childhood.

a) Parents' Support for Children's Autonomy

Parental support for autonomy is conceptualized in the scholarly literature as a multidimensional construct that integrates a variety of behaviors, interaction strategies, and

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socialization practices through which adults facilitate young children's initiative, self-regulation, and competence (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Grolnick et al., 2002). In early childhood, parents constitute the child's first learning environment and primary behavioral model, and the ways in which they respond to children's needs, set limits, manage routines, or provide opportunities for action decisively influence how children learn to act independently, express their intentions, and internalize social rules.

Parental behaviors are not merely sources of imitation, but function as forms of social mediation that structure how children relate to the world. In this capacity, the parent fulfills a dual role: that of a protector, who responds promptly to the child's needs, and that of a facilitator, who gradually withdraws in order to allow the child to practice emerging competencies. The balance between these two dimensions—sensitivity and the promotion of autonomy—is essential for children to develop both secure attachment and the capacity for self-regulation and independent exploration.

Studies on autonomy support have predominantly employed observational methods to capture parental behaviors in naturalistic contexts, as well as interviews, case studies, and cross-cultural analyses aimed at highlighting parental variations according to cultural values, norms, and practices. The convergence of these lines of research indicates that autonomy support is not a uniform practice, but rather a culturally situated set of behaviors that may vary significantly across societies depending on prevailing conceptions of childhood, education, and independence.

Parenting styles constitute a major framework for understanding how parents facilitate or constrain the development of children's autonomy. The classic classification proposed by Baumrind (1966, 1991), later extended by Maccoby and Martin (1983), distinguishes between parenting styles along two fundamental dimensions: responsiveness (sensitivity, warmth, emotional availability) and control (structure, expectations, and level of demand). The combination of these two dimensions has direct implications for the ways in which children develop functional, emotional, and motivational autonomy. The authoritative parenting style, characterized by a balance between warmth and structure, is considered the most conducive to the development of autonomy. Authoritative parents set clear limits while supporting their children through explanations, reasoning, the provision of choices, and the validation of emotions—behaviors that are congruent with autonomy support from a Self-Determination Theory perspective (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). In this context, children internalize rules not through external pressure, but through understanding their meaning, which fosters self-regulation, initiative, and autonomous cooperation (Joussemet et al., 2005). By contrast, the authoritarian parenting style, defined by high control and low responsiveness, promotes obedience but inhibits the autonomous internalization of rules. Intrusive control, pressure, criticism, or sanctions lead children to comply out of fear or dependence rather than internal conviction (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). Research shows that in such contexts, children develop lower levels of intrinsic motivation, reduced tolerance for frustration, and a fragile form of autonomy that remains contingent on the adult's presence (Kochanska & Aksan, 2006). By contrast, the permissive parenting style, characterized by high responsiveness and low control, offers children freedom but does not provide the structure necessary for the development of self-regulation and responsibility. The lack of clear rules, limits, and guidance may lead to difficulties in the internalization of norms and to behavioral inconsistency, as autonomy cannot emerge in the absence of a predictable framework within which children can practice responsibility. The neglectful/uninvolved parenting style, defined by low responsiveness and low control, represents the most unfavorable context for the development of autonomy, as

children benefit from neither emotional support nor the structure required for exploration, self-regulation, or internalization.

Therefore, parenting styles influence autonomy not only through what parents ask of their children, but also through how they formulate, explain, support, and structure these requests. Autonomy is not fostered by the absence of limits or by forced independence, but by a balance between sensitivity and structure, between guidance and controlled freedom. In this sense, the authoritative parenting style represents the optimal context for the development of authentic autonomy, as it combines emotional support with calibrated expectations, providing the framework necessary for toddlers to gradually and securely develop initiative, will, and self-regulation. Parental education, understood as the development of parents' competencies in supporting children, has been shown to be a major factor in early cognitive, socio-emotional, and moral development. Parents who are sensitive, emotionally available, and able to provide explanations, choices, and encouragement foster a form of autonomous compliance in children, based on the internalization of norms rather than external submission. By contrast, intrusive behaviors, excessive control, or pressure placed on children are associated with fragile forms of compliance and difficulties in self-regulation.

An important theoretical framework for understanding parental support is the Vygotskian sociocultural tradition, which posits that development is a fundamentally social process and that learning occurs through mediation, guided participation, and co-construction. From this perspective, the child is an active agent, and the adult's role is to calibrate support according to the child's level of competence, gradually withdrawing assistance as the child becomes capable of acting independently (Vygotsky, 1978). The concept of the zone of proximal development becomes essential for interpreting autonomy support: parents provide guidance and structured support that enable children to perform actions they could not accomplish on their own, thereby preparing them for genuine autonomy rather than merely behavioral independence. Parental support for autonomy should therefore be understood as a complex, dynamic, and relational process. It involves recognizing children's intentions and valuing their perspectives; adjusting support to the child's developmental level; promoting initiative and offering choices; explaining the meaning of rules and limits; supporting competence and task engagement; and avoiding intrusive control and external pressures.

Through these mechanisms, parents directly contribute to the formation of authentic autonomy, grounded in the internalization of rules, self-regulation, and the child's capacity to act on their own initiative within family and social contexts. This perspective is fundamental to the present thesis, as it enables an analysis of how autonomy is constructed within the family environment and the identification of parenting practices that support—or, conversely, constrain—its development.

To provide a contemporary perspective on parental autonomy support, it is necessary to examine how new social and cultural contexts shape early caregiving and socialization processes. Digital transformations over the past decade have significantly reconfigured parenting practices and children's developmental environments. Recent literature highlights that parents' intensive use of mobile technologies and social media platforms influences the quality of interactions and emotional availability in the parent–child relationship. Studies on the phenomenon of technoference indicate that the constant presence of smartphones in everyday contexts interferes with parental sensitivity, reducing responsiveness and the opportunities for socio-emotional regulation provided to the child (McDaniel & Radesky, 2018). Moreover, parents' exposure to large volumes of online information and to idealized norms of parenting promoted through social media can intensify anxiety related to parental performance, thereby

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influencing how adults set limits and support children's autonomy (Neubauer et al., 2021). At the same time, research shows that parental strategies of technology mediation—such as restrictions, discussions, and joint engagement—can significantly modulate the impact of technology on children's development, strengthening self-regulation and mitigating the risks associated with excessive digital media use (Selak et al., 2025). Overall, the literature indicates that the digital environment does not act unilaterally on the parent–child relationship, but rather becomes an integral part of the contemporary family ecology, shaping both the ways in which parents support autonomy and self-regulation and the opportunities children have to participate actively in meaningful interactions.*Perspectiva interculturală*

In the international literature, family support for the development of autonomy is also conceptualized through an intercultural lens, highlighting the fact that autonomy is not a universal competence with identical manifestations, but rather a socioculturally situated construct shaped by the values, norms, and expectations of each society (Keller, 2007; Rogoff, 2003). Consequently, what may be interpreted as autonomy in one culture—such as personal initiative, decision-making, or the expression of preferences—may be valued differently in societies where family cohesion, collective responsibility, and social conformity are central to the definition of identity and appropriate behavior. In this regard, Markus and Kitayama (1991) propose, in their intercultural analysis, a model of self-construal according to which Western cultures tend to promote an independent self, oriented toward self-expression, personal preferences, and behavioral autonomy, whereas non-Western cultures support an interdependent self, defined through relationships, harmony, and reciprocal obligations. This distinction is directly reflected in parenting practices: parents in Western cultures more frequently employ strategies that encourage free exploration, negotiation, and decision-making, whereas parents in collectivist cultures tend to emphasize guidance, protection, and learning through observation of family models (Keller et al., 2004; Rothbaum & Wang, 2010). The accelerated dynamics of contemporary societies—marked by mobility, globalization, urbanization, and digitalization—have in recent years led to profound transformations in parental values and socialization practices, making it increasingly difficult to draw strict boundaries between "Western" and "non-Western" models of childrearing. In Europe, as in many other regions, family configurations are becoming increasingly heterogeneous, and parents combine traditional elements with modern orientations toward autonomy support. This results in hybrid forms of parenting that can no longer be understood through rigid cultural oppositions, but rather through the lens of continuous adaptation to changing social, economic, and technological contexts.

Some research challenges the rigid bifurcation between individualism and collectivism. Kağıtçıbaşı (2007) proposes a model of the autonomous–relational self, arguing that modernization, urbanization, and increasing levels of education transform parental values, leading to a combination of autonomy promotion and the maintenance of family cohesion. In such contexts, parents encourage autonomous behaviors—initiative, expression of preferences, and problem-solving—without undermining solidarity, reciprocal obligations, or the importance of close relationships. This perspective is empirically supported by studies conducted in countries in Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe, which show that educated urban parents promote autonomy while preserving values of interdependence (Vignoles et al., 2016; Keller, 2004).

An important contribution to the literature on parental support for autonomy is the quantitative research program developed by Landry and colleagues (2008), which, through four complementary studies, examined the relationships between mothers' trust in the child's unique

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developmental pace, autonomy-oriented parenting behaviors, and mother–child dyadic adjustment. The entire body of studies is conceptually grounded in Self-Determination Theory, emphasizing how parental beliefs influence parents' willingness to support children's autonomy and to avoid controlling practices. Study 1 showed that mothers who reported higher levels of trust in children's organic development expressed more flexible expectations regarding developmental milestones and tended to engage in fewer social comparisons with other children. However, the authority scale used included items that primarily targeted structure and emotional involvement rather than autonomy support, which limits the direct interpretation of this relationship. Study 2 employed observational methods to assess maternal parenting behaviors in the home environment with one-year-old children, focusing on flexibility, respect for the child's pace, and the capacity to follow the child's perspective. The results indicated that mothers who trusted their child's individual developmental trajectory engaged more frequently in autonomy-supportive behaviors and avoided controlling strategies. Moreover, maternal trust was not associated with children's cognitive development or temperament (as measured by the Bayley Scales of Infant Development II), suggesting that parental variables primarily reflect beliefs and interaction styles rather than child characteristics. Study 3, a prospective study conducted over a one-year period, demonstrated that maternal trust in the child's development predicted subsequent maternal and child adjustment, even after controlling for initial variables such as child temperament and maternal adjustment. This finding underscores the regulatory role of parental beliefs in shaping the emotional climate and the mother–child relationship. Study 4 explored cross-cultural variations by comparing first-time mothers in Canada and Norway. Norwegian mothers reported higher levels of trust in child development, more flexible normative expectations, and greater perceived social support. In both groups, partner satisfaction was positively associated with maternal trust, confirming the relational nature of this construct.

Overall, the four studies converge on a major conclusion: parents' trust in the child's unique developmental pace constitutes a robust predictor of autonomy-supportive parenting behaviors, which in turn are associated with better adjustment in both the child and the mother. Interpreted within the framework of Self-Determination Theory, these findings indicate that parents who value children's autonomy are more likely to create a family climate that fosters initiative, exploration, and the self-regulated internalization of rules, while reducing the use of controlling strategies and external pressure.

Cross-cultural analyses of autonomy socialization further highlight that childrearing norms are internalized through culturally adapted routines, interactions, and caregiving practices. In some contexts, autonomy manifests early in the domain of self-care—such as eating independently or expressing preferences—whereas in other societies autonomy is defined through conformity to group expectations, responsibility in family tasks, or cooperation with siblings (Ochs & Izquierdo, 2009). For this reason, autonomy cannot be examined without considering children's developmental niches—namely, the culturally organized configurations of caregiving practices, material environments, and significant relationships (Super & Harkness, 1986).

According to the cultural analysis used in the international study on parental burnout (Roskam et al., 2021), Romania is classified as a predominantly collectivist culture, characterized by low scores on the individualism dimension in Hofstede's cultural model. In such contexts, parental identity and roles are anchored in values related to the extended family, interdependence, and solidarity, and the pressure on individual parental performance is lower than in strongly individualistic Western cultures. At the same time, collectivist cultures tend to

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value obedience, conformity, and social harmony, which influences the ways in which children's autonomy is conceptualized and supported during the early years of life.

In the early childhood education literature, risk represents a sensitive issue for parents, particularly in the case of toddler-age children. Fear of injury, cultural norms regarding child protection, and social pressures surrounding "responsible parenting" contribute to a pronounced reluctance toward situations perceived as risky. For this reason, the study conducted by Murray and Williams (2019) constitutes an important contribution to understanding how adults interpret and manage risk in the context of outdoor play, and how this management shapes young children's autonomy. The study examined two complementary dimensions: (1) how parents perceive risk in concrete outdoor play situations, and (2) the relationship between these perceptions and children's actual risk-avoidance behaviors in natural environments. Participants included nine children aged 18 to 27 months and their parents (17 parents, most of whom had higher education, from northern New England, USA). Each child was observed for 90 minutes in the outdoor space of the nursery, an environment rich in natural challenges such as uneven terrain, logs, small rocks, snow, water, slopes, and various objects. Parents completed a questionnaire assessing risk perception across four standardized scenarios: play at height, water play, the use of sharp objects, and rough-and-tumble play. The results revealed substantial variability among children in risk-taking behaviors, despite all children being raised in the same environment. Some children frequently engaged in activities such as climbing, jumping, or exploring snow and water, while others preferred more familiar or less demanding activities.

The cross-sectional analysis of the data showed that parents who rated the scenarios as more dangerous had children who more frequently avoided risky situations, suggesting an effect of early socialization or of messages conveyed explicitly or implicitly by adults. In addition, fathers tended to rate situations as more dangerous than mothers, while mothers were more often willing to allow children to continue exploring under close supervision. The study also indicates that parents focus predominantly on physical risks (injury, falls, drowning), whereas developmental benefits—such as autonomy, self-efficacy, resilience, and sensorimotor learning—are far less frequently acknowledged. The authors further note a discrepancy between discursive reporting (parents state that they value the developmental role of risk) and actual practices (a tendency to ask educators to restrict certain behaviors). Overall, the study demonstrates that young children's autonomy develops within the tension between adults' willingness to authorize exploration and their fear of risk, and that natural environments—with their real and unpredictable challenges—function as a privileged context for the emergence of autonomy, provided that a careful balance between safety and freedom is maintained. The authors' conclusions emphasize the need for educator training in risk scaffolding, as well as the importance of dialogue with parents to foster an educational culture in which reasonable risk is understood as a condition for autonomy rather than merely as a threat. The intercultural perspective on family support for the development of autonomy remains insufficiently explored, particularly in the context of European societies undergoing transformation. In-depth studies are needed to capture how parents negotiate between tradition and modernity, between dependence and autonomy, as well as how new social and technological configurations redefine everyday socialization practices. This represents a research area with significant potential, capable of bringing essential nuances to the understanding of autonomy in early childhood.

b) The Role of Older Siblings in Autonomy Development

Although the literature on early development focuses predominantly on parents as the primary agents of socialization, research over the past two decades has highlighted the significant role of older siblings in shaping young children's self-regulation and autonomous

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behaviors. Older siblings constitute unique socialization figures, as they can exert both external control (verbal and physical) and provide an accessible behavioral model that is easy for younger children to imitate (Van Berkel et al., 2017). Given their greater cognitive and socio-emotional maturity, older siblings have a more advanced understanding of rules and the consequences of transgressions (Kochanska & Aksan, 2006; Vaish et al., 2011), which enables them to function as proximal sources of guidance, feedback, and behavioral correction.

Older siblings tend to naturally assume leadership roles in sibling interactions and to function as behavioral models—a process that resonates with social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). From this perspective, their behaviors are spontaneously imitated and with greater frequency by younger siblings, sometimes even to a greater extent than the behaviors of parents or peers (Dunn, 1983; Howe et al., 2011). In this way, older siblings can facilitate the emergence of self-regulation by supporting younger children in inhibiting impulses, negotiating simple game rules, tolerating waiting, or managing everyday conflicts. However, the analysis of siblings' roles cannot be conducted outside the broader family context. Siblings are embedded within a socialization "ecosystem" in which parental discipline, educational styles, and family rules shape both the behaviors of older siblings and the ways in which they exercise control or provide guidance to younger ones (Van Berkel et al., 2015). In line with Bandura's (1977) ideas, older siblings often reproduce the disciplinary styles observed in parents—whether autonomy-supportive or coercive and intrusive—which in turn amplifies or constrains younger children's opportunities to practice self-regulation and autonomy within sibling relationships.

A major empirical contribution to understanding the influence of siblings on early development is provided by the longitudinal study conducted by Van Berkel and colleagues (2020), which followed young children between 18 and 36 months of age—an age range considered critical for the emergence of self-regulation and the assertion of behavioral autonomy. The study simultaneously examined three interdependent variables: parental discipline directed at each child (through simple inhibitory commands such as "Don't touch"), the level of control exerted by older siblings in everyday interactions, and changes in touching behaviors, regarded as sensitive indicators of behavioral inhibition and self-regulation. The findings showed that both child-directed parental discipline and the ways in which older siblings exert verbal or physical control constitute significant predictors of young children's self-regulatory trajectories, suggesting that family influences operate not only vertically (parent–child), but also horizontally (sibling–sibling).

The study identifies five distinct developmental trajectories of behavioral control: early or late declines in touching behavior (indicating progressive improvements in self-regulation), an oppositional pattern typical of the period of autonomy assertion, a disrupted pattern characterized by unexpected fluctuations, and a stable early self-control pattern. These divergent trajectories confirm that the development of self-regulation is highly heterogeneous, shaped both by parental demands and parenting styles and by the influence of older siblings, who may function either as extensions of parental control or, conversely, as agents of negotiation and rule flexibilization. Consistent with the literature on early development (Kopp, 1982; Carlson, 2005), these findings underscore the contextual, relational, and deeply dynamic nature of self-regulation, demonstrating that young children's behavioral autonomy is not an isolated individual product, but the outcome of a complex network of multilateral family interactions. An important finding of this study is the demonstration that older siblings act as socializers of young children's self-regulation not only through their direct behaviors, but also through the ways in which they adopt and mirror parental disciplinary strategies. Young children tend to model both their level of compliance and their oppositional behavior in relation

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to older siblings' responses to parental requests and daily routines. Moreover, the age range of 18–36 months—a critical period for the emergence of autonomy and the assertion of will (Crockenberg & Litman, 1990)—proves to be particularly sensitive to sibling influence, highlighting the need to extend analyses beyond the parent–child dyad. Overall, the literature indicates that older siblings represent a valuable yet still insufficiently explored source of early socialization. They contribute to the development of young children's self-regulation through complex mechanisms—modeling, guidance, negotiation, affective support, and, at times, direct control—mechanisms that are embedded within a family ecology that profoundly shapes the emergence of autonomy in toddlerhood. Further research on the role of siblings in early development is therefore warranted in order to gain a deeper understanding of family dynamics as a **multilayered system**, in which autonomy is formed not only within the parent–child relationship, but also through interactions with close members of the child's own generation.

c) The Role of Mothers and Fathers in Autonomy Development

The classical literature on parental support for autonomy has focused predominantly on mothers; however, more recent research increasingly emphasizes the necessity of including fathers in empirical studies in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of how parents contribute—both distinctly and complementarily—to the development of young children's autonomy (Cabrera et al., 2014; Van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2017). This traditional focus on mothers reflects both the historical distribution of caregiving responsibilities and the persistence of cultural norms that associate motherhood with primary caregiving. Nevertheless, transformations in family dynamics—including fathers' growing involvement in children's daily lives—as well as social policies that grant both parents equal access to parental leave (including in Romania), fully justify extending analyses to the differentiated role of fathers (Mercer et al., 2018).

Promoting an autonomy-supportive parental climate in the early years of life is crucial for the development of intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, and exploratory behaviors, and these benefits are maximized when both parents contribute to supporting the child's autonomy (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Matte-Gagné et al., 2015). Research has nevertheless documented qualitative differences in the ways mothers and fathers interact with their children: fathers tend to be more involved in energetic play involving moderate physical challenges, which stimulates exploration and resilience (Moller et al., 2013; St. George & Freeman, 2017), whereas mothers are more often characterized by higher responsiveness, affective sensitivity, and a less intrusive interaction style (Blandon & Volling, 2008; Wilson & Durbin, 2013). These differences do not imply a hierarchy of parental competence; rather, they indicate that each parent provides distinct types of learning and exploration opportunities.

A relevant example is the observational study conducted by Linkiewich and colleagues (2021), which investigated whether positive guidance, responsiveness, and levels of negative control displayed by mothers and fathers predict children's autonomy (ages 2.1–5.6 years) in the context of a free-play task conducted at home. No control variables were included, as the researchers were interested in exploring parents' use of each autonomy-supportive behavior in relation to children's displayed autonomy. Mothers' and fathers' autonomy-supportive behaviors were independently associated with children's autonomy during the free-play task. The findings indicate that both mothers and fathers contribute to children's autonomy, but they do so in different ways. For fathers, higher levels of positive guidance and responsiveness, as well as lower levels of negative control, significantly predicted children's autonomy during play. For mothers, only lower levels of negative control emerged as a robust predictor, whereas positive guidance and responsiveness did not show the same effect. The study suggests two

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possible explanatory mechanisms. On the one hand, children may be accustomed to experiencing free play with fathers and may therefore respond more strongly to fathers' positive guidance and responsiveness, perceived as novel or stimulating opportunities. On the other hand, maternal responsiveness may be perceived as normative and consistent, thus losing some of its explicit predictive power in the context of a free-play task. These interpretations highlight the importance of the situational framework—structured versus unstructured—in the assessment of parents' autonomy-supportive behaviors.

The study's findings are consistent with the principles of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), according to which autonomy-supportive environments foster intrinsic motivation, initiative, and active engagement in children. Children whose fathers displayed high levels of positive guidance demonstrated a greater capacity to lead play and make decisions independently, thereby confirming the SDT assumption that autonomy develops optimally within a warm, open relational climate free from external pressure. In contrast, high levels of negative control—observed in both mother–child and father–child interactions—were associated with reduced expressions of child autonomy. When parents resort to excessive control, frequently criticize the child's initiative, or restrict exploration, autonomous behaviors are inhibited, and the child tends to adopt a passive stance or one dependent on adult direction. These findings support a core tenet of SDT, namely that autonomy is not incompatible with adult guidance, but is instead undermined by intrusive forms of control that weaken the child's sense of self-determination.

These differences are also consistent with the literature on parental interaction styles (Lamb, 2010). Fathers tend to spend a substantial portion of their time in unstructured play activities, in which the child has opportunities to initiate, lead the play, and express autonomous decision-making (Lawson & Mace, 2009; John et al., 2013). This context provides direct opportunities for the expression of autonomy and for observable autonomous functioning. By contrast, mothers spend more time in routine, structuring activities such as dressing, feeding, or organizing the environment—activities that, although they may encourage independence, are less conducive to the spontaneous expression of autonomy in a motivational and decisional sense.

6.2 The Role of Day Care / Nursery as a Developmental Environment

The nursery represents a highly influential developmental environment during the ante-preschool years, as it brings together the essential conditions through which early autonomy is formed and expressed: caregiving relationships, predictable routines, peer interactions, child–adult interactions, accessible materials, and opportunities for participation adapted to the child's developmental level. The theoretical foundations discussed in the previous sections—stage-based developmental perspectives, attachment theory, the conceptualization of autonomy as a process of self-regulation, sociological accounts of participation and agency, and the principles of Self-Determination Theory—converge within the crèche, positioning it as a privileged context for observing and supporting the autonomy of young children.

From a socio-cultural and sociological perspective, the nursery functions as a space of early social participation, in which autonomy is constructed relationally through the negotiation of routines, cooperation, imitation, conflict, and solidarity among children, as well as through the dynamics of child–adult interactions. According to Corsaro's concept of interpretive reproduction, children do not merely absorb the institutional structures of the nursery but actively interpret and transform them. In this sense, the autonomy observed in the nursery is not

an individual property, but rather the outcome of interactions among the child, the material environment, institutional rules, and educators' willingness to recognize and support children's initiatives.

The motivational frameworks described by Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci) offer an additional lens for understanding the role of the nursery: educators' practices can either support or inhibit autonomy, depending on how they provide choices, validate children's emotions, explain rules, and avoid excessive control. In an autonomy-oriented nursery, educators create the psychological conditions for autonomous motivation, curiosity, exploration, and cooperation; conversely, in environments dominated by pressure, haste, or rigid directiveness, children's autonomous behaviors may be reduced or actively discouraged.

In line with the perspective of autonomy as a contextual phenomenon, the nursery is not merely a physical setting, but a constellation of practices, relationships, norms, and rhythms that shape children's opportunities for participation. The ways in which transitions are organized, materials are made accessible, activities are structured, and moments of waiting or conflict are managed directly influence the forms and intensity of autonomy displayed by children. The nursery can thus become a space in which the articulation of different dimensions of autonomy is concretely observable, and in which the role of staff—particularly educators—actively orchestrates an environment conducive to the development of early autonomy.

The specialized literature provides a range of empirical contributions on how autonomy is conceptualized and supported in education; however, studies that explicitly focus on children's autonomy in nurseries remain relatively limited. In this context, the following section presents relevant research that explores educators' perceptions and practices in relation to young children's autonomy.

A study conducted in the Basque Country examined educators' attitudes and practices regarding the autonomy of very young children, starting from the observation that, despite a broad theoretical consensus on the importance of early autonomy, its translation into pedagogical practice remains insufficiently documented. The study included 161 educators working with children aged 0 to 2 years in early childhood education centers and employed a quantitative design based on standardized questionnaires to identify professional representations of autonomy and the strategies used in daily practice. Data analysis showed that most participants considered autonomy to be a central component of early child development; however, significant discrepancies emerged between declared conceptions and actual practices (Zubillaga et al., 2020).

Educators predominantly associated autonomy with the independent performance of self-care tasks (e.g., eating, dressing, free exploration), while paying less attention to the socio-emotional and relational dimensions of autonomy, such as the expression of preferences, participation in decision-making, or the negotiation of interactions with peers. The study also found that educators with more advanced professional training and longer experience tended to adopt more autonomy-supportive practices, including offering meaningful choices, encouraging children's initiatives, and using non-directive language. At the same time, structural pressures within early childhood settings—such as limited time, the organization of routines, and adult–child ratios—were identified as factors that may constrain the consistent implementation of autonomy-supportive practices. Overall, the findings highlight the need for continuous professional development for educators and for institutional reflection on how declared conceptions of autonomy are translated into effective practices tailored to the needs of children under two years of age.

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A relevant comparative study for understanding how children's autonomy is conceptualized and supported in nurseries was conducted by Koivula, Gregoriadis, and colleagues (2019). The study aimed to investigate early childhood educators' perceptions of young children's autonomy in Finland and Greece and to analyze how cultural differences shape pedagogical practices. The research included 271 early childhood educators (approximately 150 from Finland and 120 from Greece) and employed quantitative methods (standardized questionnaires) and comparative analyses to identify professional representations of autonomy and the strategies used in everyday practice. The findings revealed consistent cultural differences in how autonomy is defined and promoted. Finnish educators—working within an educational system oriented toward egalitarian values, participation, and respect for individuality—conceptualized autonomy as the gradual development of competencies, active participation, and the assumption of responsibility in everyday contexts. Their definitions of autonomy integrated functional dimensions (self-care, exploration) as well as socio-emotional and relational dimensions (expression of preferences, negotiation of activity rhythms, cooperation). In contrast, Greek educators—trained within an educational culture placing greater emphasis on interdependence, conformity, and respect for adult authority—described autonomy primarily in practical terms, associating it with the independent completion of routine tasks and the gradual reduction of physical dependence on adults. With regard to concrete practices, Finnish educators reported frequent use of autonomy-supportive strategies, such as offering meaningful choices, listening to the child's perspective, encouraging free exploration, and adapting rhythms to children's individual needs. Greek educators more often mentioned strategies related to structure and direct guidance, including clear instructions, well-defined routines, and explicit support in daily tasks, reflecting a view of autonomy as a progression toward conformity and functional competence.

The study highlights that supporting autonomy is not a universally applicable construct implemented in the same way across contexts, but is strongly shaped by cultural values, institutional norms, and social expectations regarding young children. In Finland, autonomy is closely associated with participation, responsibility, and self-expression, whereas in Greece the emphasis is placed on autonomy as practical performance and progressive discipline. These findings underscore the need to interpret educators' practices in relation to the cultural and institutional contexts in which they operate, as well as the need for further research in other contexts.

An ethnographic study conducted by Vuorisalo, Raittila, and Rutanen (2018) investigates how the physical environment and institutional organization shape children's opportunities for autonomy in a Finnish kindergarten. The authors adopt a sociomaterial perspective, examining the dynamic relationships among children, educators, objects, furniture, spatial rules, and the institution's daily rhythms. The research was carried out as a team ethnography over an extended period, documenting everyday situations through participant observation, video recordings, and reflexive field notes. Although the study does not focus exclusively on the 0–3 age range, its conclusions are highly relevant for understanding early autonomy, as they demonstrate that experiences of autonomy are constructed through the interaction between the child and the educational environment as a whole. The findings indicate that autonomy is not solely the product of educators' pedagogical intentions, but also of spatial configurations, material accessibility, and the ways institutional routines enable or constrain children's actions. Open, accessible spaces rich in materials allow children to initiate play, organize activities, and negotiate interactions with others, thereby fostering the emergence of relational and practical autonomy. By contrast, areas characterized by strict rules, fixed

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furniture, or intensive supervision reduce children's level of agency and position them primarily as recipients rather than initiators of action. The study also highlights the role of educators as mediators of space: through subtle adjustments—such as moving furniture, reorganizing activity centers with attention to children's perspectives, or relaxing or reinforcing rules—educators directly shape children's opportunities to act autonomously. From this perspective, autonomy emerges as a co-constructed phenomenon, produced in relation to the materiality of the environment and educators' micro-practices, rather than as a function of children's individual competencies alone. The study's conclusions highlight that the design of educational spaces and the flexibility of key moments—such as interrupting a child's play to transition to mealtime, areas where children are not allowed to go, closed doors, or inaccessible objects—are central components in supporting autonomy at an early age and, implicitly, key elements of a pedagogy that recognizes the child as an active social actor.

A relevant qualitative study on supporting young children's autonomy in ECEC services is the research conducted by Côté-Lecaldare, Joussemet, and Dufour (2016), which examines how educators concretely support the autonomy of children aged 18 to 36 months. Conducted in Quebec, the study included eight educators with professional training in early childhood education, selected because of their strong motivational orientation toward autonomy support. The research identified 18 distinct practices, subsequently organized into five domains: knowing the child, sensitivity and responsiveness, partnership, the mentoring role, and the provision of explicit guidance and feedback. The findings show that autonomy support at early ages extends well beyond the classic SDT repertoire—such as offering choice, providing rationales, and acknowledging emotions—by integrating more subtle behaviors, including systematic observation of the child, adjusting activity rhythms to individual needs, creating opportunities for exploration, modeling behaviors, and using scaffolding to support children's initiative. In addition, the study demonstrates that autonomy support does not exclude structure: educators describe how rules, transitions, and feedback can be formulated in a non-controlling manner that preserves the child's sense of agency. The authors emphasize that autonomy emerges from a complex professional positioning in which the educator moves between a personal stance (focused on understanding the child), a dyadic stance (centered on collaboration), and an educational stance (focused on guidance and rules). Overall, the study offers one of the most detailed empirical descriptions of autonomy in nursery settings, revealing autonomy support as a relational, contextual process deeply embedded in everyday educational routines.

Significant concerns regarding the autonomy of ante-preschool children can be found in the Pikler literature, developed on the basis of the work of the pediatrician Emmi Pikler and the research conducted at the Lóczy Institute in Budapest. The Pikler approach is grounded in the idea that young children's autonomy is an emergent process supported by two core principles: free movement development and an adult–child relationship based on respect, predictability, and cooperation. Children are encouraged to reach motor milestones independently, without intrusive physical intervention, while caregiving moments are treated as privileged situations for communication, participation, and the consolidation of a sense of competence (Gutknecht & Bader). Research carried out at Lóczy—based on longitudinal observations and systematic analyses of the development of children in residential care—examined how relational continuity, a stable environment, and freedom of exploration influence functional autonomy, socio-emotional development, and attachment. Participants in these studies were primarily institutionalized children, cared for in small groups with a limited and consistent number of caregivers, and the primary aim was to identify the conditions necessary

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for healthy development in children deprived of a family environment. The findings showed that when children benefit from stable relationships with adults, predictable routines, and a carefully organized physical environment, they develop robust autonomous competencies: they explore more actively, initiate interactions, regulate emotions more effectively, and display secure attachment patterns, even in institutional settings. The studies also demonstrated that freedom of movement contributes to a stronger sense of self-efficacy, while active participation during caregiving moments fosters relational and socio-emotional autonomy.

In Romania, academic interest in the ante-preschool period (0–3 years) remains relatively limited compared to the substantial body of literature devoted to the preschool level (3–6 years). This discrepancy can be explained by the recent history of nurseries, which for a long time operated within a medicalized model, as well as by the absence of a strong tradition of systematic research on caregiving and educational practices during the first months and years of life. Notable, however, is the volume on early childhood education authored by Vrăsmaș (2014), which represents a substantial contribution to the improvement of care and developmental practices in early education. The work integrates theoretical foundations, legislative and curricular frameworks, perspectives on child development, the role of the educational environment, and partnerships with families, while proposing applied solutions and methodological guidelines that support a holistic and individualized approach to the child from birth to six years of age. Farcaș (2019) addresses the theme of autonomy, with a particular focus on preschool children, highlighting its essential role in early development and offering pedagogical and practical reference points for parents and educators. The author emphasizes the need to cultivate independence, initiative, and age-appropriate skills within an educational environment that supports active participation, exploration, and the gradual development of self-regulation and self-determination competencies.

In support of professionals in the field of early childhood education, several coordinated volumes have recently been published by Otilia Clipa, Ion Albulescu, and Horațiu Catalano. The volume coordinated by Clipa (2023) is primarily addressed to practitioners and offers an interdisciplinary perspective on early childhood education, discussing the specificities of development in children under three years of age, the role of the adult, the organization of the educational environment, the importance of routines, and the need for individualized educational interventions. These analyses provide a valuable interpretative framework for understanding the conditions that can facilitate the emergence of autonomy at early ages. Complementarily, the volumes coordinated by Albulescu and Catalano (2019, 2022, 2025) make a significant contribution to the development of early childhood pedagogy in Romania through their analysis of educational policies, curricular structures, and the professional competencies required when working with young children. Although these works do not investigate autonomy as an explicit object of study, they offer essential theoretical and methodological reference points for understanding the institutional contexts in which children's autonomy may be supported or constrained. Vrăsmaș (2019, 2021, 2022) is among the authors who promote a complex and up-to-date vision of early childhood education as an integrated field, centered on children's needs and on each child's right to participation and appropriate support, particularly with regard to inclusion, diversity, and early intervention. Her work addresses key themes for the modernization of educational practices, such as the inclusion of children with special educational needs in early education settings, the organization and functioning of mixed-age groups as a form of inclusive early childhood education, and the developmental characteristics and support needs of children with special educational needs in the 0–3 age period.

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The study conducted by Ulrich Hygum and Hygum (2021) represents one of the first empirical investigations in Romania to directly analyze the lived experiences of children under the age of three, making a significant contribution to the development of a sociological perspective on early autonomy in nursery settings. The research adopts a comparative ethnographic design and was carried out in four nurseries—two in Romania and two in Denmark—involving 77 children aged between 9 months and 2.5 years, who were observed over a total of 26 full days of fieldwork. The main aim of the study was to examine the ways in which very young children express agency in different institutional contexts, with a particular focus on crying as a privileged form of communication and negotiation of the child's position within the generational order. Rather than being viewed merely as an emotional reaction, crying is interpreted as a relational strategy through which children articulate desires, needs, discomfort, or resistance to institutional structures. The findings highlight major cultural differences between Romania and Denmark with regard to the meanings attributed to crying, the organization of space, the structure of daily routines, and adult responsiveness. In Romanian nurseries, crying tends to persist for longer periods and often takes the form of a "collective chorus," shaped by strict time organization, limited access to space, predominantly dyadic interactions, and rigid institutional expectations regarding behavioral conformity. In Denmark, crying episodes are generally shorter and are more frequently regulated within flexible spaces, through adult interventions as well as through solidarity and support from older children. The comparative analysis reveals that children's autonomy and agency are profoundly shaped by the social logic of the institution, by cultural values concerning the child (such as the notion of the "courageous child" in Denmark), and by the ways in which space and routines enable or constrain young children's initiative.

With the transfer of nurseries under the coordination of the Ministry of Education and the consolidation of the curricular framework for the 0–3 age group, it is expected that interest in research will increase, both with regard to developmental processes and to educational practices, family–institution relationships, and the quality of interactions.

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