



# How to support student autonomy and enhance motivation

School resources

The extent to which teachers support students' needs for autonomy has a major effect on the quality of student motivation. Autonomy-supportive styles involve creating relationships that nurture students' intrinsic motivation. The opposite of supporting autonomy is controlling or pressuring students to think, feel or behave in a particular way. When the learning environment is perceived as controlling, students' feelings of self-determination and intrinsic motivation are diminished. They become demotivated and less engaged, which has a negative effect on both wellbeing and achievement. Students of autonomy-supportive teachers display more positive learning behaviours and achieve better outcomes than the students of controlling teachers.

## The benefits of supporting student autonomy

Research has found that a teacher's support for student autonomy benefits students in many ways, enhancing their wellbeing, learning and motivation. Research finds that students who experience teacher support for their personal autonomy also experience greater levels of intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, positive emotion and psychological wellbeing through increased perception of control. They display curiosity, persistence and self-regulation strategies. They have better conceptual understanding as well as better outcomes, and are more able to process material at a deeper level. The positive benefits of teachers supporting students' autonomy have been found for primary, intermediate and secondary school students, as well as students with special needs and students from a diversity of cultures including collectivist cultures.

Teachers also benefit from developing an autonomy-supportive motivational style. Compared with teachers with a controlling motivational style, those teachers who use an autonomy-supportive style report a greater sense of personal accomplishment and satisfaction from teaching and markedly less emotional and physical exhaustion.

## What teaching style supports student autonomy?

Teachers with a motivational style that supports students' autonomy listen to students' perspectives and integrate these into instruction (rather than ignoring, criticising or dismissing them). They welcome and solicit students' input into the lesson and support their initiatives. Teachers might need to actively solicit input through conversation, for example, or by using anonymous suggestion cards.

Autonomy-supportive teachers recognise that students' feelings and ways of thinking and behaving have motivational potential. They understand that students' interests, preferences and psychological needs fuel their motivation, and by finding out about these they can create classroom conditions in which students' intrinsic motivations align with learning tasks and activities.

These teachers also share their perspective in non-pressuring ways by offering information and strategies and providing their rationales for the importance or usefulness of a given learning activity or task. They take time to listen, provide encouragement and helpful hints, praise signs of progress and hold off on giving advice until they understand the student's goals and perspective. They provide scaffolding only when it is needed and invited. Students who experience a teacher's supportive style have

opportunities to develop a sense of personal autonomy in their learning while having their psychological needs (such as the need for connection and recognition) met.

### Does this mean there is no structure?

Supporting student's autonomy by taking their perspective and adjusting teaching in line with their preferences and needs does not mean an unstructured environment for learning. Indeed, teachers that support students' autonomy actually provide more, rather than less, classroom structure. Think of structure as involving the amount and clarity of information provided to students about what is expected of them and how they can achieve these expectations. Such structure may include communicating expectations and high standards, establishing goals, introducing strategies and procedures, providing directions, making models available to emulate, and giving feedback. Without structure, students are left with confusion about what they are supposed to do and how they are supposed to perform.

While autonomy-supportive teachers regularly introduce rules, procedures and high expectations to their students, they include the students' perspectives, provide explanatory rationales for why following the rules would be personally beneficial, use informative and non-controlling language, and communicate acceptance of students' resistance. In providing structure, the teacher conveys his or her perspective (plans, priorities and goals) on student learning and therefore negotiates a balance between student and teacher perspectives.

### How to develop an autonomy-supportive style

Start by avoiding controlling language and behaviours. Be aware of the factors that influence you to adopt a controlling style (such as the pressures of accountability for student outcomes or your low expectations of students). Being more mindful of these behaviours can increase your capacity to replace them with more flexible and adaptive behaviours. Research shows that teachers who engage in the following instructional behaviours come to internalise a more autonomy-supportive motivating style, and as a result teach in ways that better support students' autonomy.

- ask for and incorporate **students' perspectives**
- welcome **students' thoughts, feelings and behaviour**
- find out about the **motivational potential of your students**: their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and connections with others, their intrinsic motivation, their preferences, interests, and personal goals and values
- take note of students' negative emotions, listlessness, passivity and poor performance or behaviour, using these as constructive information that can help you **realign students' inner motivation with classroom activity**
- provide **ongoing cognitive support for autonomy during learning tasks** by scaffolding students to be independent in problem solving, prompting students to monitor and evaluate their own work, and encouraging students to collaborate, ask questions and share ideas
- support students' capacity for **self-regulation**
- provide **information, strategies and rationales for learning**, using flexible messages that are non-evaluative and content-rich and offering hints and encouragement rather than providing solutions or telling students how to do it

## Avoiding a controlling style

Research suggests most teachers adopt a controlling motivational style at least some of the time. Teachers with a controlling motivational style prioritise their perspective over the students' without inquiring into the student's perspective (why the student is doing what he or she is doing). They also create a controlling environment when they impose deadlines, emphasise grades and performance, and set solution strategies and processes rather than allowing multiple possibilities for generating solutions. Teachers also indirectly control students by creating internal compulsions to act through feelings of guilt, shame, anxiety or the threat of the withdrawal of attention or approval.

It can be difficult to avoid a controlling motivational style due to the inherent power differential between teachers and students, the teacher's responsibilities and accountability for student outcomes, and possible perceptions of low intrinsic motivation in students. What is more, most teachers and parents believe that offering rewards (a controlling strategy) is likely to be more effective than providing a rationale for the activity (an autonomy-supportive strategy), although research has demonstrated that the benefits of the controlling approach are significantly lower than those of an autonomy-supportive approach.

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## References

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### Dr Vicki Hargraves

Vicki is a teacher, mother, writer, and researcher. She recently completed her PhD using philosophy to explore creative approaches to understanding early childhood education. She is inspired by the wealth of educational research that is available and is passionate about making this available and useful for teachers.