

## Parenting and healthy lifestyles. Balance of As

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**Abstract:** The current emergency of promoting healthy lifestyles is well known. These lifestyles are shaped and driven by sociocultural and individual behavior patterns. Parenting styles carry great weight in regard to this endeavor, especially in adolescence, a time in which autonomous decision-making starts. The scope of adolescent decision-making is gained as parents cede their own authority with this process becoming a balance between parental Authority and teenage child Autonomy: balancing the As. In this process, discrepancy as to who is responsible for deciding is frequent between parent and teenage child. Parenting styles which are able to adjust expectations between parents and adolescents by focusing on the teachable dimensions of the person are proposed. These parenting styles create the right environment to establish affective dialogues in regard to specific behaviors and generate assertive discipline channels. The main advantage of these parenting styles rooted in the cognitive, conative and affective dimensions of children is that they can be adapted to different socio-cultural contexts. By promoting adolescent autonomy they promote the internalization of long-term healthy lifestyles. Adolescence is presented as a sensitive period in which to adopt healthy lifestyles.

**Keywords:** healthy lifestyles; parenting; parental authority; teenage behavioral autonomy; discrepancy between parents and teenage children; assertive discipline; affective communication

**Resumen:** Es conocida la emergencia actual de fomentar estilos saludables de vida. Éstos se conforman a instancias de patrones de conducta socioculturales e individuales. Los estilos de crianza paternos tienen un gran peso en esta tarea, especialmente en la adolescencia, momento en el que se toman las primeras decisiones de modo autónomo. Los ámbitos de decisión adolescente son ganados a medida que los padres les ceden su autoridad: se trata de un balance entre la Autoridad paterna y la Autonomía filial: el balance de las As. En este proceso es frecuente la discrepancia paternofilial sobre a quién le compete decidir. Se proponen unos estilos de crianza centrados en las dimensiones educables de la persona, capaces de ajustar expectativas entre padres y adolescentes. Esos estilos de crianza forman el clima adecuado para establecer un diálogo afectivo sobre las conductas concretas y generar canales de disciplina asertiva; la principal ventaja de estos estilos de crianza centrados en la inteligencia, voluntad y afectividad de los hijos es que se

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pueden adaptar a los distintos contextos socioculturales. Al fomentar la autonomía adolescente promueven la interiorización de los estilos de vida saludable a largo plazo. La adolescencia se presenta como el periodo sensible para adoptar estilos de vida saludables.

**Palabras clave:** estilos de vida saludable; discrepancia entre padres y adolescente; parenting; autoridad paterna; autonomía conductual adolescente; disciplina asertiva; comunicación afectiva

## 1. Healthy Teen Lifestyles

Health officials at international level have long warned about the importance of promoting healthy lifestyles (WHO). Healthy Lifestyle programs focus on biorhythms: sleep, physical activity, diet, etc., with Healthy Living Habits also including psychosocial aspects related to proactivity toward emotional health or addiction prevention through adequate time management. The complexity of this subject is also expressed in adolescent substance use prevention studies, which reflect the interdependence between relational microsystems: neighborhood, school, family and peer group (Calafat et al. 2014; Di Luzio, Procentese & Guillet-Descas, 2019). Indeed, healthy lifestyles combine living conditions and sociocultural and individual behavior patterns (WHO) which are closely related to family parenting styles. Thus, strategies for promoting healthy lifestyles should acknowledge and understand these patterns to reduce health risks and promote well-being; regardless of whether, according to the classic socio-family typology, it is an individualistic or collectivist society, horizontal or vertical (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998).

Lifestyles are shaped through sociocultural behavior patterns, in which the following paradoxes are currently perceived (Read & Horton, 2016; Turkle, 2014):

- On the one hand, individualism seems to exert its influence beyond Western culture, weakening the social fabric and generating closed tribalisms that confront each other. At the same time, the postmodern nomadic life demands more than ever to return to stable roots, to the sense of belonging and security of the family.
- In the Image era, where collective liturgies form group identities surrounding fiction and fake news, minimalist movements seem to be emerging, less is more, with a realism that disrupts the social lies. That is, despite the media's stark illusions, the simplicity of personal and daily relationships is used to build one's identity.
- The permanent uncertainty surrounding relationships and employment in today's liquid society, together with the lack of ecological sustainability have generated a rise of anxiety disorders.

Expert voices urge us to restore emotional balance by teaching new generations to establish sustainable relationships, which are friendly with oneself, with others and with the cosmos.

- Faced with the era of big-data, in a world dominated by algorithms, when Artificial Intelligence threatens to reduce personal relationships to functional exchanges, deprived of intimacy, it is urgent to revalue the emotional and volitional dimensions, respecting the rich integrity of the human being, the true natural and cultural, biological and symbolic microcosm.

In addition to these contradictions in sociocultural behavior patterns, there are different experiences and worldviews. For example, in the large multiethnic cities of North America, it is necessary to design programs that center around identity issues related to being migrants and members of cultural minorities in order to promote healthy lifestyles (Rousseau et al. 2014). Both the universal and specific interactions of each culture influence the socialization processes relevant to teenage autonomy in their approach toward healthy lifestyles (Soenens et al. 2018); an aspect that leads to the analysis of the second shaping aspect of healthy lifestyles, the individual behavior patterns.

When analyzing individual behavior patterns, the broad concept of “Family Lifestyle” is relationally understood as the peculiar type of interaction between family members, who in turn interact with social roles and expectations. In this game of interactions, family identity shapes the core of personal identity, similar to how a child’s relational style is formed based on the parents’ attachment style (García & Sánchez, 2013). With the development of autonomy, adolescence constitutes a turning point to restore the relational style (Shimotomai, 2018; Kheiroddin et al.2012; Aymerich, Musitu, & Palmero, 2018). Even more so if certain authoritarian or permissive parenting styles have led to processes of hostility or confusing or elusive identities. In this evolutionary stage, the perception that children have of their parents depends on the style of communication between them, an aspect related to satisfaction with the family itself (Álvarez & Martínez-González,2017). With the analysis of brain responses, neuroscience supports the idea that psychological control by parents limits the socio-emotional development of their children and their capacity for weighted decisions (Marusak, 2018). This great influence of family styles on healthy adolescent adjustment extends to clinical settings. For example, in the year after a suicide attempt, recurrence is affected by the perception of the quality of the parent-child relationship (Van Alphen, 2017); in addition, the efficacy of substance dependence prevention programs in some adolescents with affective disorders is reinforced by autonomy support strategies, although more studies are required (Savard et al.2013, Spirito et al. 2015).

The importance of preventing risky lifestyles in adolescence, a time at which teenage children learn to make their decisions autonomously, derives from the connection between

sociocultural and individual behavior patterns that make up healthy lifestyles. In each family it is necessary to find a personalized balance for each child. During the teenage period the teenage child's Autonomy will develop as his/her maturity evolves, and it is during this same time in which parents start ceding more Authority in certain areas: balancing the As. Many risky adolescent lifestyles can be found to originate from a mismanagement of the discrepancy between parents and teenagers in regard to that gradual surrender of authority (Rote & Smetana, 2016). Several reviews have shown the influence of parenting styles on adolescent adjustment and the development of their autonomy (Torio & Peña 2008; Oliva & Parra, 2008; Gómez, 2008; Kirby, 2020). However, studies that go into further detail regarding the influence of behavioral autonomy development on the consolidation of healthy teenage lifestyles are still missing.

## **2. Healthy teenage lifestyles, the personal perspective of parenting styles**

The objective of this work is to analyze this issue and offer a parenting style which is capable of achieving the adjustment of expectations between parents and teenage children in regard to adolescent autonomy, a contributing factor to healthy lifestyles. A parenting style capable of adapting to different cultures, so that its affectivity is not diluted by an excessive contrast with the environment, as suggested by the evaporation hypothesis (Hancock, 2014).

Each family tends to forge its own relational dynamics to promote adolescent adjustment. Although one may imply that in English-speaking cultures it seems that Authoritative parenting styles favor adolescent adjustment, while in other cultures it is the Indulgent style that is most appropriate (Martínez & García, 2008; Martínez et al, 2019; García et al. 2019; Martínez et al, 2017; Capano & Ubach, 2013; Xu et. Al, 2017; Katz et al, 2019; García, López-Fernández & Serra, 2018; García, et al, 2018), reaching a transtheoretical approach, centered around the person and his/her behavior, using metatheoretical postulates that can be applied to specific behaviors (Aroca & Cánovas, 2012) would be more appropriate. For this, one must open the mind to new changes so that personal and social well-being is maintained in the long run. Steinberg (Darling & Steinberg, 1993) proposed to separate the concepts of parenting style and parenting practices in order to address socialization processes, as is the case of healthy lifestyles. In this regard, parenting styles would be like the modeling context for specific parenting practices. When promoting adolescent autonomy, personal parenting styles create the foundation for creating specific practices regarding the fields of decision-making ceded to children. Deciding correctly on these specific behaviors is what will get them to gradually assimilate healthy lifestyles.

One way to integrate the different parenting styles from an interactive systemic approach is to focus on the teachable dimensions of the person, regulating the greater or lesser intensity in the volitional, emotional or intellectual aspects depending on the context. For this purpose and to

update socio-cultural changes, placing parenting styles in the teachable dimensions of the person (Alonso-Stuyck, 2019) is proposed.

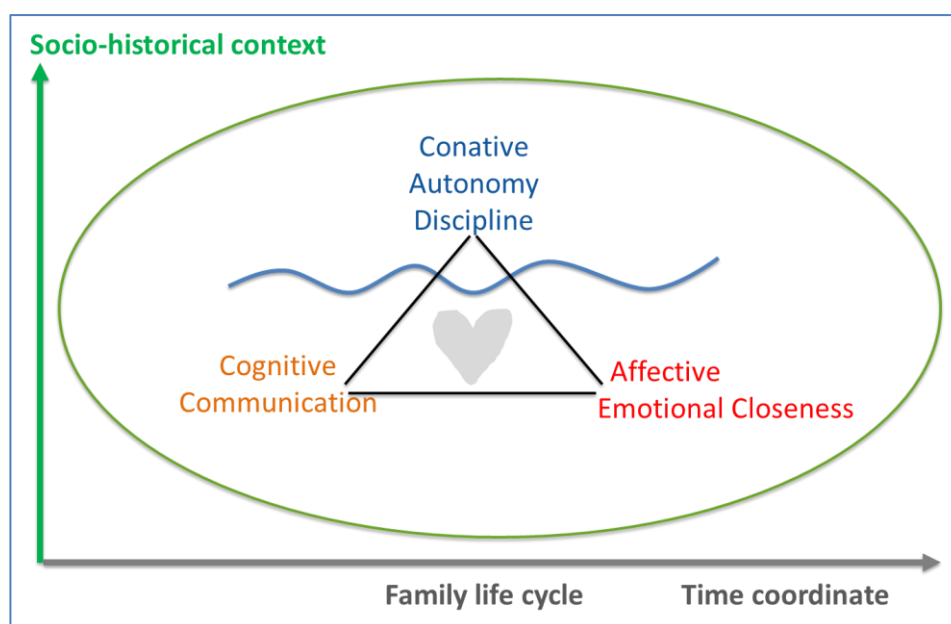


Fig. 1 Parenting styles rooted in the teachable dimensions of the person. Own elaboration

This way of approaching parenting styles based on intellectual, emotional and volitional aspects represented in Figure 1, uses the iceberg metaphor; below the observable horizon line - the specific behaviors – one can find the cognitive-affective system that modulates family limits through communication's own reasoning and its affective tone. It is especially useful for creating an attractive environment at a family's life cycle stage which involves teenage children, given the growing influence of the group of friends and the environment in this evolutionary period. With the sense of belonging to a group of friends mostly contributing to the definition of interests, the development of social skills, and the discovery of one's identity, its influence is not always positive; sometimes, the socialization practices that characterize some groups move away from healthy behavioral patterns. For this reason it is necessary to invest all available resources that allow access to the personal integrity of children.

A powerful resource to overcome the context's possible negative influences, is to establish harmonic channels of discipline that favor assertiveness in parent-child relationships (García & Gracia, 2010; Solís & Manzanares, 2019). This refers to the volitional aspect of parenting styles that emphasizes discipline as a set of attitudes that favor teenage autonomy and minimize family conflicts. Seeking that delicate balance between authoritarianism and anarchy helps children to self-regulate and internalize healthy lifestyles. Whether they decide to follow parental indications, or whether they choose to transgress them, the agreed limits help adolescents to develop cognitive

autonomy, and therefore assimilate habits that last over time. Parents also learn to exercise a weighted authority, to achieve that midpoint between permissiveness and authoritarianism, between letting one do what one wants or imposing duty for the sake of duty. It is in this family environment, where the decision areas that make up teenage behavioral autonomy which can lead to long-term psychosocial wellbeing will be set up (Alonso-Stuyck, 2006).

The way in which these limits are set will be nuanced by the communication style, oscillating between the extremes of maximum flexibility and rigidity. Conceives the communication style as a part of the emotional dimension of family dynamics, the most relevant for defining parent-child relationships, which usually remains unchanged throughout childhood and adolescence. The way to establish the limits, the communication style, affects the intellectual and affective dimensions of children and parenting styles (Serna & Martínez, 2019; Martínez et al, 2019), as shown in Fig. 1. In some instances, the appropriate affective tone is linked to the development of the sense of humor, which is so necessary to avoid over dramatizing small disagreements (Oliva, 2011); with a close and consistent parental relationship being required for the development of the child's prosocial skills (Jiménez-Iglesias, 2014). Despite the appearance of emotional literacy programs in schools, it is well known that their effectiveness depends on the family's emotional-relational style.

It is in these family environments, that result from parenting styles, in which the areas of adolescent decision are negotiated on a daily basis. When addressing the aspect of decision-making on specific issues in each family, the child's volitional, intellectual and emotional dimensions (discipline, communication and closeness) are taken into account and combined, as shown in Figure 2. The way in which these dimensions will be combined will depend on the child's relational style, their ability to establish relationships of trust that generate positive learning circuits in social, work, ecological fields, etc., thus developing the relational aspect of the healthy lifestyle (Riquelme, García & Serra, 2018). Although these specific areas, and the specific behaviors that integrate them, differ in different cultural environments, the discrepancy between the expectations of parents and children still coincides, it is the so-called delay phenomenon in which parents perceive their children as younger than they actually are (Rappoport, 1986).

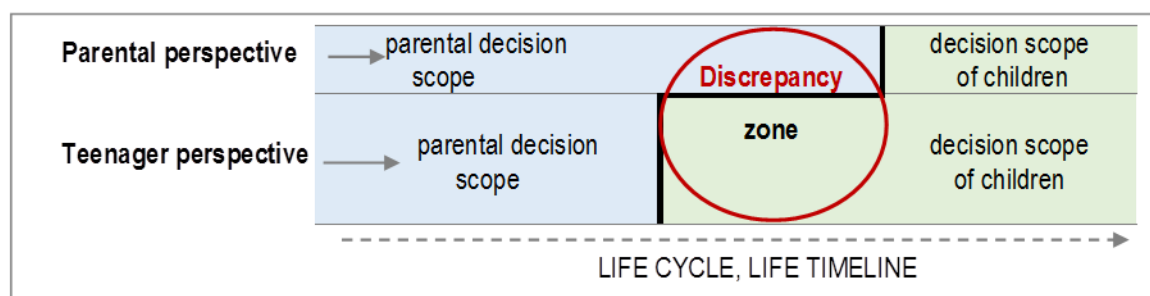


Fig. 2 Delay phenomenon, from Rappoport (1986).

It is still a paradox that, although parents and adolescents want the same thing at a global scale: that the children come to fend for themselves and learn to decide without resorting to their parents, when the time comes for children to demand greater autonomy parents think they are not ready. This discrepancy requires a friendly expectation adjustment, one that promotes a close and realistic dialogue (Rote & Smetana, 2016). Research on family functioning during adolescence reveals that the constant discrepancies between parents and children stand out throughout this period: when addressing the relationship dynamics -e.g., conflict (Özdemir, Vazsonyi & Çok, 2017) -, the supervision of teenager behavior by parents -e.g., monitoring (De los Reyes & Ohannessian, 2019) -, or the teenager's perceptions -e.g., legitimacy of parental authority (Gonzales-Backen, 2019; Yeung, Tsang & Chen, 2019)-.

In different cultural contexts it is convenient to study the values and attitudes of adolescents that generate this discrepancy (Rousseau, 2015; Bi, 2018); for example, the effect of acculturation gaps between parents and children, more pronounced in migrant families, is not yet clear (Wang-Schweig & Miller, 2018). In any case, the resolution of the conflict seems to come from the lack of adjustment of expectations between parents and children about who should decide what (Spirito et al, 2015; Alonso-Stuyck, 2006). To solve any problem, we must start by defining it well, so the first step would be for parents and children to each categorize the topic of discussion, which in a classical way have been divided into 3 areas (Figure 3). The child's behavioral Autonomy grows as if on an inclined plane in an inverse trajectory to the parent's surrender of Authority on these same issues. The double direction of the arrow indicates that as the children's decision sphere increases, the parental decision areas decrease correspondingly.

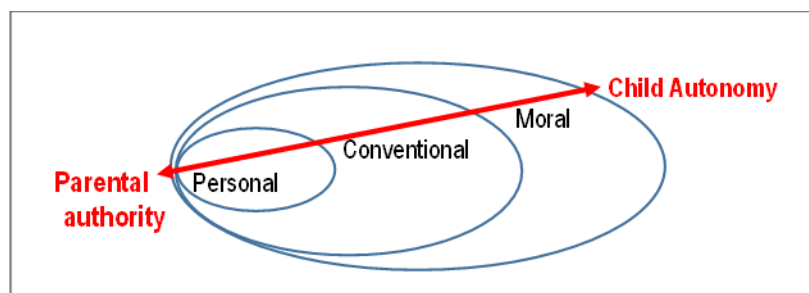


Figure 3. Inversion between the decision areas of children and parents. Own elaboration

In general, both parents and children often accept that moral and socio-conventional issues are decided by parents, but often both place the same issues in different categories. Some questionnaires offer a list of these behaviors (Bosma & Jackson, 1996) that could be defined and grouped as follows:

▲ Moral: includes issues that compromise conscience, because they border on justice, rights, or the physical and psychological well-being of people. What friends you go out with; how much alcohol to consume; where to go when going out; whether to smoke or not to smoke; what to do and not to do regarding sexuality; to participate or not in religious activities.

■ Socio-conventional: refers to the praxis of the group order, that is, to the norms established to ensure social and family coexistence. To help with housework; how often to visit family and relatives; evening curfew; how to behave at mealtime; use of language and way of speaking; time to go to sleep; what clothes to wear; appearance, hairstyle, overall appearance.

● Private / prudential: issues related to a personal project. How to spend allowance; in which sports to participate; what hobbies to practice; time devoted to homework; frequency of bath or shower; consumption of sweets and chocolates; personal or private matters.

It is common that the degree of discrepancy is significant in the three categories, less in some very specific behaviors, such as housework, visits (■) or money (●), while discrepancy is maintained in all moral issues (▲).

This data reflects the need for greater dialogue between parents and children, especially on those issues that give meaning to their lives, to direct them toward healthy lifestyles. It is about learning how to establish a reflective negotiation in which all parties come out feeling like they have won. Success in this regard is based on a tendency of adolescent Autonomy toward interdependence and a gradual surrender of parental Authority that doesn't leave the child completely alone. In the face of this negotiation, the Image culture seems to encourage thoughtless confrontations where artfully managed emotions are able to conquer or destroy any achievement. If the conflict between parents and teenage children can be considered a rite of passage in adolescence (Alonso-Stuyck & Aliaga, 2017), it becomes decisive to understand how to deal with



it so that it does not turn into adjustment problems for adolescents (Ohannessian, 2012). The benefits of maintaining spaces for dialogue in the family, despite the disagreements of the adolescent period, translate both into positive personality development and healthy lifestyles (Álvarez, 2017).

### **3. Conclusions**

Adolescence can be considered a critical period for shaping healthy lifestyles through tendencies that surround new behavioral autonomy, in a similar way to how childhood is critical for personality development through the emotional experiences of that period. However, it does not mean that the person is already determined by it, but to some extent conditioned.

Parenting styles that center around the teachable dimensions of the person: intelligence, will and affectivity, are presented as the right environment to foster adolescent autonomy in accordance with healthy lifestyles. These parenting styles are characterized by an affective dialogue capable of bringing parents and children's expectations closer to the meaning of the specific behaviors - parenting guidelines - that make up the areas of moral, socio-conventional and personal decision. Establishing these assertive discipline channels means balancing the As, that is, combining a close parental Authority with an interdependent adolescent Autonomy, capable of maintaining sustainable personal relationships.

The questionnaires that explain the behaviors that are most often the cause of discrepancy between parents and adolescents on who should decide what, are presented as powerful resources to rehearse this affective dialogue, from which the assertive discipline channels derive. The normalization of the conflict together with resorting to the Socratic dialogue encourages children to express their opinion and builds trust. Each family will discern whether the content of the discussions focus solely on everyday matters, avoiding deeper issues, and whether they are addressed or not due to lack of time, excessive work schedules that limit coexistence, an essential moment of formative dynamism.

The flexibility of generating alternatives when making decisions should also be present from childhood. Patiently opening up to children's proposals allows them to experience responsibility and to face the consequences of their own actions. A balance which is far away from both excessive interventionism to prevent children from making mistakes - overprotection - as well as the absence of limits - permissiveness. The key could be found in a type of appreciative view of parents that fosters a trusting approach toward them: listening with acceptance and positively focusing on children's proposals would be a decisive factor in achieving the expected commitment to healthy lifestyles.

These characteristics of family functioning would form an expectations adjustment methodology between parents and teenagers supported by the Authority-Autonomy balance aimed at turning this apparently difficult period into an opportunity for family growth. Parents are responsible for the art of transmitting their experiential heritage (not only biological or economic), sharpening their children's awareness, getting to know them well, to awaken in them the love of life and promote their openness to freedom; and children assume their biological and social determinants without yielding to them: within the wide range marked by genetics and education they are called upon to build their own mature identity.

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