

Are kids today truly more autonomous?

August 4 2009

Rutherford's analysis of back issues of the popular US magazine, *Parents*, maps how the portrayal of parental authority and children's autonomy has changed over the last century. Her findings are published online in Springer's journal *Qualitative Sociology*.

Parents are faced with a difficult task when they try to balance authority with children's autonomy: they are trying to be the right kind of parents, while at the same time trying to form the right kind of kids. And there are many sources of information and social support that parents turn to in order to achieve this balance, including family, friends, doctors, teachers, other parents and the media.

Dr. Rutherford looked at how the increasing importance of individualism and personal autonomy in American culture appears in childrearing advice. She analyzed a total of 300 advice columns and relevant editorials from 34 randomly chosen issues of *Parents* magazine, published between 1929 and 2006, to see how parental authority and children's autonomy have been portrayed over the last century.

The study demonstrated that while the magazine articles showed greater autonomy for [children](#) in some areas, they also depicted children as having become more constrained in others. Instead of an overall increased autonomy, she found evidence of a historical trade-off: while children appear to have gained autonomy in private spaces in their homes, they have lost much of their public autonomy outside the home.

The articles in *Parents* showed that children were increasingly

autonomous when it came to their self-expression, particularly in relation to daily activity chores, personal appearance and defiance of parents. In contrast to this increased autonomy that child-centered parenting has given children, the 20th century has seen, in other ways, children's autonomy curtailed, through increasingly restricted freedom of movement and substantially delayed acceptance of responsibilities. Children now have fewer opportunities to conduct themselves in public spaces free from adult supervision than they did in the early and mid-twentieth century.

Dr. Rutherford concludes: "Today's parents face demands that require near-constant surveillance of their children. Allowing children more autonomy to express themselves and their disagreements at home may well be a response to the loss of more substantial forms of children's autonomy to move through and participate in their communities on their own."

More information: Rutherford MB (2009).Children's Autonomy and responsibility: an analysis of childrearing advice. *Qualitative Sociology*, [DOI 10.1007/s11133-009-9136-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-009-9136-2)

Source: Springer

Citation: Are kids today truly more autonomous? (2009, August 4) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-08-kids-today-autonomous.html>

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