The Development of Autonomy Among Learning Handicapped and Nonhandicapped Adolescents: A Longitudinal Perspective

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Factors that influence the development of adolescent autonomy were examined in a longitudinal study of 30 learning handicapped and 30 nonhandicapped adolescents. Autonomy was represented by three separate measures: distance from parental supervision, responsibility, and deviance. Findings suggest that handicapped adolescents lag behind their nonhandicapped peers in achieving separation from parental supervision, in part because of more restrictive parental rules. But the gap appears to be shrinking as the handicapped adolescents are making strides to catch up during the high school years. In both groups, the families where autonomy is achieved with the least amount of discord are those where parents relax control gradually during the period of adolescence.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a time when young people begin to assert a measure of autonomy from the family, when they begin to assert their own identity (Bowl-
by, 1973; Greenberg et al., 1983; Greenberg and Sorensen, 1974; Steinberg, 1985). Steinberg (1985), who provides an extensive discussion of adolescent autonomy, identifies three kinds of autonomy: emotional, behavioral, and value. The first concerns the extent to which adolescents "feel that they have been granted 'enough' freedom by their parents" (p. 280). The second involves the degree to which young people resist "pressures from peers, parents, and other sources of influence" (p. 285). The third category "entails changes in the adolescent's conceptions of moral, political, ideological, and religious issues" (p. 293).

While this tripartite concept has intuitive appeal, it views autonomy as a subjective state and as such it is difficult to measure. However, each of Steinberg's three categories can be given a behavioral interpretation. Emotional autonomy reflects, in part, the extent to which adolescents act apart from direct parental control and supervision. Some adolescents are closely tied to home and family, while others demonstrate more "distance" by spending time outside the home with peers. Value autonomy is best demonstrated in adolescence through acceptance of responsibility. Adolescents who undertake serious work and family commitments are demonstrating a sense of moral responsibility that is an important prerequisite for adult living. Behavioral autonomy can be demonstrated through behaviors that conflict with established norms. Deviance is behavioral evidence of adolescents demonstrating independence from the norms of their parents and society. In the present schema, then, adolescent autonomy can have a clearly positive aspect (responsibility), a negative aspect (deviance), and/or a neutral aspect (distance). These three aspects of autonomy may influence each other in complex ways as they develop over time.

Many other factors may influence each type of autonomy described above. One factor of special concern in this research is the degree to which parents attempt to maintain control over adolescents. Does lack of autonomy reflect excessive restrictions by protective parents more than a lack of initiative by adolescents themselves? This question is difficult to address because the amount of independence that adolescents achieve, and the amount that parents are willing to allow, influence each other over time. The present study will attempt to tease apart these mutual influences through a longitudinal approach that examines autonomy at two points in time.

A second concern in this study is understanding the influence of a mild learning handicap on the development of autonomy. Adolescents with learning handicaps appear to lag behind their nonhandicapped peers in establishing autonomy from parental control. Murtaugh and Zetlin (1988) found that a sample of learning handicapped adolescents from special education classes tended to stay home more, spend more time with the family, and when they did go out, were more likely to remain under parental super-