

Unleashing student autonomy in an AI world

Helping kids develop confidence, persistence, and ownership

Tips for parents



Did you know?

Developing autonomy is a key human, and adolescent, need.* Autonomy means being able to think for yourself, participate in decisions, and take responsibility for your actions. Helping kids develop autonomy means giving them meaningful choices, allowing them to make mistakes, and helping them learn the power of asking for help, from humans, and, when appropriate, AI.

Autonomy helps kids build confidence.

When kids have meaningful choices and are encouraged to take initiative, they learn that their decisions and actions matter.

Overreliance on AI can weaken autonomy.

While strategic use of AI may give kids more control over their learning (for example, through personalized tutoring), dependence on AI (for example, using it to write an essay or solve an interpersonal conflict) can reduce opportunities to make decisions, work through challenges,

ask others for help, and experience the satisfaction that comes from effort. In a 2024 survey, about half of U.S. students in grades 3-12 reported learning experiences that indicate they are in Passenger Mode (where kids simply go through the motions, put in minimal effort, and feel that school is pointless).** AI can amplify this tendency by making passivity easier.

When used intentionally, AI tools can support autonomy. Hands-on, experiential learning, especially in real-world contexts, builds confidence and ownership. AI tools can help students simulate real-world situations or explore ideas they want to pursue, while keeping students in charge of decisions and outcomes.

*The “What” and “Why” of Goal Pursuits: Human Needs and the Self-Determination of Behavior, by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, 2000.

**The Disengaged Teen, by Jenny Anderson and Rebecca Winthrop, 2025.



What to notice

If your kids pursue their own questions.

When kids have the autonomy to follow their interests, they are more likely to be engaged, set goals, and develop strategies to meet them. They may use AI to support this exploration, or they may not!

If your kids feel they need AI to do well in school. When kids believe they can't do well without AI, they may become dependent on it. This can cause them to

lose motivation, pride in their work, and their love of learning—all things that are linked to building confidence and autonomy.

If your kids use AI to coast and do less.

When kids ask AI to pick their science fair topic, write their essay, and complete their worksheet (in other words, to do their work for them), they are making fewer choices and practicing less autonomy.

What you can do: Conversations to build student autonomy and confidence

With your kids:

We recommend these activities for kids ages 10-14. But you know your kid best! If these are relevant to you, use them!

- **Conversation starter:** What's one goal you want to set for yourself this week? What can you do to reach it?
- **Give kids space to practice autonomy.** Parents want to do everything to help their kids succeed, but sometimes, your help hurts more than it benefits them. Ask yourself, "Will this help my child learn to do this on their own?" If the answer is no, take a step back and support them to do things independently (and without depending on AI!). Providing kids with opportunities to practice autonomy (with your guidance and support) helps them build confidence.

In your school or community:

- Ask schools or teachers if they offer any opportunities for experiential learning (where kids learn through doing, reflecting, and applying skills in the real world). If this isn't available through your child's school, extracurricular, or community activities, explore other ways to engage your kid in experiential learning, like trips to museums or cultural landmarks, visits to farms or small businesses, or volunteer opportunities.



Find more in our Parent Tip Sheet Library! For more detailed information, including data sources, check out the full report: A new direction for students in an AI world: Prosper, Prepare, Protect.