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Agency vs. Guan: The role of parental beliefs in shaping children's agency

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Abstract

Agency is an important yet elusive concept in cognitive development. In China, parents commonly hold the traditional belief of Guan, which literally means control but aims to cultivate agency—being self-disciplined and proactive in learning. To understand how these two opposite notions coexist, Study 1 developed a questionnaire to assess both in parents and revealed a U-shaped relationship: moderate Guan beliefs align with lowest agency beliefs, while high and low Guan beliefs are associated with greater agency beliefs. Study 2 used a vignette-based task to test how these beliefs shape children's perceived agency in decision-making. In learning contexts, control-oriented Guan belief negatively predicts children's perceived agency, while agency beliefs positively predict it. Additionally, children's perception of agency in low-agency scenario predicts their strategic responses to maternal control. These findings highlight children's active meaning-making role and suggest that shifting from control to agency beliefs may better support children's agency development.

Keywords: children's agency; Guan beliefs; agency beliefs; Chinese parenting; daily decision-making