

# Adolescent Autonomy and Family Authority: A Bedtime Negotiation Based Perspective

Xiangyuan Sun

Queen Ethelburga's Collegiate, York, YO26 9SS, United Kingdom;

## Abstract:

For adolescents, consultation with their parents about bedtime is an awareness of personal autonomy and an understanding of legal norms and the relationship between authority and the governed. The article analyzes the difference between the ideal bedtime and real-life flexibility, emphasizing parents' adaptability in rule-setting and respect for children's autonomy. At the same time, the protection of children's rights under international law and the different definitions of children in various cultural and legal contexts were emphasized. The article's conclusion shows that, given the specific circumstances of each adolescent and the uniqueness of the family environment, it is impossible to prescribe a fixed bedtime suitable for all adolescents simply. This conclusion underscores the need to consider individual differences and practical life needs when setting family rules, as well as the importance of maintaining family order while respecting children's autonomy.

**Keywords:** Juvenile; Bedtime; Autonomy; Family Authority.

## 1. Introduction

For children and teenagers, negotiating bedtime with their parents may be the first step in understanding their autonomy over their bodies, the boundaries between themselves as individuals with free will and others, and the delicate power dynamic between themselves and their guardians. This negotiation, setting, and obeying regulations also facilitates an enhanced comprehension of the nature of legal regulation and the roles of authority and the governed. The paper argues that determining whether 11 p.m. is really "my" bedtime in the circumstances discussed is very difficult, as a range of factors, such as a young person's age, parenting style, and punishment, can affect a teenager's bedtime. As such conditions have not been fully illustrated, judging whether 11 p.m. is really "my" bedtime would be difficult and irresponsible.

One reason is that the age of the children and teenagers mentioned is not provided in question, which leads to the impossibility of addressing this problem from a legal perspective. Besides, there might also be an inevitable gap between practice in principle and reality, which applies to most situations where the original plans have not been carried out due to reasons of all kinds. Furthermore, without a clear understanding of the rules and boundaries set by their guardians, bedtime might be arbitrary and confusing for the youngster. Moreover, the autonomous decision-making of young individuals may serve as the

primary impetus driving their actions, rendering them unpredictable.

## 2. The uncertainty in the age of „me“ and according to legal responsibility for actions

According to the UK Children Act 1989, individuals under 18 would be defined as non-adults from the legal perspective regarding the different stages of youngsters, such as babies, children, and teenagers <sup>[1]</sup>. The differences in psychological and cognitive development among children of different ages mean that their autonomy and understanding of rules vary at various stages. Therefore, the age of the youngsters in question is a decisive factor in the education and sentencing process on a global scale.

Young adults aged 18-25 are traditionally not distinguished from children and young adults in jails and the criminal justice system. Numerous countries have minimum criminal responsibility ages of 7-16, with some countries like South Korea and Japan considering everyone under 20-19 minors <sup>[2]</sup>. Based on research indicating that the human brain does not fully mature until the mid-20s and that legal issues require unique and complex requirements, numerous countries have developed specialized approaches to addressing young people in the criminal justice system. For example, Germany has established an expert youth court to handle young people aged 18-21 <sup>[3]</sup>.

This principle also applies to other questions regarding the extent to which they or their guardian should take full or partial responsibility for their behavior and life choices, including bedtime. Therefore, as the age of the teenagers was not defined in this question, it would be impossible to answer the question put forward at the beginning. In the UK and many other countries, very young children (such as those under 6) are considered not to have total capacity for action. Thus, parents or guardians primarily hold legal and practical decision-making rights<sup>[4]</sup>. Thus, in the early stages of a child's development, the parents have full responsibility for guiding and protecting the youth, so the basic living arrangements of the child, such as bedtime, are often determined by the parents. The "best interests of the child" mentioned in the Children Act 1989 should always be considered, including accommodating the child's personality and desires<sup>[5]</sup>. Children over six may start to disagree with specific family rules, such as unwillingness to go to bed on time. On this occasion, parents need to balance respecting the child's growing autonomy with maintaining family order. Apart from age, the competency of making their own decision will be another influential factor. In England and Wales, no act states the age of incompetence, which can be a mental disability, learning difficulties, or other conditions<sup>[6]</sup>. Thus, it is for the jury to decide whether the child is incompetent or not. To answer the question of "Is 11 p.m. really your bedtime?", the fact that the changing personal condition would affect one's answer to this question should be demonstrated first. However, this leads to the second problem, the gap between reality and ideals.

### 3. The uncertainty in the external circumstances

In response to potential objections, the advancement of setting a regular bedtime for adolescents should be fully recognized, as research has shown that regular routines, including sleep schedules, are effective in establishing a stable body clock for young people<sup>[6]</sup>. Therefore, cooperation between teenagers and their parents could be achieved to enable teenagers to follow their scheduled bedtime.

However, in analyzing the implications of a theoretically established bedtime of 11 p.m. within a family setting, it is essential to consider the distinction between theoretical constructs and practical application. Therefore, from this perspective, it is still impossible to adhere to the rule that "my" bedtime is 11 p.m. every night due to various external circumstances.

Establishing a bedtime rule, whether decreed by parents or agreed upon through negotiation with the youngster

or "me" in question, serves as an idealized standard to structure the child's routine. However, the real-world application of this rule often diverges from its theoretical framework due to the dynamic nature of family life and individual circumstances<sup>[7]</sup>. The application of a bedtime rule like 11 p.m. is influenced by various factors that render its strict enforcement impractical and inadvisable. For instance, the daily activities of teenagers, their physical and emotional state, and their unique needs on any given day might necessitate a deviation from the set bedtime. In other words, this isn't always achieved even if parents ask teens to go to bed by 11 p.m.. This explains why the above question is impossible to answer.

### 4. The authority of regulation and the absence of punishment

Another consideration of this question lies in understanding the authority of regulation under the condition where the punishment is absent. Frequently, parents and I could have different opinions on bedtime. Perhaps, in some scenarios, it's "me" who wants to stay up past 11 p.m., but parents want children to get enough sleep and set a bedtime of 11 p.m. In these cases, the issue of bedtime becomes more than just a matter of when to sleep but a reflection of the power dynamics in the relationship between young individuals and their guardians<sup>[8]</sup>. In some situations, the application of punishment might incur resentment and defiance among the youngster as they struggle to assert their autonomy in a system that may not always prioritize their needs and desires<sup>[8]</sup>. The absence of punishment in this scenario can be interpreted as a form of respect for the child's autonomy. If teens choose not to adhere to the set bedtime and face no adverse consequences, it implies that the rule serves more as a guideline than a strict mandate<sup>[9]</sup>.

From the legal perspective, penalties such as a prison sentence, a suspended sentence, or a heavy fine can be imposed on the offender to deter them from committing similar crimes. Thus, one of the main aims of the punishment is deterrence. Section 142 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 aims to sentence those aged 18 or over, one of which is 'Reduction of Crime (including its reduction by deterrence)'<sup>[6]</sup>. However, critics of the deterrence theory assume that criminals do not consider the consequences of their actions because most crimes are committed in the heat of the moment. Similarly, from the perspective of parenting within the family sphere, the 11 p.m. bedtime every day will not always be obeyed, even if a punishment should bring deterrence<sup>[10]</sup>. For example, if a friend wants to stay up late together to celebrate their birthday, the youngster might not refuse to do so.

This is perhaps because, according to the question, no punishment is applied even if “I” do not go to bed at 11 p.m. In this situation, personal freedom could be considered the decisive factor behind the bedtime for the youngster. In these cases, the nature of the ‘rule’ set by the parents, without enforcement, subtly shifts the power dynamics. This move transforms the bedtime from a rigid requirement into a negotiable suggestion, where their preferences could influence the child’s willingness or unwillingness to comply. This acknowledges the child’s growing capacity to make reasoned decisions. Individual discretion and free will play significant roles in whether the enforcement of regulations is complied with..

### **5. The free will of youngsters versus the authority of parents**

This leads to further questions of how to understand the relations between the role of guardians, “my parents,” and the free will of the youngster, “me.” First, there is a complex interaction between parenting, school education strategies, and legal provisions. While the law provides a framework for children’s rights and protection, specific family education decisions also need to consider each family’s unique circumstances and the child’s personality. Parents who recognize the necessity for flexibility in parenting may apply this rule flexibly, adapting to the child’s immediate needs rather than adhering rigidly to a predetermined schedule. On this issue, some parents of teenagers say that 11 p.m. is bedtime, but they don’t punish their children when they fail. Therefore, it could be reasonable to assume that the non-enforcement of bedtime, when not adhered to, suggests a parenting approach that prioritizes the development of autonomy and self-regulation in the child. This flexibility indicates an understanding that while rules provide structure, the child’s well-being takes precedence. Therefore, the free will of “me” might play a determining factor in the question of when their bedtime is.

In addition, it is essential to recognize that legal norms generally advocate for protecting children’s rights in a manner that respects their evolving capacities and personal autonomy. This is particularly emphasized in jurisdictions that prioritize the child’s best interests in family and social contexts, in alignment with international agreements such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>[10]</sup>. These legal frameworks suggest that while parents have the authority to establish guidelines such as bedtime, these should not be enforced in a way that negates the child’s sense of agency and dignity. For example, when the UK government considers banning smartphone sales to youths under 16, their parents’

attitudes have been considered<sup>[10]</sup>. Nevertheless, although a significant proportion of parents would favor such a ban, introducing such regulation would be a complex process, as can be imagined<sup>[9]</sup>. This principle aligns with the philosophical view that moral and social development in children is best supported in an environment that balances guidance with freedom.

Such an approach allows the child to internalize discipline through understanding and self-motivation rather than coercion. This approach indicates a broader legal and social recognition that children, while under the guardianship of adults, should be treated as individuals with their own rights and voices. Such practices encourage the development of self-regulated behavior and critical thinking in children, which is essential for their transition into autonomous adulthood. Under this circumstance, it would be challenging to address the question proposed, as whether the flexible guideline would be applied in reality is unknown.

### **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, answering whether 11 p.m. is “my” bedtime would be impossible. This is because the negotiation between teenagers and parents regarding bedtime, in reality, may be influenced by factors such as age, personality, autonomy, and diversity of free will of the teenager representing the “me”, and the uncertainty of these conditions makes it impossible to provide a definitive answer to this question.

### **References**

- [1] PENAL REFORM INTERNATIONAL, “Young Adults,” Accessed May 19, 2024, <https://www.penalreform.org/global-prison-trends-2022/young-adults/>
- [2] HERRENKOHL, TODD I., et al. “INTERSECTION OF CHILD ABUSE AND CHILDREN’S EXPOSURE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE.” *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2008, pp. 84–99.
- [3] Stearns, Peter N., et al. “Children’s Sleep: Sketching Historical Change.” *Journal of Social History*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1996, pp. 345–66.
- [4] Wolfson, Amy R., and Mary A. Carskadon. “Sleep Schedules and Daytime Functioning in Adolescents.” *Child Development*, vol. 69, no. 4, 1998, pp. 875–87.
- [5] Eide, Eric R., and Mark H. Showalter. “Sleep and Student Achievement.” *Eastern Economic Journal*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2012, pp. 512–24.
- [6] UK GOVERNMENT, “Criminal Justice Act 2003”, Accessed May 28, 2024, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/44/contents>
- [7] Lindsey, Elizabeth W. “The Impact of Homelessness and

Shelter Life on Family Relationships.” *Family Relations*, vol. 47, no. 3, 1998, pp. 243–52. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/584973>. Accessed 2 June 2024.

[8] UK GOVERNMENT, “Human Rights Act 2003”, Accessed June 2, 2024, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42/contents>

[9] UK GOVERNMENT, “Children Act 1989”, Accessed June 2, 2024, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/>

contentsCohen, Cynthia Price. “UNITED NATIONS: CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD.” *International Legal Materials*, vol. 28, no. 6, 1989, pp. 1448–76. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20693385>. Accessed June 2, 2024

[10] <https://news.sky.com/story/smartphone-ban-for-under-16s-should-be-considered-group-of-mps-suggests-13142777>