

# THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids: A Letter for Parents by the NYU Child Study Center



VOLUME 6, ISSUE 8

APRIL 2008

## **HELICOPTER PARENTING**

### **What is helicopter parenting?**

Perhaps it is a sign of the times. An era of endless telecommunication and technological advances has provided access to any person or thing in an instant and, not surprisingly, also parents' access to children. A helicopter parent is a term for a person who pays extremely close attention to his or her child, such that the parent rushes to prevent any harm or failure from befalling the child. This parental behavior is not dependent on or adjusted to the child's needs, but rather is a parenting style of hovering closely overhead.

Helicopters, to be sure, are vital for emergencies, but mainly uncomfortable for regular and frequent use. Using this analogy, the phenomenon of helicopter parenting may handicap children by making their lives too easy and preventing them from learning from their own mistakes. Helicopter parents have difficulty knowing when it is necessary to step in and advocate for their child and when it is more appropriate for their child to handle things on his or her own.

### **Why does it happen?**

Most helicopter parenting results from the honorable intention of wanting the best for one's child, and most helicopter parents may have difficulty seeing the unintended, long-term negative consequences. In addition, helicopter parenting may occur because the parent feels that without pushing, prodding, and coddling, their child will not achieve what the parent perceives is necessary. Many helicopter parents feel that their child's lack of accomplishment, or even perceived failure, is their fault or a direct reflection of their parenting. As academic and extracurricular demands placed on children become ever increasing, helicopter parents will help their child be most efficient and productive in any way they can, tending to give children more answers to remember than problems to solve. But, "a child, like your stomach, doesn't need all you can afford to give it" and too much involvement may thwart a child's ability to develop into a capable individual. It may also prevent a child from understanding the limits in what he or she can achieve, and may deny the child the opportunity to practice limit-setting, a critical skill in managing one's life.

### **Who is affected and what are the negative consequences?**

The dynamic that unfolds in helicopter parenting will affect both children and parents. Many parents feel overwhelmed by their perceived responsibility to oversee and micro-manage, but do not know of an alternate parenting style. For children whose problems are solved and life is micro-managed by helicopter parents, taking responsibility for their problems will be a much more difficult lesson to learn. As a consequence, these children may not develop the skills necessary to handle many of life's challenges, may assume someone else will handle the tedious details, and/or may feel incapable of achieving on their own. While helicopter parents may believe they are easing the transition from childhood to adulthood, they may actually be encroaching on it.

Experts warn that helicopter parenting in a society that values independence may hinder the development of this quality in children, as they become increasingly reliant on their parents to solve problems. In the words of Steven Kurtz, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the NYU Child Study Center, "When children aren't given the space to struggle through things on their own, they don't learn how to solve problems." Without experiencing trial and error, children of helicopter parents may become increasingly dependent and reliant. Even if a child embraces parental over-involvement, it is likely not without consequence and may be a direct result of their over-reliance. Without the confidence that is built up by the experience of working through challenges, these children may feel that their abilities alone are inadequate to produce desired or sufficient results. This lack of assurance in oneself can affect these children well into their adult years.

### **Are there any benefits?**

There are obvious benefits for the child whose parent makes homework a joint activity, writes his or her cover letters, or resolves a dispute with another child by talking to a fellow parent. It is unlikely, however, that the short-term benefits outweigh the long-term consequences discussed above. The National Survey of Student Engagement found that nearly 40% of college freshmen have had a parent or guardian intervene to solve a problem at college. A closer look at the findings reveals that the students with intervening parents did not receive higher grades. With younger kids, a helicopter parent's over-involvement in academic tasks may conceal learning difficulties or gaps in knowledge that should be addressed.

To the extent that helicopter parenting may help a parent avoid the distress of seeing their child fail or make a mistake, this parenting style may serve as a secondary gain for the parent's emotional state. In addition, some parents' sense of self-worth may be directly tied to their children's successes; in an effort to feel positive about themselves or their parenting abilities, parents may develop a helicopter style. Helicopter parents are advised to seek support, either from mental health professionals, other parents, or support groups, in order to manage their fears and obtain an alternative source of self-esteem.

### **How can parents avoid helicopter parenting but stay involved in their child's life?**

Helicopter parenting and being an involved, conscientious parent are not mutually exclusive, but rather part of a parent-involvement continuum. Helicopter parenting is over-involvement that is not functional for the child's long-term adaptive needs (e.g., achieving a sense of mastery, learning from mistakes, gaining increasing independence with age). Helping and guiding a child through a task or problem is not the same as solving the problem for the child. Like a shaky kid on a bicycle for the first time, a child needs both support and freedom.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that roughly one in ten adults aged 25 to 34 are living with their parents. Skyrocketing tuition, increased reliance on student loans, rising debt accrued by college graduates, an insecure job market, and the difficulties of finding a home, may lead some adult children back to the nest. Returning to the nest is not necessarily indicative of a child's inability to be independent or be an independent decision-maker; however, parents should carefully consider a child's solicitation for assistance and also examine their own desire to "fix" the problem for underlying motivations that may not ultimately serve the child's best interest. In order for children to benefit from the advice of their parents long into adult years, parental guidance must not be in place of or in isolation of the child's own problem-solving abilities.

While none of the items below are diagnostic in and of themselves, if a parent identifies with any of them, he or she may be over-managing his or her child:

- Do you feel your child will not perform adequately without your vigilance?
- Do you find yourself monitoring your child's academic and/or extracurricular pursuits?
- Is homework a joint activity?
- Are your feelings of self-worth closely tied to your child's successes or failures?
- Do you rush to solve your child's problems before giving him or her the opportunity to solve them first?
- Do you call your child several times per day, check messages to make sure you have not missed a call, and require that your child check in at regular intervals?

Depending on the context and age of your child, these items may be indicative of helicopter parenting. A mental health professional may be the best person to assess whether your child's long-term functioning is at risk by such parenting behaviors. In addition, parent support groups and individual therapy may be helpful for parents who find the urge to micro-manage difficult to keep at bay.

If you think you may be a hovering parent and want to practice guiding your child in problem solving, the following four steps may be useful: Step 1) empathize with the child's current problem; Step 2) ask the child what he or she thinks and is going to do; Step 3) offer or help brainstorm for a variety of choices and solutions and have your child articulate the different consequences to each solution; Step 4) give permission for the child to solve the problem or not to solve the problem. Remember, if the child is fortunate enough to make a poor choice, he or she may learn two lessons. Learning to "let go" is never easy, but becoming aware of and trying to change parenting tendencies that may not be beneficial for your child is critical to better parenting, being a positive role model, and ultimately the long-term welfare of your child.

**Written by Samantha Miller, M.A., M.Sc., clinical psychology doctoral candidate and extern in the Institute for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity and Behavior Disorders at the NYU Child Study Center.**

#### ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention, and treatment of child and adolescent psychiatric disorders. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with various disorders including anxiety, depression, ADHD, learning or attention difficulties, Autism, eating disorders, and trauma and stress-related symptoms.

We offer a number of treatment studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212) 263-8916 or visit <http://www.aboutourkids.org/professionals/research>.

If you or your child needs immediate assistance, mental health professionals are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by calling 1-800-LIFENET (1-800-543-3638), a program of the Mental Health Association of New York City. Help is available in several languages: Spanish: 1-877-298-3373, Chinese: 1-877-990-8585. For other languages, ask for a translator.

For further information, guidelines, and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center's website, [AboutOurKids.org](http://AboutOurKids.org).

ABOUTOURKIDS.ORG