

ARE YOU A HELICOPTER PARENT?



WHEN CARING TOO MUCH BECOMES DAMAGING TO A CHILD'S MENTAL HEALTH

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"My mother is constantly around me!"

"Why can't they stop hovering?"

"I think I can handle things on my own by now."

RECENTLY, I was in a session with an 18-year-old college student, and she started expressing her frustrations on being suffocated by her parents' constant attention.

She admitted having made mistakes and was still trying to figure out her life. Yet, she yearned to be independent in managing it.

She felt very dependent on her parents and unfortunately, did not feel that they trusted her enough to be responsible.

Ultimately, she decided to express her frustrations to her parents, which in return, provoked their outburst: "Don't we have the right to know and be a part of your life, as your parents?"

HEAVY INVESTMENT

Many parents defend their parenting practices by saying that they are only looking out for their children's safety and education, and that they are proud to be so involved in their children's lives, which is a completely fair statement to make!

At the same time, the real motivation of parents is probably multiple.

According to an article from *Psychology Today*, many parents are anxious about the future success of their children and think that clearing every path for them, including taking over tasks, will

smoothen the way and increase their chances of achievement.

In addition, some parents also want to continue the kind of connections they had when their children were younger because it is a scary thought for parents to know that as their children get older, the dependency diminishes.

There are studies showing that some parents are especially needy, emotionally. They expect their children to supply the closeness missing from their marriages or their own social life.

However you slice it, parents are putting their own emotional needs ahead of the developmental needs of their children. This will ultimately create an overly protective environment, with parents failing to instil a sense of independence and a can-do attitude in their children.

HOVERING OVERHEAD

So what does it mean to be a helicopter parent? Helicopter parents are accused of being obsessed with their children's education, safety, extracurricular activities, and other aspects of their children's lives.

Helicopter parents are also accused of over-programming their children, and for failing to allow them free time to play and explore on their own.

It is common in the younger children but they are also present in secondary school teenagers and even at the university level.

Helicopter parenting is a relatively new cultural phenomenon. Not a lot of research has been done as to the effects of it. But one can certainly imagine the

effects when a child does not grow up with a sense of independence and responsibility.

So what typically happens to children of helicopter parents?

A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Parents work very hard and with good intention to make sure that their children are protected from disappointment, failure and hardship.

Sadly, such "over-helping" might assist teenagers in developing impressive résumés for college admission, but it also robs them of the chance to learn who they are, what they love and how to navigate the world.

It can leave young adults without the strengths of skill, will and character that are needed to know themselves and to craft a life.

Another research conducted by professors at California State University found that college students with "helicopter parents" had a hard time believing in their own ability to accomplish goals.

They were more dependent on others, had poor coping strategies and didn't have soft skills, such as a sense of responsibility and conscientiousness throughout college.

Don't get me wrong! I believe that parental involvement might be the extra boost that children need in order to build their own confidence and abilities. I do think that in this day and age, children and especially teenagers need to develop the characteristics and skills needed in order to "survive" and lead full lives.

So are you a helicopter parent? Here are some simple questions to ask yourself.

1 Are you doing your teenager's homework for them? It may seem ridiculous to some but many parents do complete their children's college

homework for them. If you do, take a moment and consider what qualities you are modeling to your child.

2 Are you often arguing with your child's teachers, principals, coaches and every other adults who are involved in your child's life? Chances are you are a little too invested and may need to allow your child the opportunity to speak up and express themselves. As a parent, your job is not to solve your children's problems but to guide them into solving it themselves.

3 Are your teenagers given responsibilities and chores at home? Something small such as washing their own plates is a value towards being self-sufficient.

4 Do you feel bad about yourself for your child's mistakes? Parents will always worry about their children, but there is a difference between feeling bad about yourself and supporting your child when he or she makes the mistake.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

If parents and children are able to have an honest conversation about how parents can help in their lives, this will solve a lot of conflicts and over-parenting issues.

I believe that the key is for parents to sit with their children and ask questions like "How do you want this to go?", "When do you want me to be involved?" and "How can I support you?"

Then as a parent, you have given your child the chance to think for themselves and be accountable for their own actions. In return, children feel trusted by their parents and ultimately become more confident in figuring out their lives.

■ Jean has a background in marriage and family therapy and has worked with a variety of people. She believes that everyone has strengths and can be empowered to lead a life filled with positivity, strength and true happiness. If you would like to find out how you can leverage your strengths and manage your weaknesses in your personal or professional life, please email her at jean.selvam@leaderonomics.com



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