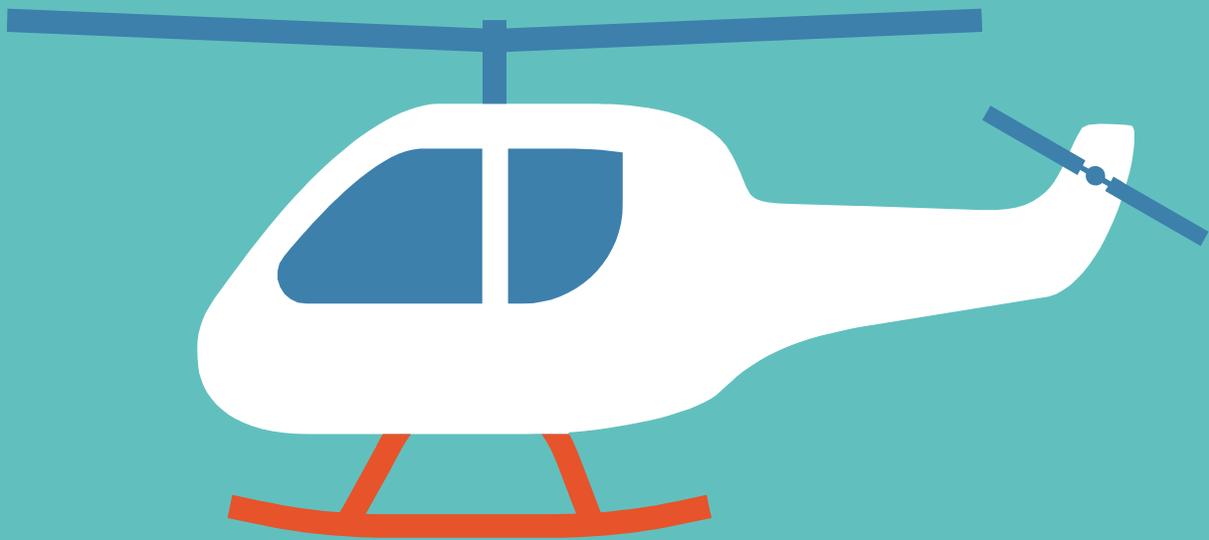


Helicopter Parenting: The Fallout

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“How to begin to educate a child. First rule: leave him alone. Second rule: leave him alone. Third rule: leave him alone. That is the whole beginning.”

D.H. Lawrence



What is a “helicopter parent”? It means being involved in a child’s life in a way that is overcontrolling, overprotecting, and over perfecting. They stay very close, rarely out of reach, pay extreme close attention to their child and rush over to prevent any harm, physically and psychologically, to the point of enmeshment. This is where personal boundaries are diffused, sub-systems undifferentiated and over-concern leads to a loss of autonomous development.

If you thought helicopter parents were too much, wait till you learn about Lawnmower Parents. These are the new generation of helicopter parents, who take overparenting to the next level. Rather than hovering, these parents actively prepare the way for their children to succeed, they mow down all obstacles they see in their child’s path; make sure their kids always look perfect and if they don’t, they’ll intervene and make it better right away.

This does not sound good!
However, if most parents read this they will likely say, phew that is not me.
So let’s look at a few examples.
Examples of helicopter parenting are:

- You prevent your child from exploring and stretching his abilities (e.g. your child climbs a tree (or anything), you run over and tell them to not do that)
- In toddlerhood, you might constantly shadow your child, always playing with and directing his behavior, allowing them no alone time
- In elementary school, ensuring your child has a certain teacher or coach, selecting the child’s friends and activities
- You monitor and control their homework, providing disproportionate assistance for homework and school projects
- You shield them from failure, if they fail then you pull your weight to change that.
- You do for your child what he/she can actually do for herself
- You influence your child to work as per your ambitions
- You negotiate your child’s conflicts
- You do their academic works or get overly involved
- You train your child’s trainers, telling them how to do things differently for your child
- You hold the responsibility for all your child’s house chores
- You don’t allow them to tackle their problems
- You don’t allow them to make age appropriate choices

When we look at this list of actions we can see that the difficulty with this often is the degree to which they get exercised. If for instance your child is stuck with homework and he/she comes to you for help it is normal to offer assistance. However, if your child is doing their homework and you consistently check the homework or monitor what they are doing, this is a step further. If your child climbs a tree that is truly a danger then asking them not to is responsible, however, if they approach any tree and they are told not to climb, well then you restrict the growth of their neurological limitations. As such it is easy to see where a parent might not have the awareness of their own helicopter parenting.

This type of excessive parenting, even though done with genuine intention, has some serious kickbacks and severe long-term consequences that most are not aware of. Here is a list of these side-effects:

1 UNDERDEVELOPMENT OF THE BRAIN

Helicopter parenting implicitly involves parents taking decisions for their children, reducing their need to problem solve and make their own decisions. The area of the brain that deals with these components is housed in the prefrontal part of the brain. This part of the brain is found to only have fully developed at 25 years of age. However, it is like a muscle and if not given the chance to exercise it will not grow substantially, meaning that these skills will stay underdeveloped. The brain is exercised by “doing”, this means by doing it yourself, failing and falling, and learning how to better do it next time. This is what increases the connectivity and effectiveness of this part of the brain. Having helicopter parents could be hindering a child’s ability to develop problem-solving and decision-making skills; skills that we want our children to have copious amounts of when they leave the nest, so they can make the most well-informed decisions in all aspects of their life and get through it as unscathed as possible. As such by not letting them fall and learn and do better next time, we hinder the development of brain and with it the copious capacities needed to thrive socially, personally and academically.

2 EMOTIONAL BACKLASH

Additionally, if parents exert too much control over situations and step in before children try to handle the challenge on their own, or physically keep children from challenging contexts altogether, they may hinder the development of self-regulatory abilities. Again, this is related to the control of the prefrontal

cortex, the more developed it is the more of a lid it can hold down on emotions. This is a well-researched area, for instance a research study published in the journal of Developmental Psychology determined that 2-year-olds exposed to this kind of parenting ended up less able to regulate their own emotions and behavior by age 5. That upped the risk for emotional problems at age 10.

3 LOW SELF-ESTEEM AND CONFIDENCE:

Helicopter parenting backfires! The over involvement of the parent makes the child believe that their parents will not trust them if they do something independently. It, therefore, leads to lack of self-esteem and confidence. When we parent this way, we deprive our kids of the opportunity to be creative, to problem solve, to develop coping skills, to build resilience, to figure out what makes them happy, to figure out who they are. Although we over involve ourselves to protect our kids and this may in fact lead to short-term gains, our behavior actually delivers the rather implicit soul-crushing news: Kid, you can’t actually do any of this without me.

It is that which we as parents need to keep at the forefront “what am I implicitly telling my child?” This is what our kids take away, not the physical words but the underlying message.

4 IMMATURE COPING SKILLS, LOW FRUSTRATION TOLERANCE = DISADVANTAGE IN THE WORK FORCE

When the parent is always there to prevent the problem at first sight or clean up the mess, the child can never learn through failure, disappointment or loss - inevitable aspects of everyone's life. They deprive the kids of any meaningful consequences for their actions. As a result, the kids miss out on the opportunity to learn valuable life lessons from the mistakes they make; life-lessons that would contribute to their emotional intelligence.

When seemingly perfectly healthy but overparented kids get to college and have trouble coping with the various new situations they might encounter—a roommate who has a different sense of “clean,” a professor who wants a revision to the paper but won't say specifically what is “wrong,” a friend who isn't being so friendly anymore, making choices—they can have real difficulty knowing how to handle the disagreement, the uncertainty, the hurt feelings, or the decision-making process. This inability to cope—to sit with some discomfort, think about options, talk it through with someone, make a decision—can become a problem unto itself. When these kids grow up, they don't know how to resolve difficulties. Hence the fallout is that over-protection makes it nearly impossible for these young people to develop problem solving skills and frustration tolerance and without these important psychological attributes, young people enter the workforce at a great disadvantage.

5 MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS:

Helicopter parenting increases a child's depression and anxiety levels. They are always in look out for guidance, and when left alone, they become too nervous to take a decision.

Multiple studies over the past decade summarize the social and psychological risks of being a helicopter parent's child. These kids are less open to new ideas and activities and more vulnerable, anxious and self-conscious. The other problem with never having to struggle is that you never experience failure and can develop an overwhelming fear of failure and of disappointing others.

Both the low self-confidence and the fear of failure can lead to depression or anxiety. Studies show that when they reach college, children of overbearing parents are found to be more likely to be medicated for anxiety or depression. The data emerging about the mental health of our kids only confirms the harm done.

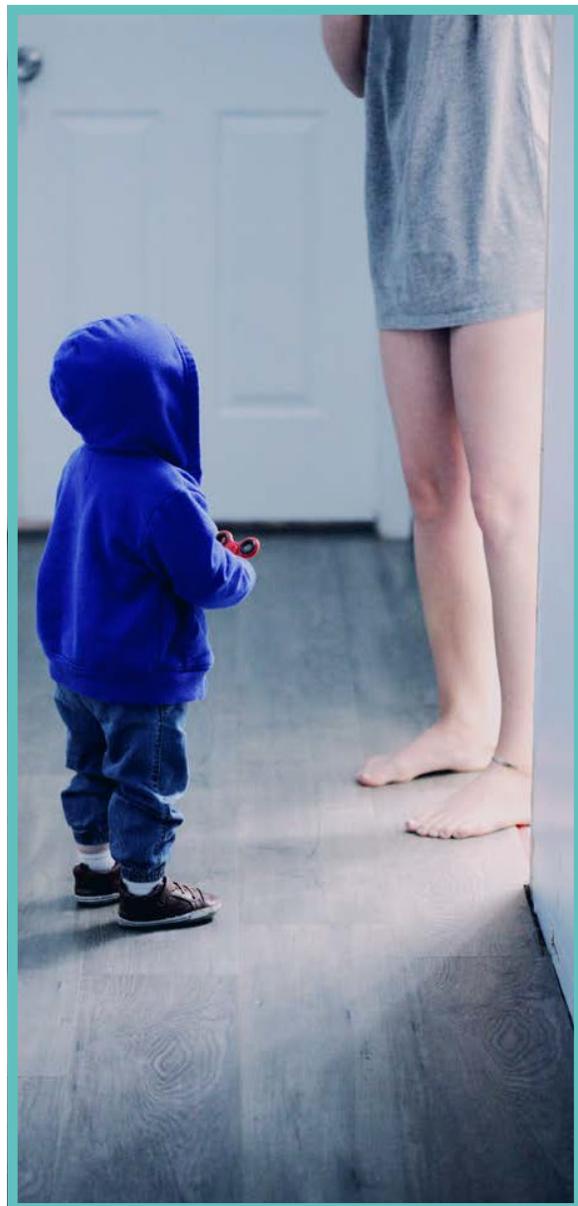
At the end of the day we want our kids to be happy. However, driving them does the opposite, it robs them of the ability to discover who they are and what internally drives them. Without this understanding of oneself, happiness hardly ever happens.

6 SENSE OF ENTITLEMENT COMPLEX:

When parents involve themselves in their child's academic, social and athletic lives, children get accustomed to always having their parents to fulfill their needs. This makes them demanding as they feel that it is their right to have what they want.

7 MEANNESS AND AGGRESSION

Research shows that kids raised by intrusive helicopter parents tend to be meaner or more hostile towards other kids. This is believed to be a response of extreme parental control. Kids act out and assert their dominance as a way to regain a sense of agency over their lives. As such, they tend to become irritable and less patient when faced with having to relate well with peers.



HOW DOES THIS STYLE OF PARENTING COME ABOUT?

The standard of overparenting (helicopter parenting) is a few decades in the making and is largely derived from a cocktail of dread: fear that our children might be injured or kidnapped, anxiety that junior might not be academically or socially successful in the absence of constant supervision, and worry that not tending to a child's every need will somehow lead to irreparable psychological damage. As a remedy, some parents have embraced intensive parenting styles that are endlessly caricatured, but have nonetheless shifted the collective expectation of what it means to be a responsible, devoted parent and it seems like the situation is getting worse.

A variety of factors shape the ability to provide such an involved and attached level of parenting, and finances are among the most important. Helicopter parenting is more readily adopted by parents in the socioeconomic stratosphere. Money may not buy happiness, but it creates space and time—including, in some cases, the option for one parent to stay home. Research revealed an interesting self-perpetuating cycle: professional women who left work to prioritize parenthood often justified that decision by making child-rearing a full-time, all-encompassing job, which in turn raised the stakes of what ideal parenting looks like. This shifted goalposts, creating a new, hard-to-achieve standard for others to live up to. In our current times of social media, visibility and connection through digital means offers a new level of support, but also a new level of judgment. Parents—mothers, particularly—aren't just living up to standards set by moms on the playground or the PTA, but the ones they encounter online. Social media has upped the ante and parents are desperate to make their kids look as successful as possible in the eyes of online

viewers. Parenting is a race to gain the greatest number of awards and experiences on behalf of their child in the shortest amount of time, and posting these successes on Facebook. In addition, due to the competitive nature of social media, parents fear their children will fail and can't meet these requirements, and this leads them to take charge of their kids' problems. For the same reason they fill their kids' agendas from early age with dozens of extracurricular activities which, they indicate, are aimed to help them prepare for adult life.

Other reasons that parents over parent is a validation of how they did themselves as parents. And so especially senior year is the witching hour, where this parenting style becomes over prevalent. One principal said, "I think for a lot of parents, college admissions is like their grade report on how they did as a parent."

There are many other reasons for this particular parenting style. For instance due to children being seen as material property of great value. The fact that couples have children in more advanced age, often after undertaking various fertility treatments, means that these children are considered a very valuable asset that must be protected at all costs. So children end up being considered gods, metaphorically speaking. Equally parents do not want to be seen as "emotionally distant parents" so they over compensate by being excessively present. Another reason is what parents "think" is expected of them, if a child loses their ball in the water, rather than letting the kid figure it out they think to themselves "if I don't run to get the ball others will think I am negligent as my kid might wade out to get it themselves".

Each one of us will innately know what our reasons are if we sit down with this question for long enough. Regardless of the reasons behind this we must, for the health and wellbeing of our children and in turn their children, move away from this pattern.

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HOW TO PREVENT HELICOPTER PARENTING

1. Always, always, think of the long-term goal, not the now. What is it I want my child to achieve? Can he achieve it with my interference?
 - A. A child is stuck on a homework problem and you help them by giving them the solution. The long-term goal is that they become their own problem solvers. So, this is an example of what not to do. What you can do is suggest ways of thinking about the problem or nudge them to research the answer to the problem.
 - B. A child comes home after having a fight with a friend. The long-term goal is for them to learn to be flexible in their thinking and come up with potential solutions. Telling them what to tell their friend would not be the answer. However, offering a listening ear and hearing them out as they track through the possible solutions, is the right thing to do to achieve the long-term goal.

2. Remember to think “what am I implicitly telling my child?”. Our children take away the underlying message, not the actual words.
 - A. Remember their brains grow by letting them do. If we always pick up what is on the floor, what they drop, then the physicality of checking and reaching to pick up does not wire and they will be hard pressed to become neat as they grow. If I pick up my child’s jumper when we leave the waiting room, what am I implicitly teaching my child? Well, that others will do the work for him (and again they are not creating those neurological connections for themselves).
 - B. If I keep checking my child’s work each time he does his homework, what am I implicitly telling my child? Well, “you need to rely on others to do a good job because on your own you might not do it well enough”.

3. Ask “Whose problem is this?” If these really are kid problems, then our job is not to solve them. It’s to help the kid solve them. Research on rats shows that when you shock them, it’s extremely stressful. But if you give them a wheel to turn after, it gives the rat a sense of control and the prefrontal cortex activates. Then in similar stressful situations, the rat can leap into a coping mode, even in situations that are uncontrollable. What we want to do is condition kids when they have a problem to leap into coping mode as opposed to waiting for their parent (or someone else later in life) to solve the problem. The latter can again also lead to learned helplessness, anxiety and depression. There are some problems a kid can’t solve themselves. If they’re being mercilessly bullied at school, an adult needs to step in. But we want as much as possible for kids to develop that coping impulse. It almost inoculates kids from stress by experiencing that. There’s a big difference between coaching a kid and trying to solve problems for them.



SO, HOW CAN PARENTS GIVE UP CONTROL WITHOUT CHECKING OUT COMPLETELY?

When kids feel securely attached to a parent or caregiver they feel safe, and when they feel safe, they explore and take risks appropriately. They’re more adventurous. Having the internal sense of safety, or a “safe base,” is simply good for human beings. In one study, researchers separated baby rats from their mothers every day for a couple of weeks, which was extremely stressful for the rats, and then bring them back to their mothers. When mothers licked and groom them for a long time after and let them know they were okay, these rats became almost impossible to stress as adults. But you have to have that den, that environment to let your guard down.

- Stop saying “we”! I catch parents saying this a lot “we need to go home to do homework”. Huh, no, it should be “we need to go home so you can do homework”. I hear “we didn’t do so well on that test”. Hum? Who’s test is it?
- Stop arguing with adults in your kids life. Let them do the problem solving, but you can guide them.
- Stop doing their homework! Stop checking their homework! Parents seem to find this the hardest. When this is stopped from a young age, kids will learn to self-monitor. Don’t worry the negative consequence of looking bad before their teacher and peers will mostly motivate them to do their homework. When they are coached through their homework and suddenly at 12 years they are expected to do it on their own, this becomes a terrifying chore with no internal self-regulation.
- Stop solving your kids problems!! Ask them, “ well what do you think you should do”. Ok, go try it out and then tell me how it went. Do not give them the answers! Let them trial and fail and trial and succeed. Do you know how much effort and energy parents put into trying to find solutions or giving the answers? I am sure you know!
- We need to stop over-scheduling our kids and let them play outdoors on their own, without adult supervision or control. We need to trust our kids and recognize that they’re smart, resourceful young people, better able to care for themselves than we might imagine. When our kids can spend time just playing and hanging out with one-another, they’ll learn essential life skills including leadership, cooperation, problem-solving, flexibility and compassion.
- Keep in mind a good motto: “ Our job as parents is to put ourselves out of job!!!”

LET THEM FALL!

The main message here is clear and bears overwhelming importance: LET THEM FALL. Oh I can hear it already “what! that is totally irresponsible and dangerous”. Hear me out... Yes let them fall... but...this is the image you need to keep in your mind: Your child is a tight rope walker in a circus (life), his aim is to walk that tight rope as safely as possible and get through the walk with his head held high, a sense of accomplishment, joy and unscathed as much as possible. So! If you hold your child's hand as they try and walk that rope, what happens? Well, they will do quite well, they might wobble a little nevertheless they will get through it... but... will they learn it for themselves? What happens when you let go of their hand? Well, they won't have made the neurological pathways to be able to sustain themselves on that rope, their brain will not have grown in those areas and they will fall, hard on to the ground. Now, if you are not the hand holder but are the net, what happens?? Your child will get up there with fear in their hearts, sweating profusely, knees like jelly but at some point they will get the courage to start that walk as they know that if they fall the net is there, you are there to catch them. And they WILL fall, no doubt about that, many times. But what happens?? Well, they gain the confidence in themselves that bit by bit they can maneuver this challenge better, they gain the confidence that they can do it themselves but have someone there to not make the fall too hard when it goes wrong. Slowly slow, the fear subsides, the sweating subsides, the wobbly knees dissipate and they start walking straighter, they start walking with confidence, they start smiling, they are sturdy, they are happy and they know in their gut and in their heart beyond a shadow of a doubt that I CAN DO IT on my own. Now when they leave your nest at whatever age it may be YOU too will know in your heart of hearts that YOUR child can make it in this world with or without you and that my dear parent is something worth striving for!

Let them fall...but be the net!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laurence van Hanswijck de Jonge is a Developmental Neuropsychologist and Coach who provides developmental and psychological assessments for English speaking children between the ages of 3 and 18 in Geneva and neighbouring Vaud, Switzerland. Her practice is rooted in Positive Psychology and her belief in the importance of letting our children flourish through building on their innate strengths. She is certified by the University of Pennsylvania, USA, to run the cutting edge resilience building programme for children. She is also a CogMed coach, an evidence-based Working Memory Training program (computer-based) which sustainably improves attention by training working memory.