

## Authoritarian and authoritative parenting

### The real problem behind the so-called 'helicopter parents'

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It recently happened to an American couple that tried to allow their children to walk the one mile from a local park to their home. [1] They were charged by child protective services with “unsubstantiated” child neglect —itself a near-oxymoronic and self-canceling term— which means their case will be held on file for five years. As the editor of a popular magazine puts it, “it’s hard to think of a safer time and a better place than the United States of 2015 to raise children — but we act as though the opposite were true.” [2]

To understand what is happening, we should go back to four years ago. In 2011, a book titled ‘Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother,’ written by Amy Chua, hit the shelves of American bookshops. [3] The book is essentially a memoir of her experience raising her daughters and exposes the many differences in the styles of parenting found in different cultures.

It created no small amount of controversy, where most parents were shocked to read about her ‘extreme’ methods. She never allowed her children to have or attend a sleepover. Her children were not allowed any extracurricular activities other than learning an instrument.

The term ‘helicopter parents’ is a pejorative expression for parents that has been widely used in the media.

The metaphor appeared as early as 1969 in the bestselling book ‘Between Parent & Teenager’ by Dr. Haim Ginott, which mentions a teen who complains: “Mother hovers over me like a helicopter...”

It gained wide currency when American college administrators began using it in the early 2000s as the Millennial Generation began reaching college age and their parents complaining to their professors about grades the children had received.

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Then another book brought up a similar controversy in the realm of parenting, only this time it points out the difference for French mothers and fathers. Pamela Druckerman, author of 'Bringing up Béb ,' is an American who moved to France and noticed a drastic difference in the behavior of her child and the children who had grown up in France. [4]

In her book she highlights that French children don't make terrible messes in public, don't throw tantrums, don't have extreme meltdowns over being told 'no', and that they are somewhat more self-sufficient than American children. She also notes that French parents, while concerned about the health and safety of their child, do not overtly concern themselves with the well-

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being of their child's immediate happiness. They do not feel a need to make their child 'happy' all the time but acknowledge that in order to raise an independent adult a child will need to understand that the rules do not revolve around them.

American parents are big believers in raising a child with high self-esteem. They believe inspiration will encourage a child to reach their goals. Should they learn from the Chinese and become the 'security guard' of their children or would it be better to follow the French system and allow them to grow by themselves, even if it implies facing risks and making mistakes? 'Helicopter parenting' or 'free-range parenting'? [5] The answer is probably both, depending on the circumstances and provided it means involvement of both parents in the process of education.

### **Involvement and over-parenting**

A study published recently found that there is an important line to draw between parental involvement and over-parenting. "While parental involvement might be the extra boost that students need to build their own confidence and abilities, over-parenting appears to do the converse in creating a sense that one cannot accomplish things socially or in general on one's own." [6]

In this sense, we shouldn't underestimate the vast importance of fathers in children's lives, not only because children 'need and love their dads', but also because of the significant impact that fathers have on the social, cognitive, emotional and physical well-being of children from infancy to adolescence and with lasting influences into their adult life. "Involved fathers

bring positive benefits to their children that no other person is as likely to bring." [7]

And we should also keep in mind that unstable balance is the fundamental truth of parenting, as it is so very often in life. "We want them to have self-esteem, but not pride. To master friendship, but thrive in solitude. To learn respect, but not blind obedience. To trust, but question. Be comfortable in their skin, but not preening. Be healthy, but also indulgent. Be independent, but still a part of us. And that explains why so many moments feel like there are no answers—because there are always two answers, or more. With each added child, the possibilities multiply exponentially." [8]

Maybe going through what Katie Roiphe has called the 'myths' of helicopter parenting can help to understand how to manage that balance better. [9] First, the belief that we can control our children on a very high level and somehow program or train or condition them for a successful life however we define it is extremely prevalent and takes many forms. Ironically, parents today want their kids spending time on things that can bring them success, but they've stopped doing one thing that's actually been a proven predictor of success—and that's household chores.

Giving children household chores at an early age helps to build a lasting sense of mastery, responsibility and self-reliance, according to research by Marty Rossmann, professor emeritus at the University of Minnesota. In 2002, Dr. Rossmann analyzed data from a longitudinal study that followed 84 children across four periods in their lives—in preschool, around ages 10 and 15, and in their mid-20s. She found that young adults who began chores at ages 3 and 4 were more likely to have good relationships with family and friends, to achieve academic and early career success and to be self-sufficient, as compared with those who didn't have chores or who started them as teens. [10]

Chores also teach children how to be empathetic and responsive to others' needs, notes psychologist Richard Weissbourd of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. In research published in 2014, he and his team surveyed 10,000 middle- and high-school students and asked them to rank what they valued more: achievement, happiness or caring for others. [11]

### **The 'frustration tolerance'**

Helicoptering is also a natural outcome of our increasingly competitive society. The problem is that if you are anxiously trying to make your child into a successful adult, you are most likely communicating anxiety—and not success—to them. Common triggers are fear of dire consequences—when many of those consequences are great teachers for kids; feelings of anxiety—worries about the economy, the job market, and the world in general; overcompensation of adults who felt unloved, neglected, or ignored as children; and peer pressure from other parents—feeling that if we don't

immerse ourselves in our children's lives, we are bad parents.

The main point is probably that we don't want our children to fall, so instead of letting them experience adversity, we clear the path. We remove obstacles to make their life easy. But adversity is a part of life, and only by facing it can our children build life-coping skills they'll need down the road. So while it seems like we're doing them a favor, we're really stunting their growth. We're putting short-term payoffs over long-term well-being. [12]

The era of instant gratification has led to a decrease in what therapists call 'frustration tolerance.' This is how we handle upsetting situations, allow for ambiguity, and learn to navigate the normal life circumstances of breakups, bad grades, and layoffs. When we lack 'frustration tolerance,' moderate sadness may lead to suicidality in the self-soothingly challenged. [13]

The idea that you can turn your child into a creative person is another equally pernicious form of helicoptering. It is somehow connected to the frequency with which people talk about their children as 'gifted' and the need for bright children to be geniuses, the pumping up of ordinary kid stuff into art. As Levine puts it in one of her elegant deadpan moments, "Being special takes hard work and can't be trusted to children." [14]

New parents are also burdened by the way our society romanticizes early parenthood, especially motherhood. Played out in media imagery, this contributes to perceptions of instant bonding, instinctive breastfeeding and 'perfect babies' being cared for by 'perfect mothers.' [15]

### Good intentions gone awry

Helicopter parenting is about too much presence, but it's also about the wrong kind of presence. In fact, it can be reasonably read by children as absence, as not caring about what is really going on with them, as ignoring the specifics of them for some idealized cultural script of how they should be. It is the imposition of the parents' fantasy of how they want their children's lives to be. It's the appearance of being busy and enjoying a rich or full life. As Levine points out, it is "the confusion of over-involvement with stability." [16]

While you think you're giving your kids everything, they often think you are bored, pushy, and completely oblivious to their real needs. But let's look at this very simply: if you're willing to give up your own life and identity, what is the message you have sent your kid about the value of other people, mothers in particular?

Some people think that helicopter parents are bad or pathetic people with deranged values, but that is never the case. Actually, as both Warner and Levine point out, helicoptering, even in its more gruesome and dire forms, is generally the product of love and concern.

## Parenting styles \*

Baumrind suggested that the majority of parents display one of three different parenting styles. Further research by Maccoby and Martin suggested the addition of a fourth parenting style (1983).

It seems obvious that the 'helicopter parent' would join the authoritarian style, while the authoritative one would be much more desirable.

**Authoritarian Parenting:** in this style of parenting, children are expected to follow the strict rules established by the parents. Failure to follow such rules usually results in punishment. Authoritarian parents fail to explain the reasoning behind these rules. If asked to explain, the parent might simply reply, "Because I said so." These parents have high demands, but are not responsive to their children. According to Baumrind, these parents "are obedience- and status-oriented, and expect their orders to be obeyed without explanation."

**Authoritative Parenting:** like authoritarian parents, those with an authoritative parenting style establish rules and guidelines that their children are expected to follow. However, this parenting style is much more democratic. Authoritative parents are responsive to their children and willing to listen to questions. When children fail to meet the expectations, these parents are more nurturing and forgiving rather than punishing. Baumrind suggests that these parents "monitor and impart clear standards for their children's conduct. They are assertive, but not intrusive and restrictive. Their disciplinary methods are supportive, rather than punitive. They want their children to be assertive as well as socially responsible, and self-regulated as well as cooperative."

**Permissive Parenting:** these parents, sometimes referred to as indulgent parents, have very few demands to make of their children. These parents rarely discipline their children because they have relatively low expectations of maturity and self-control. According to Baumrind, permissive parents "are more responsive than they are demanding. They are nontraditional and lenient, do not require mature behavior, allow considerable self-regulation, and avoid confrontation". Permissive parents are generally nurturing and communicative with their children, often taking on the status of a friend more than that of a parent.

**Uninvolved Parenting:** an uninvolved parenting style is characterized by few demands, low responsiveness and little communication. While these parents fulfill the child's basic needs, they are generally detached from their child's life. In extreme cases, these parents may even reject or neglect the needs of their children.

\* *'How fathers can shape child health and well-being'*, L. Wood y E. Lambin - *The Univ. of Western Australia*, 2013.

It is not necessarily a sign of parents who are ridiculous or unhappy or nastily controlling. It can be a product of good intentions gone awry, the play of culture on natural parental fears. [17]

### An odd way to 'help'

Now, the novel phenomenon of American upper-middle-class helicopter-parenting, in which kids are scheduled, monitored, and supervised for their 'enrichment' at all times, is now being enforced on others, as the case mentioned at the beginning shows.

It's an odd way to 'help' a child who is unsupervised for five minutes to potentially inflict years of stress, hours of court appearances, and potential legal fees and fines on their parents. Children who experience discreet instances of suboptimal parenting aren't always aided by threatening their parents with stiff, potentially family-jeopardizing legal penalties. The risk of five or even 10 minutes in a temperate, locked car while mom shops is still a lot better than years in group homes and foster systems. [18]

That attitude seems to forget that "parenting is like being in a triathlon: You feel like you are winning at times. You excel in one way, but always have a weaker leg of the race. You prepare, but you never

know what the weather will be like that day. It could be cold and windy or really freakin' hot. You could buy the fanciest bike and the most expensive shoes, but in the end, you are all the same. Together, you are all trying your best and looking for strength within. Some may look like they have it easier, but you can't use that as an excuse. You signed up for the damn thing and it's not even about winning, but finishing the race. You see beautiful scenes, but often, you're going so fast, you forget to notice until you get towards the end. You get worn out. You want to quit, but really, you just want to hit pause and you can't." [19]

What our children need more than anything is love. We cannot love our children too much. We can give them too many things and not enough discipline, but it is impossible to give them too much love. Raising children is a challenge because they are here to be their own people. When they come into our lives, they are a blank cell with no definitive direction. Our job as parents is to provide them the right environment, guidance and sustenance so they can find their unique purpose. Our love is the nutrition guiding them in learning to love and define themselves as separate and significant people. Truly loving them means love with no strings attached. This means our children don't have to be or do anything in particular to earn our love because "our love is a given, not a reward system." [20]

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[2] Jennifer Senior, 'We live in an age of irrational parenting', NY Mag (13 March 2015).

[3] Amy Chua, 'Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother Paperback', Penguin Books (2011).

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[9] Katie Roiphe, 'The Seven Myths of Helicopter Parenting', Slate (31 July 2012).

[10] Jennifer Breheny Wallace, 'Why children need chores', Wall Street Journal (13 March 2015).

[11] Richard Weissbourd, 'Making Caring Common', Harvard Graduate School of Education (2014).

[12] Kari Kubiszyn Kampakis, '10 common mistakes parents today make (me included)', The Huffington Post (3 March 2014).

[13] Brooke Donatone, 'Why millennials can't grow up', Slate (2 January 2014).

[14] [15] [16] [17] Madeline Levine, 'Teach Your Children Well: Parenting for Authentic Success', HarperCollins (2012).

[18] Michael Brendan Dougherty, 'Stop helicopter-parenting other people's kids', The Week (6 June 2014).

[19] Jenny G. Perry, 'Parenting is sometimes like a Triathlon', The Huffington Post (26 January 2015).

[20] Sherrie Campbell, 'Love your children: Easier said than done?', The Huffington Post (1 May 2014).

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