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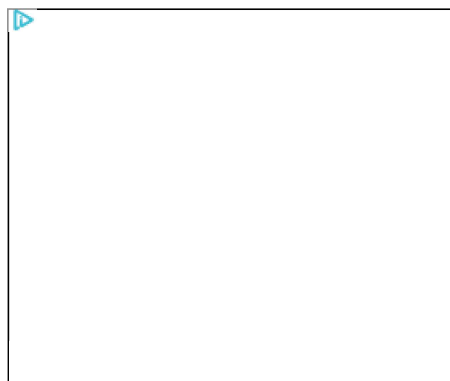
Want A Well-Adjusted College Student? Stop Helicopter Parenting

In just a couple months, a new crop of high school graduates will head off to their freshman year of college. Regardless of what they were doing while living at home with their parents, they will now be expected to do their own laundry and choose their own schedules. Those living off campus or who don't have a meal plan through the school may need to go grocery shopping and cook their own meals. (I'm sure they'll be making Cordon Bleu instead of the daily diet of ramen, Hot Pockets and midnight-baked brownies my roommate and I enjoyed.)

They will now have to manage their time effectively, plan ahead for studying for tests and writing papers, and budget their money, whether from financial aid or working or a parental stipend. They'll need to resolve roommate disputes on their own, visit office hours with professors to discuss concerns about their grades and make their own appointments at the student health center for a health problems.

Or will they?

[Complaints from professor and college administrators](#) about the increasing dependence of college students on their parents are on the rise. Professors (including myself as a adjunct and my former colleagues) seem to get more calls from parents about absences or grade disputes than a generation ago. And [article](#) after [article](#) has lamented how "[helicopter parents are ruining college students](#)," making them [more fragile](#) and unable to cope with the pressures of young adulthood.



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Graduating students participate in commencement exercises at City College, where First lady Michelle Obama delivered the commencement speech after being presented with an honorary doctorate of humane letters on June 3, 2016 in New York City. (Photo by Spencer Platt/Getty Images)

But is it true? Well, if you believe the research, yes. [Another new study](#) in the *Journal of Child and Family Studies* this week has built on that research, finding that helicopter parenting can increase students' risk of depression and anxiety—but developmentally supportive parenting can increase students' wellbeing and independence.

Concerns about the impact of helicopter parenting on young adults' wellbeing isn't new—or unwarranted. In one national survey noted in the new study, 89% of college counseling center directors reported that they had seen an increase in student anxiety disorders in the past five years. More than half (58%) reported an increase in clinical depression among students, and more than a third (35%) reported an increase in self-injury problems among students.

[Another survey](#) found that 95% of counseling center directors reporting psychological problems in students to be a growing concern. [And yet another](#), of nearly 100,000 college students, found in the previous 12 months that more than half had felt overwhelming anxiety, 57% felt loneliness, 61% felt sadness and 84% felt overwhelmed by all they had to do.

While some of these increases may be driven by more students' willingness to seek out help or greater awareness of mental health issues—both positive developments—those two explanations probably don't fully explain such dramatic increases. Hence the new research looking at the effects of parents who basically hover too much and do too much for their children instead of teaching and preparing their children to do more things themselves.

The new study, from doctoral candidate Kayla Reed and other researchers at [Florida State University](#), characterized helicopter parents as “overly involved, protective parents who provide substantial support (e.g., financial, emotional, physical health advice) to their emerging adult children, often intervening in their affairs and making decisions for them.” Plenty of studies have already shown that lower family satisfaction, greater emotional problems among children and greater rates of anxiety, depression and stress—among other issues—have all been associated with helicopter parenting.

“Individuals with parents who engage in highly controlling, overprotective behaviors have been characterized as being overly needy in terms of seeking attention, approval and direction from others,” the authors wrote in summarizing past research. “In addition, they have been found to utilize more ineffective coping skills, express higher levels of narcissism and demonstrate lower self-efficacy.”

The alternative isn’t neglect, pull-up-your-bootstraps lectures about hark-knocks or just leaving kids to their own devices, though. Developmentally appropriate parenting can promote healthy decision-making and a child’s development of autonomy, increasing the likelihood that their children will become independent, well-adjusted, problem-solving adults. They tend to cope better with stress, have more self-esteem and experience less depression.

“For example, emerging adults whose parents set clear limits while maintaining a warm and engaging environment reported higher perceptions of self-worth and self-efficacy,” the researchers wrote, “whereas emerging adult men with parents who demanded unquestioning obedience and lacked warmth during childhood reported lower self-esteem.”

The researchers interviewed 461 college students, ages 18 to 25, from a large university in the Southeast. Nearly all were full-time students, and 81% were young women. Most were also white (72%), and just over half said they were in a committed, romantic relationship. Only 15% were currently living with their parents. The questions primarily assessed the students’ perceptions of their mothers’ parenting

behaviors, with a focus on mothers because they tend to be the primary caregivers and the parent that college students communicate more with.

The researchers used a new assessment scale actually called the “Helicopter Parenting Behaviors measure,” which seeks to identify intrusive parenting behaviors versus those that are supportive and encourage a child’s autonomy. Items measuring autonomy that students had to agree or disagree with included “my mother encourages me to make my own decisions and take the responsibility for the choices I have made” and “my mother encourages me to deal with any interpersonal problems between myself and my roommate or my friends on my own.” Items measuring helicoptering behaviors included “my mother regularly wants me to call or text her to let her know where I am” and “my mother monitors my diet.”

One goal of the study was actually to confirm the two dimensions of the scale, but another goal was to discover whether young adults’ mental and physical health were directly related to either helicopter parenting behaviors or parenting behaviors that supported autonomy. Questions the students answered about self-efficacy included ones such as “I feel insecure about my ability to do things” and “If something looks too complicated I will not even bother to try it.”

Both supportive parenting and helicopter parenting affected children’s likelihood of anxiety, depression, life satisfaction and physical health, but in different ways. Having parents who supported children’s autonomy led to adults who were more satisfied with life, less likely to be depressed and healthier after accounting for the children’s ability to care for themselves as adults.

Children of helicopter parents also had good overall physical health, but it was also associated with lower levels of self-efficacy. Interestingly, helicopter parenting itself was not directly associated with any other outcomes, including wellbeing, depression or anxiety, in one direction or another. But self-efficacy was related to greater life satisfaction and less depression.

It can be hard to know where the lines are as a parent, of course. “One key factor that distinguishes helicopter parenting from

autonomy support is the nature of the parental advice,” the authors write. Advice that “threatens an emerging adult’s autonomy or competence”—such as implying that an adult cannot do something for themselves—falls closer to the helicopter pad, for example. But it’s not typically on purpose.

“Helicopter parenting is unique in that it does not target the emerging adults’ emotional or psychological autonomy,” the researchers wrote. “Rather helicopter parenting is characterized by behavioral control and excessive limiting of autonomy that is inconsistent with the age of the emerging adult child.”

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