

Helicopter Parenting

We try too hard. We are so anxious for our children to be successful, to be good athletes or musicians, to get a good trade, get into good colleges and to have good jobs. We do not, however, often appreciate how in our fearing the worst for our children we plant the seeds of incompetence, frustration, and unhappiness. That's the sobering news from the latest crop of books on parenting.

Carl Honore, author of "Under Pressure: Rescuing Our Children From the Culture of Hyper-Parenting" says he was inspired to take on the topic when he saw himself becoming one of those parents. At a parent-teacher conference, his 7-year-old's art teacher told him that his son was "incredibly imaginative," that he was indeed "a gifted young artist." Elated at the news, Honore charged home and spent the evening surfing the Internet looking for the right art course to nurture his son's talent. The next morning on their walk to school, Honore floated the idea of art lessons. His son wasn't interested.

"I don't want to go to a class and have a teacher tell me what to do -- I just want to draw," his son said firmly. "Why do grown-ups have to take over everything?" Honore said the reply opened his eyes. "My God, he's right. I am trying to take over. I'm one of those overbearing parents," he said.

That epiphany prompted Honore to embark on a 2-year investigation of child-raising approaches around the world. What he found everywhere he went, particularly among middle-class and affluent families, was that despite the best intentions or perhaps because of them, kids are over-scheduled, over-stimulated and over-indulged.

This micromanagement of kids' lives has different names in different countries. In the U.S., it is called "helicopter-parenting" because Mom and Dad are always hovering around their children. Scandinavians joke about 'curling parents' who frantically sweep the impediments from the metaphorical ice in front of their child. 'Education mothers' devote every second to steering their children through the school system in Japan.

It remains to be seen if this kind of micromanaging the life of a child is equipping anybody to be successful. I know some parents who see their children as an extension of themselves and want to be proud of their children's happiness, intelligence and achievement.

Another author, Hara Marano, is the author of "A Nation of Wimps: The High Cost of Invasive Parenting" tells of parents who do their children's homework, sell their charity sponsorship lines, fill out their college applications, solve conflicts with their college buddies and, after leaving college, negotiate their raises.

These are parents who are so determined to take the lumps and bumps out of childhood that they never allow the child to develop coping skills. This over-involved style of parenting may account in some small way for the epidemics of depression, anxiety, binge-drinking and self-harm seen on college campuses these days.

Many of these teenagers-young adults have no coping skills because they have been over-monitored, over-pressured. They have sort of been building portfolios of excellence since they were in kindergarten.

In the grip of anxiety, parents sometimes forget one really important thing: The goal of raising children is to produce an independent, autonomous adult.

While parents have always wanted their children to be happy, parents of past generations did not make it a daily project as some parents today do. Parents of the past didn't create a protective bubble around their kids or insulate them from the responsibilities, the events, or the people who seemed to get in the way of the children. That's the happiness police trying to thwart anything in the way of their kids' happiness.

The teacher who gives a child too much homework might get a call from one of these parents saying the child is having a hard time, that she can't handle the level of the homework, that she's so unhappy. A generation or two ago, parents would commiserate: Sorry there's a lot of homework. That's just the way it is. Do your best

Many modern parents have become over-sensitive and hyper-respectful of their child's emotional life. This develops into a pampering and indulgence of the child by not wanting the child to experience distress. However it is only through the experience of distress that the child discovers his or her own inner resilience. The child, in learning to cope with frustration and disappointment, develops his/her self-esteem and inner belief. For this reason the spoiled and pampered child is no match for the child that has learned to cope with the everyday strains and stresses of life.

Focusing on wanting the child to be 'happy' often undermines the importance of allowing the child to experience and cope with other feelings such as disappointment, frustration, and the effects of living with the consequences of their own choices. It also makes parents less likely to say "no" when it's needed because they feel that it is sure to make their kid unhappy. The temporary emotional distress of a child that is not getting what he/she wants is not remotely close to unhappiness, it is no more than the emotional reflex to try to manipulate his or her parents!.