

Letting go of your inner helicopter parent

They can be found at the playground, the preschool classroom and the pool. But they can just as easily be spotted on high school football fields and in college dorm rooms.

The helicopter parent.

Hovering, this caregiver can't quite let go. And with good reason. The world can feel like a scary, out-of-control place for many moms and dads. We want to protect our kids and make sure they succeed in life. That means, sometimes we hold onto them just a bit too tight.

But while there may be understandable reasons for the rise of helicopter parent, there are also downsides. And it's important to strike a proper balance of keeping kids safe and giving them the skills to survive on their own.

For advice, we turned to Jamie Nordling, Ph.D., social developmental psychologist and assistant professor at Augustana College. She studies parent-child relationships and has been researching helicopter parents in college age kids. Anecdotally, she has come in contact with plenty of young adults who can't make a decision without running it by mom and dad.

"Students have trouble making decisions without asking their parents," Jamie says. "Things like taking class or choosing a major."



Her research focuses on how helicopter parenting affects academic confidence, depression, risk-taking behavior, autonomy, social competence and more. And while there are many variables, there are some interesting findings.

"Broadly, helicopter parenting is leading to negative behaviors," Jamie explains. "When someone is always making decisions for you, when do you begin to make them for yourself?"

And don't think that means helicopter parenting is only a problem when kids are getting ready to leave the nest.

"It's the same pattern of behavior, whether the child is 2 or 20," Jamie says.

Here's what you need to know:

The origins of helicopter parenting

The term "helicopter parenting" is relatively recent. It generally refers to excessive over-involvement in a child's life, even when it's not necessary to do so.

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When kids are little, it can be developmentally appropriate as a parent to "hover."

- You likely wouldn't give your six-month old food she couldn't swallow.
- You probably wouldn't let your one-year-old walk himself across a busy parking lot.
- You likely wouldn't drop your three-year-old off at the city pool alone and hope for the best.

But as kids get older, it's a caregiver's job to help them develop autonomy and independence. This means letting young people make age-appropriate decisions and deal with the consequences of those decisions. It also means letting them manage tricky social relationships - they need to learn to negotiate, disagree and communicate with others.

And they need to do it without the intervention of a parent.

For some moms and dads, it's can be challenging to let go and allow kids make their own choices and mistakes. It can feel too hard to let them handle difficulties on their own. And this is especially the case when parents have been stepping in and taking care of problems for the child's life entire life.

The good intentions behind helicopter parenting

In most cases, helicopter parenting comes from a good place. Jamie explains that parents generally want what's best for a child and want to help their kids avoid mistakes, pain and failure.

But these things are also part of growing up. And by avoiding all of life's problems, parents aren't giving their kids the opportunity to develop skills needed to succeed in adolescence and adulthood.

Developing autonomy from a young age

Parenting is a continuum between nurturing and survival. At an early age, parents are responsible for every aspect of survival. As the child grows, parents continue to keep their kids safe, but the focus moves away from survival and toward nurturing.

"You can support autonomy in the confines of what's socially acceptable and safe," Jamie says.

At an early age, this means modeling good decisions and giving kids plenty of opportunities to making their own choices. By adolescence, a parent's role moves to primarily giving guidance and support - but not necessarily always telling kids what to do.

"There is an identity shift in early adolescence," Jamie explains. "For parents and for kids. It is a transformation of the relationship."

By the teenage years, kids need to be making autonomous decisions. They should have the freedom to make many decisions on their own, with parental support and guidance. If you have already been giving your child a chance to make age-appropriate choices, it will be an easier transition.

How to let go of your inner helicopter parent - before it's too late

Maybe letting go is hard for you as a parent, but you know you want to help your children develop autonomy. It's never too late to step back and allow your kids to make more decisions.

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Here are a few tips:

Give your kids choices.

Parents can give even young children the chance to make decisions. For example, kids can choose between two acceptable options for breakfast or choose an outfit from a few appropriate pieces. This could mean losing a bit of control as a parent. Your child may choose to wear something that doesn't exactly match. Or your child may choose to eat the same meal every day. But it's also giving them the practice they need.

As kids get older, they should also get to make more decisions with parental guidance. Activities, jobs and friendship decisions will give them plenty of opportunities - with your guidance.

Involve your kids in decision-making.

Many kids don't realize all the decisions adults make and responsibilities adults have. Give them an opportunity to be part of your decision-making process and model the proper way to make a decision. For example, if you are buying a new car, bring your kids with you to the dealership and discuss how you make the best decision for your family and budget. Let your child weigh in and give their opinions, too. Or if you are making a tough decision at work, share it with your child and have an open discussion at dinner.

Give your kids autonomy in social interactions.

As kids get older, they should be given an opportunity to navigate tricky social situations without parental interference.

It can be natural for parents to want to step in and take care of troubles with peers, teachers and coaches. But, it's incredibly important to give young people the opportunity to deal with these situations, when appropriate. By providing guidance and wisdom, young people can actually take care of many situations on their own.

Support decisions your kids make.

Keep the lines of communication open when your child is making decisions or dealing with challenging circumstances. Just because they are developing autonomy doesn't mean you shouldn't have the opportunity to help and provide guidance.

Just as you wouldn't let your child drive off in the car without hours of driving practice, autonomy also takes time and practice.

If your child is forgetting something important when making a decision, bring it up. Walk through the decision together. Give them examples.

But at the end of the day, give them the autonomy to make a decision - even if it's not what you would consider the "best" decision.

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Be there when mistakes are made.

Even under the best of circumstances, failure will happen. But for our kids, all mistakes are not the enemy. They can be painful, but they can also help a young person make better choices in the future. "We learn from our mistakes - it's a part of development," Jamie explains. "Parents want to keep kids from pain and rejection. But that's not real life."

When a child inevitably makes a bad decision, be there to support them learn and do better next time. If your child wants a different outcome next time, you can be part of this learning opportunity.

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Helicopter parents are all around us - from the playground to the college campus. And sometimes, we all become a bit of a helicopter parent. (No shame.)

But if you aren't ever giving your kids the opportunity to make decisions and develop autonomy, you are doing them a disservice. Our job as caregivers is to prepare our kids for adulthood.

So now's the time to stop hovering and begin supporting our kids as they grow and develop their own independence. In the end, this is an important way to show them we love them.

Originally posted on the Now What? Blog on 4/30/18. The Now What? Blog served for nearly 7 years to

1. Normalize parents seeking support and help as a manner of child abuse prevention
2. Engage community in how they can work to prevent child abuse
3. Work to build resiliency in families through promotion of the 5 protective factors

Maybe you coach a baseball team or you help care for the neighbor kids from time to time. You are investing in the safety and security of the children in our community. Because it truly does take a village to raise our children, we want to offer the tools needed to bring awareness and education to preventing child abuse.

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