Helicopter parent
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The Seven Myths of Helicopter Parenting

Don't fool yourself into thinking you're not one, because you probably are.

By Katie Roiphe|Posted Tuesday, July 31, 2012, at 3:21 PM ET

Are you a helicopter parent?

Photograph by Thinkstock.

1. You are not a helicopter parent if your kid is not in a zillion extracurriculars. In the recent clamor on the subject of whether this generation of parents is hovering too much and oversteering, overmanaging, and otherwise spoiling their children, I've heard parents say, "But we don't know any actual helicopter parents." They say this because they don't know anyone who fits the obvious caricatures—that is anyone who schedules Mandarin classes for their 5-year-old and dutifully shuttles them off every Saturday morning for theater-to-express-yourself classes. But the overabundance of extracurriculars is only one small part of the larger, disturbing phenomenon Madeline Levine chronicles in her voice-of-reason-ish new book, *Teach Your Children Well*, which was excellently reviewed this weekend in the *New York Times* by Judith Warner. 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. Do you not allow your children to watch television? Do you allow them any time on the Internet unsupervised? Are you keeping very close track of what they eat? Do you get a little too involved in homework? Do you barely ever hire baby sitters at night? I know parents who think of themselves as very unhelicoptery but who are just helicoptering in different ways. As Levine points out, "It's possible to feel that things are 'normal' when it seems that everyone around you shares a similar belief."

2. Helicoptering is 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. Warner put it this way:

These are parents who run themselves ragged with work and hyper-parenting, presenting an “eviscerated vision of the successful life” that their children are then programmed to imitate. They’re parents who are physically hyper-present but somehow psychologically M.I.A.: so caught up in the script that runs through their heads about how to “do right” by their children that they can’t see when the excesses of keeping up, bulking up, getting a leg up and generally running scared send the whole enterprise of ostensible care and nurturing right off the rails.

The point is that you most likely can’t make your child succeed according to narrow, conventional standards, and if you do manage to do so, you may be crushing something else more important out of them. I remember a conversation with a very smart 20-year-old about his future when he said, “I just want to have a nice apartment in New York City.” And I thought, “That’s all? That’s what you want at 20?” In their efforts to ensconce him in security and some safe version of happiness or success, his parents had somehow pounded the spirit and desire out of him. Part of helicoptering is the fearful, anxious embrace of the comfortable bourgeois life that is making you anxious in the first place.

3. If you are not that materialistic, you can’t be a helicopter parent. The idea that you can turn your child into a creative person is another equally pernicious form of helicoptering. I knew someone who used to put out art projects for her children at breakfast so they would have something educational to do while she rooted for sneakers and poured Corn Flakes. This sweetly crazy practice 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.”

4. Helicopter parenting is about too much presence. Well, it *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 overinvolvement with stability.

5. Sacrificing your own life for your children is a good or noble thing. From behind the therapist’s door, after decades of experience treating privileged kids, Levine has this to say on the subject:

> You should hear what most kids say about this. ... 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?

It may be useful to remind ourselves that sacrifice is not a gesture that you make in front of a mirror: The recipients of this sacrifice may not take it in the spirit in which it is intended, and it may, in fact, *harm* them.

Illustration by Charlie Powell.

6. Helicopter parents are bad or pathetic people with deranged values. 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. 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.

7. This conversation is boring. In the little echo chamber of media, we have heard enough about bourgeois parents overparenting their kids to last 13 lifetimes. You may feel this way, and I honestly sympathize, but the problem persists. Judging from all the books desperately reaching for other ways to parent (Chinese? French?) along with the recent anguished works of elaborate critique, we may be reaching a tipping point, one of those interesting moments of self-reflection in which people actually look at what they are doing and try to change it, or, more cynically, in which fashions change. Madeline Levine's pleasingly sensible and practical book occasionally dips into the melodramatic, apocalyptic tone of popular cultural critiques—like the *The Lonely Crowd*, *The Feminine Mystique*, and *The Culture of Narcissism*—with its discussion, for instance, of a "culturally normalized form of child abuse," but she is not in this particular case overplaying her hand. The image Warner cites from Levine's first book, *The Price of Privilege*, of a girl from a wealthy family, successful in all the right ways, personable, high-achieving, but with the word "empty" carved into her forearm, continues to haunt. Or put another way: "Our kids need more than four years between crossing a street and putting on a condom."