

ARE WE *TOO INVOLVED* WITH OUR CHILDREN?

BY ILLYSE LANE

I'd like to think of myself as a good parent. I provide the basics – food, which on occasion, is made to order; shelter, which is kept toasty warm in the winter; and clothing, which, of course, changes like the weather. Sometimes, I do even more. I help with homework. Talk with teachers. I sign the kids up for extracurricular activities. I watch their practices. Make sure they don't forget their lunchboxes on their way out.

But when does all my help turn into harm? Am I too involved with my children? Is there even such a thing? Believe it or not, there is. And, although your knee-jerk reaction is to say, "Not me," you may have to take a closer look in the mirror. I did.

Hovering or Helping

Maybe you check your children's grades daily. Perhaps you've helped design and build a project. Have you even requested a teacher? Or spoken to a coach about your child's performance? Maybe you've wanted a progress report changed because you didn't care for a comment. Or arranged play dates with kids you think your child should be playing with, not ones he likes. Any of this ring a bell?

If so, consider yourself warned, for too much involvement now can lead to helicopter parenting later on.

This recently coined term describes parents of college-aged children, who, like helicopters, hover over their children by paying close attention to their experiences, especially when it comes to school. But don't let the words "college-aged" and "school" fool you. This phenomenon is slowly spreading among children as young as elementary school, as parents strive to help their kids achieve success not just in academics, but also with extra-curricular activities and social situations.

Helicopter parents hover whether or not their children need them to, all in an effort to prevent any harm or failure from happening to their children. Although these parents mean well, hovering now can lead to issues later on. For once we get into the habit of taking responsibility for things our children can do for themselves, we put them in the tough position of never learning how to solve their own problems.

Too Much of a Good Thing

As parents, it's our natural inclination to want our children to be successful. So while it's good to be involved, our well-intentioned efforts to help our kids can cross a fine line that is often hard to see.

If my older son knows I'll take the short drive back up to school to grab a forgotten book, he won't be upset upon realizing he's left it behind. If I offer to email the teachers about him leaving early for a doctor's appointment, it's one less thing my child has to remember to do. If I continue to pick up the bath towel left on the floor after the shower, my younger son will never learn where to hang it.

"A child who always forgets has a parent who always remembers," says Amy McCreedy, founder of Positive Parenting Solutions. "If we always try to prevent natural consequences, we make our children feel less independent."

A good rule of thumb is to ask ourselves if we are doing something that our child can do for himself. If the answer is yes, we need to resist the urge to speak, direct, comment or even Google the answers for him.

The Technology Twist

Speaking of Google, it's easy to blame our over-involvement on technology. Our world consists of immediate gratification, instant communication and unlimited accessibility to our children's teachers, their coaches, their friends and even their friends' parents. We see more. Hear more. And inevitably, become more involved.

Although technology has contributed to this, it's the way we use technology, not the accessibility to these tools that creates an issue when it comes to being too involved.

As parents, one of the toughest decisions we have to make is determining when it is best not to act. While e-mail, BlackBerry phones, cell phones and high-tech school information management systems have made micromanaging all aspects of raising children both easy and effortless, we need to use technology in a healthy way, without overstepping common sense boundaries. Steve Brechbiel, a local father of three boys, ages 10, 14 and 15, has coached his sons' teams for years and has seen first hand how technology has changed the way he interfaces with parents. While he acknowledges that parents need two-way communication, he also feels there's value in leaving much of the talking between him and his players.

"I like to see parents use the same sensibility and courtesy in technology that they should use face to face. If I provide e-mail updates on Monday following a weekend tournament, it is intended to celebrate our accomplishments and identify areas we'll be working on as a team. It's not meant to start a multi-day thread or individual player analysis," says Brechbiel. As a coach, he finds that kids who just love to play and have parents that encourage their child to participate to the best of their ability usually have the most fun.

Adjusting Our Mindset

So, how do we take steps now to prevent becoming full-fledged helicopter parents later on? It's tricky. Since our children not only need our assistance but welcome it, it can be tough to find the perfect balance between teaching responsibility and micromanaging. McCready is quick to point out that we need to be involved. We just need to redefine to what degree.

The first step is adjusting our mindset. "As parents, we tend to think short term. We want them to be successful immediately. But the mindset we have to have is to take these kids from dependence to independence," says McCready.

We want our children to be able to stand up to a bully at school without us interfering. We want our high school seniors to be able to complete a college application on their own – for the college of their choice, not ours. And we want to raise young adults that can go into the workplace and understand the importance of hard work, dedication and effort. We can only do this if we keep the big picture in mind.

It's our job to identify moments in our day-to-day routine that present opportunities for our children to assume responsibility. This can be as simple as having your middle school child learn how to do laundry or make his own lunch. It's recognizing that as soon as our elementary-age child starts writing his assignments in his school planners, it's time for him to start managing his own homework. And if your child wonders why she didn't make the team, she should be the one to talk to the coach.

Laura Munster, a Midtown mother of a 9 and 13-year old, says that she used to check her children's grades frequently using the school's online system. She then realized that it was too much monitoring on her part and her children were ready to take responsibility for their work.

Munster was able to remove herself from the policing role by teaching her children how to use the technology to see patterns with their schoolwork. The online grades have been a valuable tool for her very driven eighth grader, who wants to monitor his progress. For her younger daughter, it has been an opportunity to teach time management and organizational skills. "For my children, this technology has served as a huge motivator," says Munster. She is also careful to point out that although she is still involved, it's in a different, more effective way.

A Sense of Balance

Finding a healthy balance is our key to success. As our children grow, we're supposed to give them a little bit of space and allow them to flourish on their own. It's not always an easy thing to do.

Fortunately, subtle changes in the ways we interact with our children can be the defining difference between hovering and helping. And that's a good thing. For, while our children will embrace independence, *we* may need to be slowly weaned off the dependent relationship we have created.

So I'll move away from doing for them and just try to guide them. I'll aim to give my kids tools to solve their problems, instead of being the problem solver. Because I may be a good parent, but I could be better. ♦

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