

Make Room For Daddy.....And Mommy:
Helicopter Parents Are Here!

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Abstract

Universities have always interacted with parents of students and prospective students, usually on tours of the campus, during open house activities, on designated Parents Weekends and in unusual and emergency situations. The number of interactions has risen markedly in the last few years and the types of interactions have changed from what universities considered appropriate to the mundane such as getting the plumbing fixed in a dorm room for their child. Today's parents of college students invite themselves along unless told otherwise. Who are these people invading our campus? They're helicopter parents!

The Characteristics and Definitions of Helicopter Parents

Helicopter parents hover over and around their children interceding as soon as the child faces an unpleasant situation or uncertainty. Currently the term signals the parents are Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) and the offspring are members of the Millenium generation (born between 1982 and 2002) [Felix Carroll, Albany Union Times]. The term signals the parents are "overinvolved" in their child's life and are overly protective. Parents hover willingly and tirelessly, organizing many areas of the child's life. Even in college and now starting in graduate school, parents stay on the job (Damast, 2006).

Most helicopter parents are just overinvolved, and that means calling or texting their children three-four times a day, reading and proofing their child's papers, making to-do lists for them, driving two hours each way to the dorm every two weeks to clean, do dishes and do the laundry, or calling to wake the children up for classes. Children give their parents their passwords to their college accounts so parents check grades and schedules and may call the dean if they don't like what they see (Shannon Colavecchio-Van Sickler, June 19, 2006, p. 1).

A few helicopter parents cross the line into unethical areas, unwittingly teaching their children it is acceptable to use plagiarism, falsify records such as high school transcripts and bully others to get their way. The latter type of helicopter parents is known as a "Blackhawk" (<http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0503/p08s02-comv-htm>.) Others refer to the more brazen parents as 'kamikaze parents' (Sue Schellenbarger, WSJ, March 16, 2006, p. D1) because they have already mowed down the advisors, counselors and admissions officers at colleges and now are aiming to do the same in the workplace.

What Are Experts Saying Are the Reasons Why These Changes in Parenting Are Occurring?

There is a driving force of change occurring in our society—even in the world, that is not showing any signs of reversing. That driving force is the ability to be in constant communication with others. Consider it a permanent change in the structure and fabric of society that drives changes in other areas. The Millennials have grown up with cell phones and for them, constant communication is normal. College students readily admit talking to their parents three or four times a day—exchanging pleasantries and seeking advice. Meno, a University of Indiana-Bloomington psychologist and student counselor, calls the cell phone, a “Virtual umbilical cord (Boen, January 15, 2007 p.1)” Even from afar, then, parents can hover over their children easily. Amy Rainey reports on a study released in March 2006 by the College Parents of America. “Of the 893 parents surveyed, 74 percent communicated with their student two to three times a week and one in three did so at least once a day (Chronicle, 2006)”

Mary Elizabeth Hughes, a sociologist at Duke University, suggests helicopter parenting may be a sign of economic insecurity (Carroll, 2005). The Consumer Confidence index, unemployment rate and outsourcing managerial level jobs have added to people’s insecurities about the economy. For example, one Bethesda mother realized there are many things beyond her control that threaten us such as terrorists and the environment, but she say, “I can control how my daughter spends her day (Strauss, 2006, A08).”

There also has been a change in lifestyles. Those (the Boomers) raised during the turbulent times of the 1960s experienced major social changes in our society and hence, new lifestyles have evolved. These lifestyles include the process of parenting. Boomers have taken the best of their parents styles (emphasizing education, independence and discipline) [Carroll,2005] and moved away from the authoritarian style to a more co-operative style of parenting. Parents see themselves as responsible for helping their children make better choices—including what colleges to go to, what jobs to take and where their lives lead. A few parents understand they are not their child’s friend. This may not be the case with children, however, as several reported their parents were their best friends.

Parents today usually have fewer children than their family of origin. That means more money and time can be spent on each child. Consequently the Millennials are a protected and programmed group. They are the generation of mandatory car seats, bike helmets, play groups, soccer leagues and swim teams (Strauss, 2006, A08).

Parents also admit their own self-worth may be wrapped up in the success of their child. In a study done of 408 parents, Eaton and Pomerantz found that twenty percent of the parents were found to base their own self-worth on the performance of their

child (in Schellenbarger, April 14, 2005). Even when their children were doing well, there was no let up of the negative beliefs about themselves.

Who and What Do Helicopter Parents Influence at the University?

Helicopter parents are influencing the entire university from the prospecting stage before the application process, campus housing, relationships with academic advisors and faculty, and at the exit stage with career services and even on to graduate school, and beyond into employment. Some universities have embraced the involvement using the philosophy the parents are here on campus to stay saying why not “harness” the parents’ energy and involvement to our advantage? Others recognize their presence and are using some subtle and some not so subtle techniques to keep them from interfering with the maturation process of their child. Finally, many universities have engaged the services of a parent co-ordinator, a relatively new full time position on campuses (Lum, 2006).

Universities do have some concerns over the overinvolvement of parents. The primary concern is students are not developing critical decision making skills needed in a complex world despite getting a good academic foundation. Tom Miller, a University of South Florida dean of students was quoted in the St. Petersburg Times as saying, “Where parent behavior becomes a challenge for us is when they encourage dependence, and they become too involved because they are afraid their son or daughter will make a mistake (in Colavecchio-Van Sickler, 2006, p. 1).” Meno states the lack of independence “leads to a lack of confidence in being able to achieve things on (his) own (Boen, 2007 p.1)” Shauna Summers, a psychology instructor, psychologist and personal counselor at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne says the parent-college student close communication is good if it is used to help make decisions such as, “Should I get a credit card?” But the communication should not interfere with the children learning to function as adults (J. Boen, 2007 p.1)”. The biggest public concern of universities appears to be parents inhibiting the development of the students true adults

While some universities are setting up Mother’s Clubs and parents Web sites; other colleges and universities are subtly pushing parents to give their children some space. Miami University at Oxford is one that separates parents from their children in summer orientation. They discourage parents from calling faculty about grades and explain to them that “nothing can be done if a professor says, ‘This is the grade.’” (Marsh, Spring ’07). Many universities are taking the opportunity to have parents alone in orientation sessions to tease them a little about their hovering and still give the message that it is time to back-off and let go. (For a good variety of suggestions about how to handle helicopter parents, see Coburg, 2006.)

Career Services is another area where hovering parents may have hurt their children. Students are so used to being praised and made to feel special, they think the normal starting salary of \$30,000-\$35,000 per year is beneath them. Parents have started to attend job fairs and done follow-up with employers for their children. When given

offers, students will stall to seek parental advice about taking the offer or not. Some parents accompany their children to interviews; although, many have the good sense not to sit in even if the company offers.

There are mixed messages also being given by employers. Most of the response is not positive. Many managers see these young prospective employees as too tentative and lacking critical decision making skills. Parental involvement is a turn off for many recruiters and human resource managers.

From a different perspective, companies are recognizing the change and are finding ways to accommodate the trend. Some firms have developed parent kits with information about benefits and company culture. Others invite parents to tour the offices and still others are asking students if there is someone with whom they want to share news of job offers (<http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0503/p08s02-comv-htm>.) So while human resource directors and company recruiters have to handle a lot of things they never did before—such as a dad calling and trying to renegotiate the starting salary (Schellenbarger, March 16, 2006)—they also realize they need these young people as future employees.

Implications for Future Research and Conclusion

Helicopter parents and their offspring offer a wide open field of research for those interested in college student development and university administration. There are many newspaper articles about the topic but very few scholarly studies about helicopter parents. Additionally, teaching also has the potential to be impacted in many ways—for example, the Millennials students prefer high levels of organization and dislike ambiguity and students and parents not happy with grades of a strict professor can cause undue pressure on professors to change grades or resort to grade inflation. In short, the topic is wide open for research because so little has been done.

In conclusion, until another new way to parent comes along, prepare to have many additional commentators and active participants in the education of the Millennials.

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