

Chapter X: Helicopter parenting

Child development researchers consider “authoritative parenting” the scientifically optimal parenting style. I’ve devoted a chapter to this, but we’ll first explore several other popular parenting styles.

We’ll examine several brands of folk wisdom that I term “extreme parenting”: helicopter parenting, idle parenting, “French” parenting, “Tiger mom” parenting, and chips-all-in parenting. Each has staunch supporters and fervent practitioners who believe they’ve discovered “the best” parenting style. Because each of these styles takes a good idea too far, parents can learn valuable lessons from their strengths and weaknesses.

My “authoritative parenting” chapter will demonstrate that authoritative parenting is a particular combination of these parenting extremes that blends their various strengths.

This chapter explores helicopter parenting – the “rat race” applied to childhood. It’s especially interesting and relevant because this unbalanced parenting style – intensely focused on academic and extracurricular awards and blind to all other aspects of humanity – is widespread among educated middle- and upper-income parents, many of whom treat childhood as a race to the most prestigious colleges.

Helicopter parents and trophy kids

In much of the developed world, parents – especially educated parents – are spending more time than ever with their children. In America, “time spent by parents in childcare, after remaining stable for decades, rose dramatically during the 1990s and reached a plateau in the 2000s. ...[T]his increase in childcare time was uneven: college-educated mothers’ childcare time grew by 9 hours per week, while less educated mothers’ time grew by 4 hours per week.”¹ Children in two-parent families also increased time spent with dad from 18.5 hours/week in 1981 to 27.1 hours/week in 1997.² Children have become the center of many parents’ lives, especially in high-income, high-education families:

[M]iddle- and upper-income families... are far more apt than their working-class counterparts to

see their children as projects to be perfected. (Children of women with bachelor degrees spend almost five hours on “organized activities” per week, as opposed to children of high-school dropouts, who spend two.) Annette Lareau, the sociologist who coined the term “concerted cultivation” to describe the aggressive nurturing of economically advantaged children, puts it this way: “Middle-class parents spend much more time talking to children, answering questions with questions, and treating each child’s thought as a special contribution. And this is very tiring work.” Yet it’s work few parents feel that they can in good conscience neglect, says Lareau, “lest they put their children at risk by not giving them every advantage.”³

Parents increasingly view their children as friends and obsess over their future success. Many have responded by abandoning the traditional parental role of disciplinarian and becoming their children’s cheerleaders, tutors, chauffeurs, “fixers” and personal assistants. 1,540 videotaped hours of dual-income, multiple-child family life show “parents as at-home teachers, enforcing homework deadlines. As coaches and personal trainers, sorting through piles of equipment. As camp directors, planning play dates and weekend ‘family time.’”⁴

This sounds wonderful, until you hear the experts say over-involved, parenting-crazed parents are stunting kids’ growth by shielding kids from opportunities to struggle, experience success and failure, and grow increasingly resourceful and responsible. Many blame over-exuberant, over-scheduling, over-indulging, over-protective, control-freak, perfectionist, worrywart, micromanaging, neurotic American and British parents for our spoiled children.

Why are parents parenting harder than ever – at a market wage cost of “over \$300 billion per year”⁵ – spending \$6 billion a year on tutoring,⁶ and expecting so much from their children? Perhaps parenting has become a competitive sport because a Harvard-bound “trophy kid” yields more prestigious bragging rights than a Lexus in the driveway. Maybe parents are living vicariously through their children. Or parents may be equipping children to compete for increasingly valuable and competitive spots in top universities so they’re better equipped to compete for tomorrow’s increasingly valuable and competitive job openings:

[A]n important component of the increase in childcare time was time spent on *older* children, and particularly on coordinating and transporting them to their activities....

We argue that much of the increase in time spent in childcare, particularly among the college educated, may be a response to an increase in the perceived return to attending a good college, coupled with an increase in competition in college admissions. Importantly, the size of college-bound cohorts rose dramatically beginning in the early 1990s, coincident with the increase in time spent on childcare. Bound and Turner (2007) have provided evidence that... Increased

scarcity of college slots appears to have induced heightened rivalry among parents, taking the form of more hours spent on college preparatory activities.⁷

Parents, worried about our increasingly winner-take-all economy, may be doing everything they can to help their children win tomorrow's labor market lottery. Millions of middle class jobs are disappearing to competition from computers, software, robotics, and overseas outsourcing. Parents aspire for their children to become inventors/entrepreneurs or work at innovative companies like Apple because "many economists fear that the comfortable Plan B jobs are disappearing" and "an entire lottery-based economy, in which a few people win big while the rest are forced to toil in an uncertain and not terribly remunerative dead-end labor pool"⁸ is pretty scary.

Parents worry about all of these. Newspaper headlines declare: "Manhattan Preschools Become Harder to Get Into Than Harvard,"⁹ "In Manhattan, Preschool Interviews Induce Anxiety,"¹⁰ "'Nursery University' documentary explores ultra-competitive world of New York's elite preschools,"¹¹ "Manhattan's Elite's Competition to Place Their Children in the Best Nursery Schools,"¹² "Bracing for \$40,000 at New York City Private Schools,"¹³ and "Mom Sues Preschool For Failing To Prep Tot For Harvard."¹⁴

In America, Australia and Britain, "helicopter parents" see themselves as providing a stream of great experiences – museum visits, Baby Einstein videos, language lessons, team sports, educational "apps," computer summer camps, skating/gymnastics/tennis/ballet classes, personal tutors, SAT classes, trips abroad, etc. – that will help their loved one get accepted at Princeton or MIT, or at least maximize the selectivity of the college they attend. Helicopter parents seem obsessed with college admissions, as if optimizing college exclusivity is the objective of childhood. Unsurprisingly, the phrase originated in college admissions departments to label parents who hovered over their children and inserted themselves into an admissions process that traditionally involved only the college and prospective students.

Helicopter parents believe the college admission game is "won" with top grades and many extracurricular activities. So they rush little Bobby to swim class, gymnastics, soccer, Scouts, piano lessons, etc. or, better yet, have his Spanish- or Mandarin-speaking nanny rush him around. And they frequently praise Bobby and search for ways to smooth Bobby's path, which is why it's also called "lawnmower parenting" and, in Scandinavia, "curling parenting."

Fragile 'Teacups' and Burned-Out 'Crispies'

Helicopter parents believe they're helping their children. But a survey of college students found that children of helicopter parents are actually troubled because eighteen years of coddling has stunted their development:

having so-called "helicopter parents" was associated with being dependent, neurotic and less open, a slew of personality traits that are generally thought of as undesirable....

Students with helicopter parents tended to be less open to new ideas and actions, as well as more vulnerable, anxious and self-consciousness, among other factors, compared with their counterparts with more distant parents. ...[I]n non-helicoptered students who were given responsibility and not constantly monitored by their parents — so-called "free rangers" — the effects were reversed.¹⁵

"Attachment parenting" is wonderful... for infants. But as your children advance in age, they should also grow in self-confidence and self-reliance... and the essential ability to pick themselves up after failing. Kids can't mature into independent young people as long as they're reliant on parents to fix every problem and fulfill every wish. When your children leave home, probably at 18, they had better have solid experience facing the world without you.

Organizers of an annual Easter egg hunt attended by hundreds of children have canceled this year's event, citing the behavior of aggressive parents who swarmed into the tiny park last year, determined that their kids get an egg.

That hunt was over in seconds, to the consternation of egg-less tots and their own parents. Too many parents had jumped a rope set up to allow only children into Bancroft Park in a historic area of Colorado Springs.¹⁶

Helicopter parents have an unspoken deal with their kids: "As long as you get great grades and do enough extracurriculars to get into a top university, we won't expect you to eat dinner with us, tell us where you are at 10:00pm, act morally/ethically, be kind to others, drive responsibly, clean up after yourself, avoid drugs and alcohol, go to bed at a reasonable hour, spend money wisely, shovel snow, rake leaves, dress in an age-appropriate manner, read for pleasure, visit grandma, pursue a hobby just for fun, take tests without cheating, write essays without plagiarizing, take a part-time job to develop an appreciation of money, etc. We'll pour all our time and money into helping you get great grades and do well in resume-buffing extracurriculars, and that's really all we care about."

Kids today face a bizarre combination of tremendous pressure to excel at everything related to

college admissions and an utter lack of concern with everything else: character, morality, self-awareness, intellectual curiosity, happiness, family time, being kind, helping others (except volunteer work that looks good on a college application), true learning (as opposed to grades), etc. Child psychologist Madeline Levine says we're creating hollow kids: "teachers, coaches and, most of all, parents... have actively poured enormous amounts of attention and resources into these children. Paradoxically, the more they pour, the less full many of my patients seem to be. Indulged, coddled, pressured and micromanaged on the outside, my young patients appeared to be inadvertently deprived of the opportunity to develop an inside."¹⁷

American parents are so emotionally invested in our children's "success" that we can't let go, even when it's in our children's best interest. Belmont Hill School psychologist Michael Thompson wrote *Homesick and Happy: How Time Away From Parents Can Help a Child Grow* because parents weren't letting their kids go on overnight school trips:

Thompson [says] kids who go to camp often thrive. "When kids are away from their parents, their achievements are their own," he says. Time apart allows them to develop independence and character, and it also bolsters their self-esteem. And then, to drive the point home, Thompson asks us to think back to the childhood moment when we were the happiest. "Okay, now raise your hand if there was an adult with you in that moment," he says. Only a few hands go up....

"Modern parents feel that more time with Mom and Dad is always a positive — this is the single biggest change in American childhood — but the truth is that more time with you isn't always a positive. In fact, it's annoying.... The modern parent thinks he or she is always value added," Thompson says calmly, then delivers the shiv: "But you aren't. At some point you realize you're a burden to your kids."¹⁸

A neighbor was so cloistered as a home-schooled child that she gave up a full scholarship just weeks into college because she couldn't bear being away from her mother. Her story is no longer unusual: "College deans have a name for some of the incoming students: 'teacups' and 'crispies.' Teacups are so fragile that they are easily broken by the knocks of college life. Crispies are so burned out that they are too brittle to enjoy anything. An increasing number are actually returning home after first semester, unable to cope."¹⁹ A university career counselor with 30 years experience complains, "They're now so immature when they graduate, and they have to consult their parents about everything. But that's not the worst of it. The parents call all the time too, demanding to know just what it is I am doing for their children."²⁰

Burnout can be even worse. The documentary *Race to Nowhere* (RaceToNowhere.com) illustrates

the pressure many teens live with daily... pressure so intense that some even take their own lives. Palo Alto, CA is one of America's top school districts, a true Lake Woebegeon where everyone is truly above average: "48.7 percent of city residents 25 and older hold graduate or professional degrees. 'Teens will tell you they do not run into someone who's not successful,' Espinosa said. 'Where's just the everyday, not phenomenally successful person... the parent who doesn't have three graduate degrees?'"²¹ This might seem a recipe for academic nirvana, but Palo Alto was rocked by five teen suicides in just eight months before the community took action: "Hundreds of teachers, counselors and parents trained in suicide recognition and intervention strategies. Mushrooming of student-led outreach organizations. Heightened sensitivity to the way students talk about stress, and renewed evaluation systems to understand teenagers' well-being."²²

Our Kids Should Live More and Fail More

Silicon Valley's secret ingredient is failure. Most startups fail. But failure is not stigmatized. In fact, Silicon Valley often rewards those who have taken chances and failed because failure is recognized as a valuable learning experience. By fetishizing "success," towns full of wealthy, highly educated parents discourage kids from moving outside their comfort zone and taking risks. Fetishizing success also leads to over-scheduling and lack of unstructured time kids could use to create and explore and play.

Growing up involves more than mastering academics. It involves making mistakes, suffering the consequences of our mistakes, socializing, helping others, making friends, dealing with difficult people, learning discipline, making smart decisions, doing unpleasant things that need to happen, making productive use of time, making deadlines, setting goals, striving to achieve goals, developing a moral compass, winning gracefully, losing gracefully, being treated unfairly, having bad luck, etc.

Many American parents – I plead "guilty" – are so eager to help our children grow up well that we're overdoing it. We're driving kids to so many organized activities we're driving ourselves crazy while failing to let our children figure out how to entertain themselves, perhaps through creative, unstructured play or the informal outdoor games we played in my neighborhood when I was a kid:

Sonia Schneider... signed her preschooler and kindergartner up for so many classes last year that her 5-year-old was too busy for play dates.

"She'd want to read a book together," Schneider said, "but I'd say, 'We don't have time for that, you have to get into your leotard.'" The extracurricular activities continued to escalate. Until

Schneider finally hit bottom. “We started doing private ukulele lessons.”

...[T]he current parenting style could be described as No Child Left Alone.²³

We’re too quick to get kids that glass of orange juice they could get themselves or play with them when the gutters need cleaning out. We’re hiring lawn services and snow plows when kids could and should take on such responsibilities, perhaps together with their parents. We’re congratulating kids for “winning” trophies for just participating in soccer or skating or chess. By holding our children’s hands so tightly, we’re not letting them grow up, and we’re exhausting ourselves through over-parenting.

It’s not just us. An Australian asks, “Why are our children so seemingly badly behaved? Why aren’t they obedient? Are they really expressing their individuality, or are they just naughty spoilt little brats?” She suggests, “Our proclivity for responding quickly to the needs of our children, praising them to develop self-esteem and eating between meal times is creating a generation of overweight, bad-tempered and undisciplined youngsters, not to mention destroying their mothers’ lives.”²⁴

Margaret K. Nelson, author of *Parenting Out of Control: Anxious Parents in Uncertain Times*, complains about parents who involve themselves deeply in every aspect of their children’s lives, “build relationships with children based on intimacy, on being available, on staying connected, on intense oversight, and on friendship” and “create lives in which every moment is designed to contribute to securing a competitive place in the world.” She urges parents to give kids breathing room to grow via “less intense relationships (which allow children more occasions to demonstrate who they are rather than who they might become), clearer restrictions on behaviors, and more definitive constraints on the time and energy devoted to parenting.”²⁵ Rather than treat childhood as eighteen years of college prep, we should allow children big blocks of time to be children... to live in the moment, unburdened by concerns about their future.

Upon retiring as principal of top-rated New Canaan (CT) High School, Tony Pavia spoke passionately and eloquently to the danger of helicopter parenting:

We have a substantial group of parents who do not want their kids to experience any hardship, whether it’s in the form of a grade, a disciplinary consequence, or in the form of disappointment. They’re well intentioned, but sometimes, in trying to do all that for their child, they’re removing the very things that would be formative experiences, and the very things that would make that child more resilient, tougher and more able to deal with adversity.

I really think we are in danger of heading toward a place where kids have no adversity, and I

worry that we've come to a point where [administrators are] going to be spending more time with parents than with their kids... [W]hen you look at some other generations, the very things that were difficult and unfair and tough and made them sad are the things that made them successful later.

The old paradigm was that society, parents and the school, in general, stressed an endgame that was about the student being a well-rounded person and citizen of society. Unfortunately, now the paradigm has changed. The endgame is very simply college and, in my opinion, it has created a terrible system which really expects every single kid to be exactly the same, to learn the same way, and to be at the identical developmental stage as everyone else.²⁶

Teachers are overwhelmed by parents blind to Debbie's flaws and unwilling to accept that she deserved a "B-" on her report:

If we give you advice, don't fight it. Take it, and digest it in the same way you would consider advice from a doctor or lawyer. I have become used to some parents who just don't want to hear anything negative about their child, but sometimes if you're willing to take early warning advice to heart, it can help you head off an issue that could become much greater.

...If you don't want your child to end up 25 and jobless, sitting on your couch eating potato chips, then stop making excuses for why they aren't succeeding.

...And parents, you know, it's OK for your child to get in trouble sometimes. It builds character and teaches life lessons. ...If we give a child a 79 on a project, then that is what the child deserves. Don't set up a time to meet with me to negotiate extra credit for an 80.

...I had a child cheat on a test, and his parents threatened to call a lawyer because I was labeling him a criminal. ...[P]rincipals all across the country are telling me that more and more lawyers are accompanying parents for school meetings.²⁷

Harvard professor and psychologist Richard Weissbourd explains, "When your kid has trouble with homework and you jump in right away, you're worried about your kid's experience with failure. The irony is that, rather than securing self-esteem, that level of micromanaging usually undermines it."²⁸ The premise of his book, *The Parents We Mean To Be: How Well-Intentioned Adults Undermine Children's Moral and Emotional Development*, is that "Parents' intense focus on their children's happiness is turning many children into self-involved, fragile conformists. The suddenly widespread desire of parents to be closer to their children—a heartening trend in many ways—often undercuts kids' morality. Our fixation with being great parents—and our need for our children to reflect that greatness—can actually make them feel ashamed for failing to measure up."²⁹

Unhealthy Stress Leads to Drug Use and Cheating

Many kids seek to escape the stress and drown their disappointment by abusing drugs and alcohol. It's a huge problem in the wealthiest, highest-stress communities, like Darien, CT:

Marzano... the Depot teen center's program director, said alcohol is only one of the problems — substances such as synthetic heroin, and ecstasy, are rampant in the town.

"There is so much heroin out there — people don't want to believe it, but it's true. They are smoking it, and it's cheap," she said... "Some parents just don't know where the kids are," she said.

Or alternatively, parents are enabling the kids to partake in drinking by being home at the time of get-togethers.

"By 10th or 11th grade, they can't fight it anymore. They say 'I'd rather have them drinking my house, where I know where they are,'" Marzano said.

Marzano said often when police break up house parties, it is just as likely to be parents running through the woods to avoid getting caught.³⁰

Many kids respond to parental pressure by plagiarizing essays, cheating on tests, and taking performance-enhancing drugs. *ABC Primetime's* "Cheating Crisis in American Schools" reports cheating is not only rampant but has become normal and acceptable:

Joe is a student at a top college in the Northeast who admits to cheating regularly.... In Joe's view, he's just doing what the rest of the world does.

"The real world is terrible," he told Gibson. "People will take other people's materials and pass it on as theirs. I'm numb to it already. I'll cheat to get by."

Primetime heard the same refrain from many other students who cheat: that cheating in school is a dress rehearsal for life.³¹

Kids learn morality from parents and society. Judging from countless cases documented at *CheatingCulture.com*, American kids have reason to feel our culture accepts — perhaps even encourages and requires — cheating. Even teachers in many states have been caught cheating on standardized tests to boost their ratings.³² Over half of 43,000 high school students surveyed admitted to cheating on a test during the previous year, and one-third confess to plagiarizing material from the Internet.³³ That's likely an underestimate because "25% of students confessed they lied on at least one or two survey questions."³⁴

Parents should be pushing against this ugly cultural tide by emphasizing that honest effort and real

learning are their own rewards. Instead, parents are pushing children harder than ever and focusing on grades and trophies, not personal growth and true achievement. That's the wrong strategy:

[R]esearchers found that if parents had a more positive, supportive attitude and communicated the learning value as motivation, rather than focusing on completing an assignment or getting a higher grade, then the child's attitude and motivation would improve.

Dr. Idit Katz, Dr. Avi Kaplan and doctoral student Tamara Buzukashvily, of BGU's Department of Education, recommend parents give their children some choices, including when or where to do homework. "Parents can improve a sense of competence by allowing children to structure their own tasks and by giving the child the feeling that he is loved and admired no matter how successful he or she is in math or language," the researchers said.³⁵

Instead, many wealthy parents regularly disobey laws and treat others disrespectfully: "about one-third of drivers in higher- status cars cut off other drivers at an intersection watched by the researchers, about double [the rate of] those in less costly cars. Additionally, almost half of the more expensive cars didn't yield when a pedestrian entered the crosswalk while all of the lowest-status cars let the pedestrian cross. These experiments involved 426 vehicles."³⁶

Psychologist Madeline Levine's *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids* aims to help parents – especially wealthy, highly educated parents with "exceedingly high expectations" for their kids – stop hovering and give them space to find their own path to maturity. She describes her economically advantaged teen patients' troubles:

addictions, anxiety disorders, depression, eating disorders and assorted self-destructive behaviors.... The fact that many of these teens are highly proficient in some areas of their lives helps mask significant impairments in others – the straight-A student who feels too socially awkward to attend a single school dance, the captain of the basketball team who is abusive toward his mother.

...[M]any of them are, in fact, depressed, anxious and angry. Quite a few have been able to hide self-injurious behaviors like cutting, illegal drug use or bulimia from their parents and peers. While many of these teens are verbal and psychologically aware, they don't know themselves very well. They lack practical skills for navigating the world; they can be easily frustrated or impulsive; and they have trouble anticipating the consequences of their actions. They are overly dependent on the opinions of parents, teachers, coaches and peers and frequently rely on others, not only to pave the way on difficult tasks but to grease the wheels of everyday life as well. While often personable and academically successful, they aren't particularly creative or interesting. They complain about being bored; they are often boring...

[Parents protect] their offspring from either challenge or disappointment. Fearful that their kids will not be sturdy enough to withstand even the most mundane requirements of completing

homework, meeting curfew, straightening their rooms or even showing up for dinner, discipline becomes lax, often nonexistent. While demands for outstanding academic or extracurricular performance are very high, expectations about family responsibilities are amazingly low... [Parents] tend to shower their children with material goods, hoping to buy compliance with parents' goals as well as divert attention away from their children's unhappiness.³⁷

As Wendy Mogel's *The Blessing Of A Skinned Knee: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children* puts it: "If the pressure to be special gets too intense, children end up in the therapist's office suffering from sleep and eating disorders, chronic stomachaches, hair-pulling, depression, and other ailments. They are casualties of their parents' drive for perfection."³⁸ Parents who feel the urge to hold their child up to some high standard, rather than let their child's potential unfold naturally, should remember children are not made of clay and are not sculpted by parental artists:

Children who feel that they are expected to surpass their parents' already high level of achievement or to demonstrate skills that are beyond their capabilities will suffer.... Other children begin to feel as if they are working only for their parents' satisfaction, and they openly rebel. Some respond to the pressure by losing their intrinsic enjoyment of mastering skills, and still others use psychosomatic symptoms to get out of the running. ...Your child is not your masterpiece. According to Jewish thought, your child is not even truly "yours." ...They are a precious loan, and each one has a unique path... Our job is to help them find out what it is.³⁹

Other books that advocate less obsessive parenting include:

- Edward Hallowell's *The Childhood Roots of Adult Happiness: Five Steps to Help Kids Create and Sustain Lifelong Joy*
- Kenneth R. Ginsburg's *Building Resilience in Children and Teens: Giving Kids Roots and Wings*
- Kenneth R. Ginsburg's *Letting Go with Love and Confidence: Raising Responsible, Resilient, Self-Sufficient Teens in the 21st Century*