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# Helicopter parents need to stop hovering and let their children take control

*By Diether Haenicke*  
*October 28, 2009*

I keep regular, open office hours during which anyone on campus can come in for a brief chat about anything that concerns him or her. I can often help with problems and learn about issues that trouble people with whom I work.

But recently something has changed. A student makes an appointment and then walks in, accompanied by his mother. The mother does all the talking. She tells me that Johnny has a problem with his Japanese teacher who is a strict grader, emphasizes writing over speaking, and is too meticulous with deadlines for class work. Johnny sits by silently, listening to his mother making his case. Johnny is 22 years old.

Or I receive a lengthy e-mail from a mother who informs everyone on the highest level of administration — the president, the chief academic officer, and the dean of the college — that her daughter needs a particular class which is currently not offered, and what are they going to do about it? Daughter Maggie is ready to enter graduate school.

Meet the helicopter parent. I don't know where the term comes from, but it connotes a parent who pays extremely close attention to a child's educational progress and hovers like a helicopter over her offspring, day in, day out. The term came to life in the 1990s among schoolteachers and coaches who had to deal with parents who "advised" the educators about their children's sensitivities and needs, their under appreciated athletic and intellectual abilities, and who had firm, albeit inexperienced, opinions about grading, curriculum, and education in general.

That generation of schoolchildren has now entered college where their parents' helicopter behavior continues unabated. Johnny's mother, who knows even less than Johnny himself about Japanese, still believes that one should give serious consideration

to her opinion of how Japanese should be taught. Maggie's mother seems to believe that a beginning graduate student is not yet capable of arguing her own case.

Clearly, behind this unusual behavior of the helicopter parents lie love and concern for their children. They want the best for them; they want them to be treated gently and as if by their own parents in all moments of their lives, and I can sympathize with that.

But do they really do their children a favor? We know of parents who call their college-age children three or more times a day; who draft e-mails for them; who keep their calendar; who balance their bank accounts for them; who give them wake-up calls; make to-do lists for them; and who proofread their papers. Other parents call the university to ask if they can sit in on their son's class and take notes for him if he is sick for a few days. I have even heard of a mom who drives twice a month for two hours to her son's dorm to clean it up, do his dishes and pick up the laundry. Does she plan to do that for the rest of her life?

Many psychologists, sociologists and pediatricians are pointing out that some parents get much too involved and tend to micromanage their children's lives. The University of Vermont has begun to develop a hands-off philosophy for parents, hoping to bring students to self-reliance and greater independence necessary for their later professional work and family life.

As these hovered-over college kids graduate, their employers begin to meet them — hand in hand with their parents. Boeing, Enterprise Rent-a-Car, Pella Corp., Hewlett-Packard and many other companies report that parents accompany job-seeking children to quiz HR managers about health benefits, promotions and pay increases. Other job applicants, who come unaccompanied, use their cell phones to consult their parents during job interviews. Practically all hiring agencies say that such practices create a negative view and hurt the applicant. They want to hire an adult person for an adult job.

I certainly would never hire someone who comes to the job interview with mom or dad in tow. And my advice to helicopter parents is: Do your children a favor and let them learn how to stand on their own feet. College is a good time to start.

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