

Putting An End to Helicopter Parenting - Letting teens learn for themselves

Not so long ago children were sent out to play until the street lights came on. There were no trophies given to every member of the soccer team and no “room moms” for each middle school homeroom. Teenagers got dropped off at the mall and didn’t materialize at home again until dinner time.

Then a whole new generation of parents – Generation Xers – came of age and the pendulum began to swing the other way. As technology made it easier to keep in touch, parents started to get more involved in their children’s social and school lives, and never loosened the reins when their kids reached young adulthood. Constant involvement somehow became a way to express love and now we’ve become a society in which it’s not uncommon for college students to email papers to their moms and dads for proofreading or to ask them to call a professor to negotiate a grade.

There’s a fine line between offering support and advice and being overly involved in your young adult’s life. When you cross over into the latter territory you’re doing more harm than just annoying and potentially alienating them. You’re holding them back from easing into the independence that adulthood affords.

So how do you know whether you’ve become a “helicopter parent?” How often do you hover, ready to swoop down and rescue your teen at the first sign of trouble? When was the last time you let him or her struggle a bit to learn from a mis-step?

Think about your own relationship with your parents back when you were a teen. How much freedom did you have? Were they constantly checking in with you, asking about your friendships and school work? Or, did they give you enough space that you learned to make good choices on your own? Either way, in hindsight, you can surely see the value in letting a young adult take on some responsibility and earn your trust by making sound decisions and maturely dealing with their consequences.

In my experience working with teenagers in a clinical setting, I’ve known parents who micromanage their children’s lives. One big driver seems to be that new technology makes it easy to check in with a text or a quick phone call. Recent studies indicate that college-aged children communicate on average at least 13 times a week with their parents. This is a stark contrast to previous generations that viewed the high school years as the jumping off point toward independence, and parent contact was limited to maybe weekly phone calls and a once-a-semester visit on campus.

How often did you speak with your parents when you were 17 or 18? What about after you moved out of the house?

In my experience working with Millennials who are college students, I’ve seen the lasting effects of helicopter parenting. Moms and Dads who were involved in every aspect of their high schoolers lives don’t let go easily. Their teens are ill-equipped to navigate the adult world independently.

Great communication is absolutely vital to a healthy family dynamic, but some trust and freedom will go a long way toward letting your teen find their way in the world. And as they mature your work as a parent will become a lot easier.

Set boundaries together that make you both feel comfortable with how you’ll communicate. Ask them what sounds reasonable about touching base when they go out – how often they’ll text, call, or email

you. (And keep in mind that sometimes “no news is good news” when they do connect but don’t really want to talk.)

Remember that you are their advocate, not their savior. Ask them how they would like to “use” you when they do need help. And when you’re tempted to step in and insert yourself into their lives stop and evaluate whether it’s truly needed. A good many times you’ll find you’re just out to manage your own anxiety.

With most kids it’s a safe bet to trust in the quality of your parenting and have faith that you have instilled in them the values and expectations necessary for developing into an independent, responsible adult.

Making independent decisions and dealing with the outcome are essential parts of maturing into a functional young adult. When parents of college-aged children are constantly guiding decisions, these young adults are missing out on a necessary and vital part of normal development.

It can be hard for parents to accept, but older teens are really young adults and therefore entitled to their own, (keyword OWN), private lives. They need the time and space to make mistakes, and to learn when to ask for your help. And while it can be terrifying to let go bit-by-bit, this process will be a gift to your child. This is how they will learn about who they are and who they want to be in the world. When given the room to grow, you may be surprised to see what he or she becomes.

SIDEBAR

Here’s a common scenario -

Teenager comes home from school visibly upset.

A “helicopter parent” rushes in to say “Oh honey, how can we fix it?” This creates a dynamic of learned helplessness as children become overly dependent on their parents and don’t think for themselves.

That’s great only if you’re living in a sitcom.

A healthier (for everyone) way to respond is to seize the opportunity to help your teen become a more competent and thoughtful decision-maker. Acknowledge that they’re upset and simply ask, “What do you think should happen next?” Share that you trust their judgment and ability to come up with a creative solution. As they talk listen for clues that they are thinking through the potential consequences for the actions they’re proposing. Remember, though, that they should be leading the conversation.