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How Helicopter Parenting Harms Children and What We Can Do to Change

Section I: Introduction

Imagine you are a teenager in high school with parents persistently micro-managing and pushing you to exceed in every aspect. As a young child, they've put you through countless extracurriculars and activities, constantly pressuring you to do your best. They never let you make mistakes or fall short of success. They are always watching your grades, interactions with peers, and every decision you make ensuring you are doing it their way, "the right way". From the outside looking in, your friends say that you have it good, wishing that their parents gave them the same attention and support in their lives. But something is still wrong. You feel isolated, scared, burnt-out, and unloved, like your parents' love is anything but unconditional. As if their love is governed by grades, performance in sports, and the extent of your childhood resume. Irrationally, they act as if every test, grade, and activity you participate in will make or break whether or not you will find success in life. All of this with the hope that you are to get into the most prestigious college that only accepts a mere 3% of those who apply. They tell you that they do it because they love you, only wishing the best, and for you to succeed in life. But is it from something more? Perhaps it is their own anxieties manifesting into their style of parenting, or that they want to give you what they never had and always wished for. Or maybe it is their own selfish desires to have a child that they can brag about to all of their friends. This may seem like a good life compared to those who have absent or uninvolved parents, but the

effects of this childhood will detrimentally affect an entire lifetime by damaging problem-solving and coping skills. This style of parenting is increasingly common with new gen parents, and we are starting to see the consequences it has on children and young adults. In fact, this scenario mirrors that of a close friend I had in highschool, and I was the one with less involved parents, wondering how having parents who are too involved can be a bad thing

This style of parenting became popular recently, as the new generation of parents were raised and live in an increasingly stressful environment. Additionally, technology has made communication fast and accessible, making it easier to oversee their kids anywhere at any time. Helicopter parenting is depicted by excessive involvement in a child's life, shielding them from any hardships or failures. The term helicopter describes how parents hover over their children, unnecessarily inserting themselves into their children's lives as a means to protect and control them. This research aims to identify the short-term and long-term effects helicopter parenting has on children's mental health. Overparenting is linked to an increase in anxiety and depression in kids and young people. In CNN Wire's article written by Sirisha Dinavahi, writer for the Los Angeles Post, "Helicopter Parenting vs. Hummingbird Parenting: Finding the right balance." shared data from the National Survey of Children's Health, which states that kids (6-12 year old) being shielded by helicopter parents had a 20% increase in diagnosed anxiety from 2007 to 2012. Additionally, there was a 63% increase in depression in young adults 18-25 from 2009-2017 (Dinavahi). This statistic is indicative of how this parenting style contributes to dependence and a lack of coping skills. By depriving adolescents of opportunities to make mistakes that they can learn and grow from, parents effectively raise humans with fear of failure and lack of self-confidence.

In this essay, we will identify how the helicopter style of parenting is a major issue in our society. Overparenting is caused by parents imposing excessive control on their children which leads to negative effects like internalized behaviors like anxiety, externalized behaviors like rule-breaking, and a damaged child-parent relationship. In order to stop this issue from continuing, innovative solutions must be adopted. The best solutions that will be explored here are promoting self-awareness of when parents are being helicopters, a change in how parents view their children's mistakes, and a new category of parenting known as lifeguard parenting.

Section II: Causes, Behaviors, and Impact on the Parent-Child Relationship

The cause for why overparenting arises is wanting protection and control over the child. This excessive control and protection commonly stems from anxiety and social pressure. Kocsis, Zsófia, and others, members of the MTA-DE-Parent-Teachers Cooperation Research Group, at the University of Debrecen, specialize in researching the development of children and how educators teach. Their meta-analysis, “Wings or Handcuffs? The Dilemmas of Helicopter Parenting Based on a Systematic Literature Review,” found that the amount of research papers focused on helicopter parenting increased significantly between 2020 and 2023 (Zsófia Kocsis et al). This increase can be linked to how new parents are raising their kids in an increasingly stressful environment. The covid-19 pandemic, political unease, and the increase in bad news bias are all catalysts for this rise in parental anxiety. Former Stanford University dean Julie Lythcott-Haim’s TED Talk “How to Raise Successful Kids – Without Over-parenting,” identifies how a great deal of parents who micromanage their kids and lead them through a “check-listed childhood”, do so for college. Desperately wanting their kids to get into the best college comes from anxiety, and worry that if their kids don’t, they will have no future. Additionally, Lythcott-Haims points out that some parents act out of social pressure because they want their

kids to have a future they can brag about (Lythcott-Haims). Don't get me wrong, setting your kids up for a bright future is a good thing. However, helicopter parents bring this to an extreme, by turning every activity to a make or break moment and constantly pushing for more. This ultimately leads to a kid that is burnt out by the end of high school from the anxiety and depression that come with this unyielding lifestyle.

Internalized and externalized behaviors are two categories of behavioral issues that juveniles express when parenting is unbalanced, from either too little or too much involvement in their child's life. Helicopter parents are overprotective and controlling. However, they commonly focus on achievement and proper conduct often leaving a gap in emotional support. Professor of educational and health psychology Bacikova-Sleskova, and doctor in behavioral psychology, Kapetanovic's "Exploring the Role of Basic Psychological Needs in the Relationship Between Overparenting and Adolescent Psychological Outcomes", states that inadequate needs satisfaction and need frustration are associated with negative developmental outcomes. Insufficient need satisfaction is when needs are not met, but the child isn't frustrated. Need frustration on the other hand, occurs when the parents actively interfere and excessively control the child's life. Both of these flaws contribute to children internalizing(emotional distress) or externalizing(acting out) behaviors that negatively impact the child's life, emphasizing the importance of balanced parenting (Kapetanovic and Bacikova-Sleskova). The key takeaway from this claim is that parents that are overcontrolling lead to the child having need frustration, which leads to them engaging in risky behaviors like drug use, rule breaking, and aggression. Alternatively, parents who are absent or uninvolved put their kids at risk of internalizing behaviors like anxiety, depression, and loneliness from feeling unloved. In "Wings or Handcuffs?" by Zsófia Kocsis and others, they analyze "Relationships between positive

parenting, overparenting, grit, and academic success.” by Howard and others which discusses “the relationship between helicopter parenting and courage, showing that appropriate parental involvement positively, while helicopter parenting negatively, affects grit levels, i.e., perseverance, commitment to long-term goals, and is associated with courage” (Zsófia Kocsis et al). Insufficient perseverance and courage will result in difficulty handling adversity in their daily life, school, careers, and relationships. Consequently, this will have a cascade effect on their mental health causing problems like loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Bacikova-Sleskova and Kapetanovic’s peer reviewed article on the basic psychological needs relation between overparenting adolescent outcomes found that “a systematic review (Vigdal and Brønnick 2022) of 38 cross-sectional and longitudinal studies showed that overparenting is related to both anxiety and depression among adolescents and emerging adults”. Additionally, girls are at a higher risk to internalize, because it's less socially accepted for them to act out externally. Overall, helicopter parenting is related to social anxiety, loneliness, depression, and feeling of failure and helplessness to name a few internalized behaviors (Kapetanovic and Bacikova-Sleskova). All of these internalized behaviors are consequences of helicopter parenting. That style of parenting pays too much attention to how their kids act and perform, and not enough regard to their emotional state. Externalized behaviors occur when children have needs frustration which results from feeling overcontrolled. Researchers at Bursa Uludağ University, Graduate School of Health Sciences, Psychiatry department, Almaz Bannayeva and Ash Sarandöl’s “Helicopter Parenting: A Review”, mentions a multitude of externalized behaviors. Their research observes how individuals who have helicopter parents have poor coping and problem solving skills. The studies they analyzed found that increased helicopter parenting was linked to greater levels of alcohol consumption, a high rate of painkiller abuse,

low self worth, and high levels of risk-taking behavior. Furthermore, those who were raised by helicopter parents reported low levels of maternal affection and compassion (Bannayeva and Sarandöl). This directly shows how helicopter parenting inflicts life-long damage to a person on an emotional and physical level.

The last negative effect we will discuss is damage to the child-parent relationship. Kapetanovic and Bacikova-Sleskova's research expresses that overparented children feel controlled, judged and unloved. Their "needs are actively undermined or thwarted" (Kapetanovic and Bacikova-Sleskova). Helicopter parents tend to see their kids for who they want them to be rather than who they truly are. For example, labeling children as smart, athletic, or artistic can make it easy to overlook their individual quirks and personality. Siegel, professor of psychiatry at UCLA med school and Tina Bryson, Ph.D in psychology, stated in their article, "Do You Really 'See' Your Child?", that when a child is misunderstood, they feel alone. This feeling of loneliness affects their relationships with friends, teachers and parents, leading them to believe that no one truly understands them (Bryson and Siegel). When parents make assumptions and generalizations that are inaccurate, it makes them feel misunderstood. A misunderstood child is a child that feels invisible to the world. To better understand your child, it's important to have an open mindset, take the time to understand them, and give them the necessary freedom to be themselves.

Section III: My Solution- Building Independence With Healthy Parenting Approaches

To avoid overparenting is to become self aware of your own parenting techniques and identify if that is a trait of a helicopter parent. One way we can help parents to understand how they inadvertently put their children at a disadvantage is by allowing educators and school staff to step in if a student shows indications of being affected by helicopter parenting. In Zsófia

Kocsis and other's "Wings or Handcuffs?", they call attention to how teachers and schools are equipped to detect overparenting and have a productive conversation with parents. Developing parenting strategies that encourage participation without hindering a child's independence would be an immense benefit to educational institutions. By training educators how to effectively communicate these issues to parents constructive dialogues can be had. The parent-school relationship needs to be strong for proper social and academic development of children (Zsófia Kocsis et al). More work needs to be done in identifying overparenting and having meaningful conversations with parents. Essentially, filling the gap between educators and parents excessively involved in their children's lives. Another important aspect to be aware of is how a child's gender relates to their behavior. In Kapetanovic and Bacikova-Sleskova's empirical study, "Basic Psychological Needs in the Relationship Between Overparenting", they conclude that girls exhibit internalizing problems whereas boys exhibit externalizing problems when being overparented. By understanding this difference it is possible to address these issues specifically in regards to the adolescents behavior (Kapetanovic and Bacikova-Sleskova). Balanced parenting is the key, but by knowing how boys and girls react differently to being helicopter, it is much easier to recognize these behaviors. This is most significant for girls as it is harder to identify behavior that is internalized like anxiety and depression.

After becoming aware of helicopter parenting and the behaviors it elicits in adolescents, the next step is to change your mindset. It is important to not fall into the category of parents that think a child's struggles and mistakes are flaws. Rather than seeing them as flaws, see it as problem solving. In Bryson and Siegiel's article, "Do You Really 'See' Your Child?", they highlight the power of looking beyond initial assumptions and interpretations. Instead of immediately correcting manners, one should observe with an attitude of curiosity so you can

understand the feelings behind the behavior. Doing so will make it so your kids feel like you're there for and truly understand them. For example, toddlers that play the game of pushing food off of their highchair might make you think they are intentionally trying to push your buttons. Instead of responding with frustration, pause and ask why from a point of genuine curiosity. This will lead to seeing them as young researchers gathering data as they explore a world that is so new to them. In the end, it will allow you to respond with intention and patience, rather than reacting with aggravation (Bryson and Siegel). This simple change will not only make it easier to deal with undesirable behaviors, but it will also bring a sense of understanding that strengthens the relationship you share with your kid. Another important mindset change is understanding that being able to struggle, hope, cope, and work through trial and error is an essential part of growing up. Lythcott-Haim's TED Talk on "How to Raise Successful Kids" preaches that many parents fall into the misconception that grades are the purpose of childhood. Lythcott-Haim points out that a strong foundation for success comes from genuine love of things and doing chores. Many helicopter parents eliminate chores for their kids in place of school or extracurriculars, but chores teach a necessary skill for success. That skill is being able to do what isn't fun, but what needs to be done. She finishes by reminding parents that college does not equate to success in life, and that happiness comes from love of humans. To be able to love humans, you must teach them to love themselves, something that isn't possible unless you show them unconditional love (Lythcott-Haim). This is an issue that many helicopter parents impose on their kids, that their love is not unconditional. It is very conditional on their performance in school, the activities they participate in, and their grades. Teaching self-efficacy and confidence is immeasurably more beneficial than any short-term benefit they might receive from better grades or building a strong childhood resume.

The last piece of advice for having a healthy parenting approach is to strike a balance between giving your kid independence and being involved. To do so, parents should take inspiration from lifeguard and hummingbird parenting styles. Dinavahi's CNN article, "Helicopter Parenting vs. Hummingbird Parenting" says hummingbird parenting is keeping a close watch on children, but allowing them freedom to explore and make mistakes.

Hummingbird parents flutter in and out of their children's lives, being careful to only provide support when needed. However, it's not about choosing one method over the other, there are rare times in a child's life when hovering is appropriate. For example, being a helicopter parent during a difficult transition like starting a new school can be beneficial. A hummingbird parent understands the differences between these styles and switches between them depending on the situation (Dinavahi). It is important to take a step back so that resilience and self-confidence can be built, without putting your kid in danger. It is during these moments that they learn and grow the most. Finally, lifeguard parenting is another beneficial parenting style that is less known.

According to "Move over, helicopter parents. Try being a lifeguard parent instead" by Katherine Martinko, a writer and senior editor known for her work on parenting topics expresses that, "kids flourish when supervised only as much as necessary not as much as possible". That statement defines what it means to be a lifeguard parent. There are three states of a lifeguard parent; open attention, focused attention, and active intervention. Open attention is the default state, being physically distant and non-intrusive. Focus attention is when warning signs of danger are detected. When using focused attention, the best way to communicate danger to a child is to casually remind them to think about their actions. For example, rather than yelling at them, "Stay off that branch!", ask them, "Do you think that branch will support you?". This allows them to practice risk management skills. Lastly, active intervention should be rare (Katherine Martinko).

Using lifeguard and hummingbird parenting techniques are healthy ways to raise kids to be confident and teach them valuable skills that only come with freedom.

Section IV: Conclusion

By returning to the introduction, it is clear that refraining from being a helicopter parent will save your child from a lifetime of hardship. Although it sacrifices some short term security and support by immediately ensuring their comfort, it sets them up for a lifetime of anxiety and fear of failure. Additionally, by holding their hand through every step not only robs them of the opportunity to learn from their own mistakes, but it sends the message that they cannot accomplish anything without you. Recognizing the traits of a helicopter parent and consciously avoiding them in place of hummingbird and lifeguard parenting techniques are perfect solutions to overparenting. These two techniques show that it is possible to change how you think and respond to your child's actions so that you can empower them to think for themselves. By doing so, they build powerful abilities like confidence, self-efficacy, problem-solving, and coping skills that will guide them to a successful future. Now, let's reimagine my hypothetical scenario from the introduction. If the parents would adopt these solutions, they could help their child become happier, strengthen their relationship with them, and build the resilience needed to face future hardships. Looking back at the claims argued in this essay, will you be a helicopter parent to your current or future children? Or will you be a hummingbird or lifeguard parent?

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