

HANDS-OFF OR HELICOPTER—WHICH KIND OF PARENT ARE YOU?

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Even before their first child enters school, but especially after that momentous occasion, parents reveal their true parenting style. They show themselves to be either strictly hands-off, letting the child learn hard lessons through experience without any parental interference, or helicopter style, constantly hovering over the child to help him succeed and prevent his being harmed.

Which parent are *you*? Are these two styles the only options, or is there a better way?

THE HANDS-OFF PARENT

This style of parenting has also been called “free-range parenting.” It was popularized in the late 1940s and 1950s by pediatrician Benjamin Spock in his now-famous book *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*. Behind this style is the belief that it will help the child learn to function independently and with little need for supervision.

Hands-off parents are “indulgent, . . . permissive, nondirective, lenient, or libertarian.” [Maryann Rosenthal, “Knowing Yourself and Your Children,” www.drma.com] They place no demands on their children. Like Eli in 1 Samuel 2, they place few or no restrictions on their behavior and exercise no disciplinary actions to correct misbehavior. They try to be their child’s buddy. They allow their child to make his own decisions about everything, from what he will wear to when he will go to bed to what (or if) he will eat. This style gives no thought to whether the child is capable of or mature enough to engage in any particular task or decision.

Studies (and the experiences of the 1960s and 1970s) show the consequences of such parenting. Children of hands-off parents are characterized by three tendencies: immaturity, impulsiveness, and irresponsibility. They always expect to get their way—because they always have before. And when they don’t, there is usually trouble.

THE HELICOPTER PARENT

The opposite of the hands-off parent is the helicopter parent. Such parents “hover” over or near the child, seeking to protect him from anything that might threaten or harm him. They work to prevent every failure, discouragement, or disappointment. In the process, they readily jump in to rescue the child from dangers, take his side in social conflicts, get him into the right classes, take his side in any conflict with a teacher, make everything easy for him, and sometimes even do (or “improve”) his school work for him. In a growing number of instances, they have even attended college classes with him, argued with graduate school professors on his behalf, and even lobbied potential employers to hire him for choice positions.

They try to set their child on the road to success—and even pave it for him. A recent example of such overparenting is the college scandals perpetrated by several Hollywood stars: paying college officials to alter test scores and give their children preference so they could gain admission to prestigious colleges.

Although such parents’ motives might seem laudable, the consequences are not. Helicopter parents are involved, but they are *too* involved. They unwittingly rob their children of the opportunity to learn for themselves how to handle problems, resolve conflicts, and make wise choices. They make their children more, not less, dependent on them just when they need to be learning independence and self-reliance. By never allowing them to fail, make mistakes, or make wrong choices—and experience the consequences—they produce adults who cannot rebound from failure and learn self-sufficiency, child-adults who give up easily, have trouble becoming settled in their interests, and struggle in gaining social and professional relationships with depth. It “breeds narcissism and poor coping skills” and “amplifies anxiety and stress.” [Jill Weber, “Helicopter Parenting,” www.heartlthylivingmagazine.us/Articles/641/] Moreover, it delays the point at which they leave home and venture into their own independent life; they continue to live with Mommy and Daddy indefinitely. It sabotages the very success the parents purportedly want for their children.

“Nobody sets out to be a helicopter parent,” Malinda Carlson says. “It kind of creeps on you. . . .” [“10 Warning Signs that You Might Be a Helicopter Parent (and How to Stop),” <https://afineparent.com/be-positive/helicopter-parent.html>]

A BETTER WAY

Proverbs 22:6 says, “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” And Philippians 4:5 says, “Let your moderation be known unto all men. . . .”

These passages do not promise immediate results because parenting is a marathon, not a sprint. There is a big difference between protecting your child and being *over*protective; between being available for your child when needed and constantly hovering over and smothering him; between letting him make mistakes and learn from them and never allowing him to experience *any* failures, mistakes, or disappointments.

Perhaps Atticus Finch, a major character in the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, summed it up best. “There’s a lot of ugly things in this world. . . . I wish I could keep ’em all away from you.” But then he concludes, “That’s never possible.”

Psychologist Michael Ungar wrote, “The point of parenting should be to grow a child who is capable of taking on adult tasks. . . . It is always better to empower children to make good choices for themselves rather than having them remain dependent on parents to sort out problems for them.” [Michael Ungar, “Helicopter Parenting—It’s Worse Than You Think,” www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/nation-wimps/201401/helicopter-parenting-its-worse-you-think]

This better way errs in neither extreme, excessive permissiveness nor overparenting. It’s a sensible approach, a biblical approach.