

Mom and Dad to the Rescue!

Parents of this generation are increasingly involved in all aspects of their kids' lives. But is their hovering helpful or hurtful? You might be surprised.

by Jeanne Muchnick

When 17-year-old Stacy L.* learned she failed to make the honor roll at Clarkstown High School North, she took the news in stride. Better luck next time, she thought. While she planned to try harder next quarter, she also believed it better to move on than to dwell.

Her mother, Jane*, however, had a different approach. She called the school principal and demanded to know why her daughter was left off the list. "Her grades were on par," she says. "I thought it was worth arguing for."

By now Jane is on a first-name basis with the faculty at her daughter's New City

school. After all, in the past year, she has called the administrative offices to reschedule five different tests, and when Stacy was passed over for the school play, Jane was right there to lobby on her behalf. "She's a good singer and deserved a decent role," Jane says about her daughter. The forty-something stay-at-home mom is so busy running her daughter's life that she insisted her name be changed for this article to ensure her anonymity from her husband. She says, "He already thinks I'm too involved."

While some call this kind of micromanagement parenting, others dub it "helicopter parenting," a term that describes moms and dads who hover over their children

and manage every aspect of their lives. The phenomenon begins at birth, though it's most noticeable when kids reach high school and college. Wikipedia defines the helicopter parent as "someone who pays extremely close attention to his or her child or children, particularly at educational institutions." The online encyclopedia elaborates with the phrase "Black Hawks," a reference to those who cross the line by editing term papers, filling out job applications, even disputing their child's grades. John Darsee, of West Nyack, confirms that both types exist all over Rockland and they go to painstaking

** names have been changed*

lengths to control everything from their kids' first playdates to their first day of college.

Certainly, helicopter parenting stems from the most honorable intentions—that of wanting the best for your child—but it can backfire. “Parental overinvolvement prevents kids from learning to be confident in their own abilities, which can affect their

It's one thing to check in with a preschool teacher and let her know that your little darling needs fruit instead of cookies at snack time, but when you find yourself completing your child's high-school projects and filling out college applications, you've crossed the line from helping to hovering. And you're not alone. All over

land at a top-notch university is fierce. These days, rearing college-bound kids begins in the early stages of childhood, explains Stacy DeBroff, the founder of MomCentral.com and author of numerous parenting books including her most recent, *The Mom Book Goes to School: Insider Tips to Ensure Your Child Thrives*. Kids—babies really—are on the fast track to college from day one. As parents we're judged on the mommy groups we belong to, the amount of television our kids watch, even the educational toys they play with. In fact, “playtime” is merely a sneaky way to teach kids new languages, draw out their musical genius, or shed light on some other hidden talents that will make them a standout to admissions officers down the road.

“The fundamental structure of childhood has shifted, and now resembles a sort of elaborate Stanley Kaplan cram course for life,” says DeBroff. “It's not just playing with toys, but with supercharged toys marketed to expand your child's mind and deepen his intelligence. We play classical music to boost the intelligence of our fetuses, enroll toddlers who have just learned to walk in tumbling classes, and pop foreign-language tapes in the car as we careen around to the next hopefully optimizing event. Like a strategic stock pick or investment, parents try to determine which activities or lessons or equipment will pay off in the long run.”

The rise of the cell phone and the unprecedented influence of 24/7 technology—meaning you can reach your kid

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self-esteem,” explains Doreen Cosgrove, a Nyack-based clinical psychologist with more than 20 years experience, some of which was spent as a school psychologist. “Because they never learn to struggle and fail, they often develop an overwhelming fear of failure and of disappointing others. Both the low self-confidence and the fear of failure can lead to depression or anxiety.”

Indeed, many residents say they've heard of the helicopter-parent phenomenon, but try finding a mom who considers herself one. “Most parents don't even know they're doing it,” explains Cosgrove. “The parents think they are merely advocating for their children.”

Peter Kanyuk, a retired music teacher who lives in New City, admits there were times during his son's elementary-school years when he overstepped his boundaries as a parent. When his son, Paul, was upset because he wasn't getting called on in kindergarten, Kanyuk claims he went nuts and wrote a scathing letter to the teacher.

It wasn't until weeks later when an angry parent lashed out at him about the school band that Kanyuk recognized his mistake. Says this teacher of 33 years, “I realized that what drove me crazy as a teacher, I was now doing as a parent.”

the country, in affluent cities and suburbs, well-intentioned parents have overstepped their bounds. Cosgrove says, “It's getting to a point where kids simply rely on Mom and Dad to solve their problems for them, which will not help them in the real world.” In fact, kids are so coddled that *The Wall Street Journal* recently reported that ages 18 and 21 are no longer the true entry points into American adulthood—age 26 is.

To see what helicopter parenting means for kids in Rockland, we checked in with moms and dads around the county. We found that many parents who identified themselves as “involved” are, according to experts, actually overinvolved. Are you one of them? Read on and find out.

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Resume Building

College admissions can bring out the hovering instinct in any parent, but this is especially true in Rockland, where the competition to

anytime, anywhere—also play a part in hands-on parenting. The cell phone, in fact, has been called “the world's longest umbilical chord,” explains Steven Kurtz, PhD,

Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the NYU Child Study Center in New York City. Today, parents are in touch with their college-aged kids, often two to three times a day, and they check in with their middle- and high-schoolers on a regular basis. Lori G.* says her mom would call constantly during her high-school volleyball tournaments to ask innocuous questions: How's your ankle? Are you getting enough playing time?

Experts like Dr. Kurtz argue that such communication can thwart a student's steps toward independence, as kids get the message that the answer to their problems is just a phone call away. "When children aren't given the space to struggle through things on their own, they don't learn how to solve problems," he says.



Perhaps what fuels hovering most is the fact that today's youngsters are all too happy to let Mom and Dad handle life's more tedious details.

Kids These Days

College prep is just one theory for why such hands-on parenting exists, but there are others. Today's families are complicated: Moms and dads both work, often they don't live together, and parents try to overcompensate for less-than-ideal circumstances. Some experts attribute helicopter parenting to working mothers who are absent during the day. To prove their presence—and assuage their own guilt—they solve their kids' problems at the drop of a hat.

Then there are the baby boomers, many of whom have waited to have kids, and so they treat their offspring like pieces of Baccarat crystal and see parenting as the "absolute, most vital part of their lives." Others, like Joanie Arnold, a clinical social worker with offices in Blauvelt and Teaneck, New Jersey, theorize that the root of

such parenting is merely insecurity, and that many are living vicariously through their children. Many stay-at-home moms, in particular, seem to treat the minutiae of their kids' activities as their main mission in life.

Perhaps what fuels hovering most is the fact that today's youngsters are all too happy to let Mom and Dad handle life's more-tedious details. Rockland's high cost of living doesn't help. Between inevitable student loans and the area's exorbitant real-estate market, you can bet Junior is probably coming back home to live with you. In most cases, that's fine with today's young adults. Gen Y youngsters (those born between the early 1980s and 2000) have been so chaperoned since birth, that they embrace—and even need—Mom and Dad's perpetual interference.

One Upper Grand View parent, in fact, hired a cleaning service for her college freshman because she was worried he'd never do his own laundry. He was thrilled.

In New City, Karen S.* says she knows all when it comes to her son, and she is not ashamed to step in and help when duty calls. A few years ago, she wrote his college admissions essay. "He has ADHD," she says defensively. According to Karen, her son didn't find his mom's actions intrusive at all. In fact, this college junior still sends his school reports to his grandmother, a retired English teacher. "I like having her input," he says.

It's common for kids to stay in close contact with their parents well into their college years, confirms Susan Smith Kuczarski, a ClubMom.com teen expert and author of *The Sacred Flight of the Teenager*. It's how these kids grew up; it's what they're used to.

Mom and Dad have been controlling their lives practically since birth, so it should be no surprise they still lean on them even at the ripe old age of 19 or 20.

Chopper Down

Along with emotional stress, being too hands-on can lead to practical pitfalls as well. It was final-exam week for recent college graduate Lori when the human-resources vice president of a large company called to offer her a Westchester-based job. Mistakenly, he called her Nyack home number (instead of her cell) and made arrangements through her mother. "My mom was like, yeah, Lori will be home on May 17 and can start work on the 18," she says. "She also told the guy how happy I was to have the job." Eventually, the vice

TRANSITION | TIPS

Learning to separate from your growing teen is never easy. Here, some "letting go" tips from Susan Smith Kuczarski, a ClubMom.com teen expert and author of *The Sacred Flight of the Teenager*.

- ◀ **Keep reminding yourself "This is not about me."** Because letting go means detaching, parents find this hard and painful. But it's something you need to do to let your child be more independent.
- ◀ **Stop acting as if you know best.** Your teen has her own ideas and plans. Stop trying to control her. And try compromising more.
- ◀ **Beware of overinvolvement.** Try smiles and humor instead. You might even experiment by treating your teen as if she were someone else's. This can enable you to relate to her with more objectivity and lightheartedness.
- ◀ **Create a new relationship.** Try swapping your "parent-to-child" relationship for a "person-to-person" one.



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president and Lori connected (on her cell phone), but she says "the seed was set," leaving her little negotiating power in her start date. "I was upset with my mom but not surprised; that's how she's always been and I know she was just trying to help."

Of course, there are times when it's necessary for a parent to be an advocate on a child's behalf—e.g., bullying at school, special health issues, and serious issues with a teacher. But there is a point when you have to put your rotor down and back off.

For New City's Kanyuk, who berated the kindergarten teacher on behalf of his son, the alarm sounded after he became the victim of another parent's rage. "I backtracked and apologized immediately to the principal," he remembers. Though he still attended every parent-teacher meeting that year and, later on, intervened when he probably shouldn't have, he did eventually learn when to step in and when to let his son overcome his own challenges. "Some amount of helicopter parenting is good," says Kanyuk, "It's sort of the job of the parent. But you have to know when to back off."

It's never easy to let kids fend for themselves, but it is part of healthy parenting. Some suggestions: First, cut down on extracurricular activities. "Every child needs down time," advises Blauvelt social worker Arnold. "Leave empty space on your calendar. And trust yourself. There's no single, 'right' way to parent. You're not messing up by allowing them to just 'be.' Childhood and the teenage years are preparation for life, not a performance."

You also need to be aware of the differences between helpful involvement and unproductive hovering, adds Kuczmariski.

Certainly, when your kids are younger (pre-school and grade and middle school), you need to intervene more than when your kids have learned the skills necessary to deal with their peers. Step back and take an educational role. In fact, if you think of yourself as a coach—and look at your child with a little distance—you might be more objective and reasonable.

Lastly, find your own activities. Parents who have interests of their own will find themselves less invested in their kids' day-to-day agendas. Of course, we all worry about our kids. My daughters are 11 and 14, and the "mean girl" stuff that goes on at their middle school plagues me. But the fact that I work full-time keeps me from focusing too much on the minute intricacies of teenage existence.

West Nyack's Darsee admits he, too, has struggled with the dilemma of overinvolvement vs. being involved through the years. "I'll be the first to tell you we haven't always handled everything right over the years. Since our son will be in college next year, my wife and I are sort of biting our lips because we'd rather let him make his mistakes now, when we're still here to support him." As he points out, "We owe it to our kids to allow them to grow in an environment where they can make mistakes and learn from them." 🍌

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ARE YOU HOVERING?

If any of the following sounds like you, you're probably overmanaging your child's life:

- ◀◀ Homework has become a joint activity to the point that you have at least once told a teacher that even you struggled with the previous night's homework, and if you cannot do it with all your education, how could your child?
- ◀◀ You do most of the talking at the parent-teacher conference.
- ◀◀ You speak about your child and his activities using the pronoun "we," e.g., "We were too tired to finish all the homework last night."
- ◀◀ You fiercely believe that your child's perspective on what happened, whether in class or with a peer, is correct.
- ◀◀ You feel great personal success in each of your child's achievements.
- ◀◀ Volunteering in the classroom to get the full scoop on what goes on strikes you as both imperative and a key to making sure your child thrives.
- ◀◀ You know each kid in you child's class by face and name.
- ◀◀ You have gone to the principal to complain about a teacher without going to the teacher to discuss the issue at length first.
- ◀◀ You spend more than an hour a day at the school as a volunteer.
- ◀◀ Other parents keeping a couple of feet radius from you while you cheer loudly from the sidelines. You have e-mailed or talked with your child's coaches or activity teachers about how your child is doing more than three times in a season.



— Stacy DeBraf, founder of MomCentral.com.