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Why helicopter kids aren't happy

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In recent years, professor Holly Schiffrin has noticed the parents of students at the University of Mary Washington have become increasingly involved in their children's campus lives.

It is not uncommon for parents to contact her and other faculty members at the Fredericksburg, Va., university to inquire about their children's class schedules and grades. Some have even been known to reach out to the dean to complain about their children's roommate issues.

"It seems very different from when I went to college, and it's surprising," says Schiffrin, an associate professor of psychology, noting that her post-secondary institution is not the only one reporting this trend.

As the children of so-called helicopter parents come of age, many struggle to break free from parental control even after they leave the nest. Schiffrin notes that many colleges and universities, including her own, have resorted to offering orientation programs for parents to make it easier for them to part with their children at the start of each school year. In December, University of Cincinnati student Aubrey Ireland made headlines when she took her parents to court, alleging they were stalking her by regularly showing up uninvited to her school and tracking her computer and phone use. And last February, U.S. public broadcaster NPR reported that more helicopter parents are intervening at their children's workplaces to negotiate salaries and vacations on their behalf.

Previous studies suggest hyper-involved parenting can lead to negative consequences, such as higher rates of depression and anxiety among university-aged children as well as poorer family relationships, so Schiffrin and her colleagues set out to examine why.

In a new study, published online in the Journal of Child and Family Studies, she and her team surveyed 279 university students, aged 18 to 23. The researchers found that those with overly controlling parents reported experiencing depression and lower satisfaction with life, largely because they felt their parents were infringing on their basic psychological needs, namely for autonomy, a sense of competence and a feeling of relatedness, or being part of a genuinely caring relationship.

“Kids ... did report feeling less autonomy, less competence and less close to their parents,” Schiffrin says.

As a parent herself, Schiffrin says she recognizes parents have their children’s best interests at heart and acknowledges it can be difficult to back off and let them fend for themselves.

She suggests technology, by allowing parents to constantly keep tabs on their children, may be making it harder for many to resist helicopter parenting. Moreover, parents recognize that their children are under increased pressure to succeed. According to the Toronto District School Board’s latest census, released this week, three out of four high-school students are worried about their future, and more than half say they are so stressed, they are losing sleep.

But if the results of Schiffrin’s study are any indication, parents’ efforts to help their children can do more harm than good in the long run. Schiffrin has heard of parents going so far as to proofread or write their children’s university essays for them, while one panicked mother even sought an Amber Alert missing child warning when her university-aged daughter was visiting friends and out of touch for a weekend.

“I think the take-home message is maybe the best thing you can do to help your child is to do less,” Schiffrin says. “Let them struggle a little. Let them solve their own problems because, I mean, I’m calling them kids, but they’re adults in college, and they need the opportunity to be adults.”