

How helicopter parents are ruining college students



Move in day. (Drake University)

Attention, parents of college students.

Say your kid has a problem with a roommate. Maybe one “borrowed” his favorite t-shirt. Maybe your daughter’s roommate leaves old, stinky Chinese take out in the mini-fridge. Perhaps your child is so upset about this he texts you five times a day to complain.

Here’s the thing: Don’t call the college president to ask him to handle the situation. (Yes, that happens.)

Jonathan Gibraltar, president of Frostburg State University, has had parents call him at his office to talk about a squabble their child is having with a roommate. “Don’t you trust your child to deal with this on his own?” he asks. “Rather than

telling a son or daughter to talk to a [resident assistant] or [resident director], parents will immediately call my office. And that I consider to be a little over the top.”

A little over the top, yes. But also the way things are now for many people. The kids who have been raised by parents who watched their every move, checked their grades online hourly, advocated for them endlessly and kept them busy from event to activity to play date are tucked away in college. But that doesn't mean their parents have let go. They make make themselves known to schools, professors, counselors and advisors. And yes, college presidents.

But those parents are forgetting some very important lessons in Parenting 101, and that is how to help a child learn how to really thrive.

“When I was going to college in 1975... my mother helped me unload into the dorm room, put a note on the door saying this is the way we wash our clothes,” Gibraltar said. “I didn't find out until years later that she cried all the way home because she realized I was going to be independent.”

Oh, it is more than difficult to let go. But saying goodbyes at the dorm and then giving that little bird a push is what will help him or her succeed. That doesn't mean letting go or not being involved anymore. But hovering and intervening too often doesn't do students any favors.

A study published recently in the journal *Education + Training* found that there is an important line to draw between parental involvement and over-parenting. “While parental involvement might be the extra boost that students need to build their own confidence and abilities, over-parenting appears to do the converse in creating a sense that one cannot accomplish things socially or in general on one's own,” wrote the authors, two professors from California State University Fresno. The authors of “Helicopter parents: An Examination of the Correlates of Over-parenting of College Students,” Jill C. Bradley-Geist and Julie B. Olson-Buchanan, go on to detail how over-parenting can actually ruin a child's abilities to deal with the workplace.

Bradley-Geist and Olson-Buchanan, both management professors, surveyed more than 450 undergraduate students who were asked to “rate their level of self-efficacy, the frequency of parental involvement, how involved parents were in their daily lives and their response to certain workplace scenarios.” The study showed that those college students with “helicopter parents” had a hard time believing in their own ability to accomplish goals. They were more

dependent on others, had poor coping strategies and didn't have soft skills, like responsibility and conscientiousness throughout college, the authors found.

"I had a mom ask to sit in on a disciplinary meeting" when a student was failing, said Marla Vannucci, an associate professor at the Adler School of Professional Psychology in Chicago, who was that student's academic advisor. Her team let the mom sit in, but in the end it doesn't help. "It really breeds helplessness."

Vannucci also had a college-aged client whose parents did her homework for her. The client's mother explained that she didn't want her daughter to struggle the same way she had. The daughter, however, "has grown up to be an adult who has anxiety attacks anytime someone asks her to do something challenging" because she never learned how to handle anything on her own.

These may be extreme cases, but parental over-involvement has been bleeding into college culture for some time now. "I think they need to know that they are actually diminishing their child's ability to understand how to navigate the world by trying to do it for them," Gibraltar said.

So what to do? Gibraltar has a formula: Parents and children need to sit down and have honest conversations. "How do you want this to go, and when do you want me to be involved, and ... how can I support you." That, to me, is an incredibly important conversation for parents and children to have as they head off to be freshmen in college."

Abbey Barrow, a senior at Drake University majoring in journalism and English, said when she went off to school, they all knew they wanted to maintain the closeness they had, but also realized it was time for her to grow more as her own person. "I remember my mom telling me that they would not set the boundaries on communication, that it would be up to me when I would call and stay in touch," she said. "That was a good turning point where I knew I'd be in charge and in control." Their usual schedule includes two telephone calls during the week and Skype on weekends. "It allowed me to have some independence and not be constricted," she said.

Barrow knows classmates who call after every test, or whose parents text or Facebook asking how particular questions went. "Those kids are still very reliant on their parents making decisions and doing their everyday life," she said. "It's a tough way to head into life if you are reliant on other people to help with decisions."

Her parents admit it wasn't so easy, letting her go and letting so many other things go. "It was very tough for us," said Mimi Barrow. "We just tried to make sure she was well prepared for it."

"It was harder for us than for her," echoed John. "We started very early with her in terms of just teaching her that she had control and power ... We did the time out chair, but it wasn't done as punishment. It was 'This is your time to think about what you can do differently.' I think it was really just reinforcing her autonomy."

Said Mimi: "I think we wanted to raise a strong, independent woman. We wanted her to make good choices as she grows and becomes an adult. We always try to model good decision making for her."

Even when she was little, her parents encouraged her to do the ordering at restaurants. She chose the gifts for birthday parties. She had to, in other words, live. "We always tried to get her to make well-informed independent decisions. Because when you grow up, you need those skills."

The Barrows both work in education, where Mimi is an elementary school teacher and John is an educational psychologist. "We've seen the harm helicopter parents can do and we see the need for children to grow and build their self confidence," Mimi said. "When you hover, you take away that sense of self esteem."