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Children of fear

Helicopter parents cultivate cluelessness

By Lauren de Leeuw



Many of today's parents are driven by fear when it comes to raising kids – and that turns them into helicopter parents. (Photo from Creative Commons)

A TODDLER sits at the kitchen table across from his older sibling, who is colouring with a red crayon. The toddler wants the red crayon and begins to cry. Mommy comes over and asks the older sibling to share the crayon with his younger brother. The toddler gets the red crayon and everything goes back to normal. A few years later, the toddler is in kindergarten. The child across the table has the red crayon. He wants the red crayon. With no tolerance for frustration and unable to negotiate without his parent, the child breaks down.

Kids pour out of the front doors of the junior high, more than half of them with their eyes downcast, staring at the glowing screen that has captivated their attention and made the autumn scenery non-existent to them. SUVs, minivans and family Sedans are lined up

along the street and around the corner, until they fall out of sight – an endless lineup of vehicles all waiting to drive their kids to karate, piano, soccer. Or to drive them home, safely in their cars, away from the dangers they might run into if they were to walk home or be bussed.

It's moving day. The university residence is swarming with a collection of parents and students moving boxes and bags into the dorms. A mother and father have made sure their daughter is lacking for nothing. Her fridge is stocked; all her posters are put up. As a parting gift, mommy and daddy leave her with a credit card so she can fill up her Volkswagen Golf (a gift from them). In return, her parents expect to hear about every experience she has, every assignment she completes, and every grade she receives.

LADIES AND gentlemen, welcome to the era of the helicopter parent; the era where parents play such a significant role in their children's lives that there is no definitive end in sight for when these children will become responsible and contributing adults.

Because the number of helicopter parents has continued to grow, their motivations and effects are being carefully studied. Cheryl Luchkow was an appeals and grievances officer for the University of Alberta, so she has had plenty of experience with helicopter parenting and post-secondary students.

"Most of these students are millennial students," she says, "and these are the students that, from K-12, their parents have been involved because schools would say, 'We really want you to come. Come read to the kids or be on the parents committee, etc.' But universities don't want parents so much. I'd have parents phone me saying that they were going to attend class because their kid couldn't attend that day."

During her time in the job, Luchkow's curiosity about helicopter parenting began to grow. She wrote her master's thesis on the subject and published the paper in April 2012.

"It focused a lot on how much the world has changed," she says. "This is the generation that, typically, every kid gets a certificate when they go to soccer, no one wants to hurt

anyone's feelings, everyone is involved and everyone gets a *Good Job*. This is the generation that has never faced being told no or experiencing failure."

This style of parenting can severely affect a child's cognitive and emotional development. It's a type of parenting that can look extremely caring to some and smothering to others, and it has created a generation that rarely lacks for anything and has a sense of privilege that didn't exist 25 years ago.

"We have a generation that, again, speaking generally, has a huge, huge sense of entitlement; a sense of immediate gratification," Luchkow says. "There's a sense of 'my kid is special.' But we all think that our children are special."

Today's children are being deprived of their independence, says Mary Frances Fitzgerald, president of the Guidance Council of Alberta Teachers Association – a position in which she works with schools and counsellors across Edmonton.

"Part of the developmental stages for our students are allowing the students to make choices on their own," she says. "Allowing students the opportunities where maybe they might not be as successful as they hoped to be is important, so that they understand the nature of what a setback can be."

At the same time, there are many reasons behind parents' over-protectiveness. Most of the time, fear is the driving factor behind this style of parenting – fear of a child not being treated well, fear of bad people, or fear of losing control.

Many parents worry that their child won't receive the treatment they think their child deserves or that they won't receive the attention they get at home. When children join the rest of society in a school, hobby, sport, or extracurricular activity, their upbringing shows in how they behave.

"Teachers have a right to work to the best of their ability and meet the needs of the class," Fitzgerald says. "And sometimes parents aren't satisfied with that, because

every parent wants the best for their child – every parent wants their child to have enough attention.

“A classroom setting is often not the best to have every child have that attention individually.”

At the same time, Fitzgerald says she hopes every child gets to feel special, and that it’s important for every child to have a champion, which is oftentimes one or both of his or her parents.

Another leading factor in why parents feel the need to hover is the culture of fear that the media has created. The media has managed to scare some parents into thinking the whole world is out to harm their child, Luchkow says.

“No kid walks alone any more, and no kid walks a block to school any more. This relates back to 9/11, Columbine, etc. ... They are worried that the bogeyman is out there and he’s going to get their kid.”

People are naturally curious when it comes to crime, so the media plays it up, says Edmonton police Sgt. Steve Sharpe.

“The media have an important role to play. [The police] don’t control what the appetite is. The media may know that investigative journalism and crime are what people want to hear about. Their readership and their viewers are just inherently interested in crime.”

On the other hand, Sharpe says parents need to be able to put things into context. According to the most recent *Police Reported Crime Statistics* chart, violent crime in 2013 was 36 per cent lower than in 2003. The media, through its preoccupation with crime, presents anecdotal evidence that our cities are dangerous violent places, when statistics show that they have actually been getting safer.

“I think that society is more engaged in the conversation than they were in the past,” Sharpe says. “Through advances in media and technology, the world conversation is

available in someone's home in Edmonton this evening. As a result of that, people are inundated with crime and with a fear of crime messaging."

Parents need to find a balance and put things into perspective when it comes to the relationship between their child's safety and crime, he adds.

"I think you need to be able to take a refreshing step back from it and say, well it's interesting and I enjoyed reading the article, but I don't know if I'm going to be mugged this evening when I go to Safeway. You need to put it in context; otherwise, if we buy into everything is just gloom and doom, we won't be able to live our lives – we won't be able to enjoy the good things that are going on."

Fear can appear in many forms, especially when it comes to trying to raise a child in the best way possible. The average number of children per family has decreased from 2.7 in 1961 to 1.9 in 2011, the 2013 Statistics Canada census shows. This has had the effect of giving parents more time to devote to each child, and that can translate into being over-protective.



*Children are more than capable of developing skills that will help them be successful in society.
(Photo from Creative Commons)*

Luchkow tells a story of a mother who created a map of the U of A campus for herself, as well as for her son. The map marked, in fluorescent bright pink, where all his classes were and where the parkades were. This way, if he needed help with any of his schoolwork, she could meet him at the parkade nearest his class. Asked why she did this, she told Luchkow, with tears in her eyes, that her biggest fear was that her son didn't need her any more.

“There are separation issues. It’s not just in North America. This is happening globally.”

A problem that has popped up, specifically in Western society, is the Peter Pan Syndrome. This is not an actual psychopathology, researchers at Spain’s University of Granada showed, in a 2007 study. But it is becoming present in more countries around the world. The syndrome – when adults display emotionally immature behaviour – is affecting an increasingly large number of adults. And helicopter parenting could be making things worse.

“A major concern arising from this trend is that students will not develop the autonomy or skills needed to function once they leave university and move on,” Luchkow says.

“Notably ... they will not develop problem-solving skills, self-initiation skills, or learn to become independent.”

Most parents want nothing more than to do right by their children. But children need to be proud of things they achieve on their own, and they need to acquire negotiating and problem-solving skills. Without these skills, they will have a hard time dealing with the world – and the world will have a hard time dealing with them.