

Confessions of a "Helicopter Parent"

I admit it. I'm a "helicopter parent." You may have seen the newspaper accounts describing the baby boomer parents who hover over their college-age children, providing for their every need—like the mother who flew in from Salt Lake City to protest her daughter's biology grade at Harvard, or the parents who insisted Colgate University deal with the less than desirable plumbing their child encountered while studying in China. Suggesting just how pervasive this phenomenon is, University of Georgia professor Richard Mullendore says the cell phone has become "the world's longest umbilical cord." While I don't talk with my children, now 18 and 23, several times a day by cell phone, I confess I am involved in my children's lives more than they like and more than I should be.

This tendency may be the result of our own experiences growing up as part of the baby boom generation. Our sheer numbers caused us to compete strenuously for places on sports teams and at the top of the class, for admission to the best colleges and later the best graduate and professional schools, and finally for the top jobs. As our children have come along, we have felt compelled to make the way easier for them, to clear away the obstacles that may lie in their path to success.

Caring for our children's welfare and helping them out along the way is a fundamental part of a parent's role, of course. But we baby boomers have made this nurturing an extreme sport. In my case, I was there in the school principal's office putting in my requests for specific teachers to ensure that my children would get the best education possible. I have constantly monitored deadlines for them, whether it's for completing a homework assignment, filing a college application, or lining up a summer job. While my husband and I have worked hard to ensure that our children are independent thinkers, we still inject ourselves into their decision-making far more than our parents did in ours. "Never leave anything to chance" has become our mantra in parenting.

This involvement with our children seems right to us. Isn't this what good parenting is supposed to be, we ask? But is it healthy? Shouldn't our children be taking more responsibility for their own lives? Shouldn't we recognize that encountering obstacles and overcoming them is often a valuable learning experience? And shouldn't we back off and find something else to fill our days (and our "need to be needed")? After all, most of us can expect to live at least 20 years past the time our youngest child has left the nest.

As baby boomers, we don't want to accept that we are aging, much less acknowledge our own mortality. The reality is that we will not always be there to help our children along. Will they be ready, when that day comes, to cope with whatever life brings them?

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