

BEWARE THE HOVERCRAFT!!!!

Helicopter Parenting in the 21st Century

by Carolyn White

Look up and you'll see them, as ubiquitous as crows or pigeons and even more annoying. They have been with us for years and won't seem to go away, and there isn't anywhere to hide from them. Remember Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*? Well in the 21st Century they come in the form of helicopter parents who have morphed into hovercraft that seem to be a permanent part of the landscape. Instead of sitting on the telephone wires, they are sitting in their SUV's or on the soccer field. They suck up their children's oxygen and prey on their independence. They can't let go and can't move on. Parents of only children have long been accused of hovering and smothering, but they have lots of company... with parents of siblings. Of course, with only one child to think about there is more time to "helicopter."

But really, what's so bad about being there for your kids, especially in a world that appears so fraught with danger and stress? From Internet predators to SAT scores, we agree that kids require protection and support, but overprotection is addictive for many parents. Once they





start they can't seem to stop. And usually, they don't even know they are doing it. While we all agree that it's essential for parents to give advice, help and know what their kids are up to, we should not agree to be enablers who prevent their kids from maturing. Sixty years ago, a twenty-year-old boy was considered a man who might be expected to support his own parents as well as a wife and kids. My, how times have changed! Today, adolescence has been extended well into the twenties and most young men are still little boys attached to their *X-Boxes* and mommy and daddy's bank accounts. At that age, if parents are always available to problem solve, write checks, and help work out social or educational conflicts, why should kids provide their own safety nets or learn to soothe themselves? Colleges and universities have reported that many parents are so obsessed with their kids that they show up for registration along with them. After all, how can you expect an eighteen-year-old to know which courses he needs or wants to take unless mom is there to advise ...or coerce him into registering for courses he never was attracted to in the first place? Parents of kids from Kindergarten to graduate school have hired tutors, shadows to help their little ones learn to socialize, paid fortunes to therapists because their only child seems lonely, made special trips to bring forgotten homework, lunch boxes, and pieces of clothing to school. Why would parents expect their child to figure

out how to get something to eat (maybe a friend would share), how to figure out a math problem, or learn to make up with a friend? In a 2009 article on the backlash against over involved parents, *Time Magazine* reported that Karen Faucher, a principal at Belinder Elementary School in Prairie Village, Kansas, got so fed up with parents waiting on their kids that she instituted a “no rescue” policy. Like a “no fly zone” parents were not allowed to enter school space to rescue their child from possible malnutrition or social disgrace.



When I went to school (in medieval times). I was expected to save myself from the hangman’s noose, and if the dog ate my homework then I was responsible for the tortuous explanation to my teacher. My mother wasn’t about to call school and make excuses for me. Having to hold my own kept me honest. Our kids don’t have to do much on their own. We parents have been holding their hands and protecting them for so long that paralysis has set in. I admit that in the past I had moments when I was ready to fly my own hovercraft. When my daughter was filling out her college applications I did sit in her room and talk through those essays with her. And, boy, how I longed to tell her what to write. But I was able to restrain myself, and when she had a falling out with friends I didn’t call a therapist. I expected that she would work through those issues herself (with my guidance if necessary) when things got really rocky, which they did from time to time. Yet, she survived and blossomed into a secure person because she learned to trust her own instincts and because she knew she could handle much of her personal life on her own.



One mother I know bought a condo for her son when he went to college and decorated it to designer perfection so he would have a chic pied a terre in which to entertain his friends. Well, some of us have decided not to take it anymore and are

looking for ways to disable the helicopters so children can fly on their own. But, you say, “If I can afford it, financially or with my time, why not?” Why not, because it’s unhealthy and doesn’t help your child build character, and it’s character that will be there for him when times are hard and you aren’t there to save him.



Character can’t be built overnight. In other words, you can’t wake up one day, realize that your thirteen-year-old has no idea of how to care for herself, wash a dish, make a bed or make good choices in her friends unless she has had training and practice. Yes, it still takes practice to get to Carnegie Hall. In fact, a recent large-scale study showed that kids who are rewarded for their determination rather than their talent do better in school as well as playing the piano. Start small when your kids are small. There is no reason why a three-year-old can’t put his toys away in a box and a four-year-old is perfectly capable of dressing himself even though he may end up looking like a refugee from Ken Kesey’s *Magic Bus*. Who cares? He did it himself and in the process if he asks for help you can give it. But he owns the outfit for better or worse. Why can’t a five year old help make his own lunch? He can slap on the peanut butter with the best of them, under your supervision. Then he can choose a piece of fruit rather than a cookie to put in the mix.

If a child is not asked back to a school because he has tried to intimidate a teacher, why should his family petition to have him reinstated? What is wrong with believing the teacher and making the child responsible for his behavior? We all make mistakes and some of them certainly will make our lives tougher. But how else are we supposed to learn?

There is a time to be a mamma bear defending a cub and a time to back up and head for the cave. When you start finding all kinds of excuses for your child, it’s time to choose a differ-

ent course. Remember the guidelines you gave your little one about looking both ways before crossing a street? Follow that same rule when deciding whether or not to intervene in your child's life. Look both ways to see what's coming and assess. Don't assume that because your child is upset that it's your job to fix it. And don't ever assume that your child is so good at home that he is always that same way at school. Young children are clever at getting their way, teenagers even more manipulative, and young adult children will stay tied to your apron strings financially as long as you let them. If your child knows that you will always defend him or be ready to purchase living room furniture, where does it end?

I can look up and see those hovercraft right now and the pilots are saying, "But she's my only child. How can I not give her what I think she needs?" My advice is to look both ways and think logically not emotionally. What your child needs is space and time to figure things out in her unique fashion as long as it isn't potentially dangerous. At many points in your child's life, your job is to be there to listen and advise and watch which path your child chooses. It may not be the path that you would choose, but it's hers to walk and explore. Try to leave the helicopter on its pad unless and until it's needed for an important rescue mission. ©

