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Motherlode

Adventures in Parenting

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Defining a Successful Parent

By *LISA BELKIN*

“Today the child is king.”

So begins a paper to be published later this year in The U.C. Davis Law Review. In an article titled “[Over-Parenting](#),” Gaia Bernstein of the Seton Hall University School of Law and Zvi Triger of the College of Management School of Law in Israel define a two-decades-long trend of what they call intensive parenting.

Its hallmarks:

Parents devote their time to actively enriching the child, ensuring the child’s individual needs are addressed and he is able to reach his full potential. They also keep abreast of the newest child-rearing knowledge and consistently monitor the child’s progress and whereabouts. Parents are expected to be cultivating, informed and monitoring. To satisfy these high standards, parents utilize a broad array of technological devices, such as the cellular phone and the Internet, making Intensive Parenting a sociotechnological trend.

Intensive Parenting begins at pregnancy, when the pregnant mother accesses an ever increasing amount of information instructing her on how to achieve an optimal pregnancy and does not end when the child enters college. Colleges have recently adjusted to accommodate a new generation of parents who insist on being in direct contact with administrators and professors in order to continue to monitor their children’s lives.

Sounds good, right? Many parents think so. After all, enriching, and cultivating and informing and monitoring are what parents are supposed to do, no?

[Bernstein](#) and Triger are not so sure. They cite studies that suggest what we have discussed on Motherlode before, that what they call intensive parenting (which others dub helicopter parenting or smothering mothering) can cause more harm than good. It is creating an anxious, dependent generation, they write, and it can “seriously undermine one of the most important roles of parents, namely, nurturing a sense of independence and separation from the parent.”

They fear that the trend is already being codified into law. In custody cases, lawyers advise parents, particularly the one who might have had less day-to-day participation in the children’s lives, to enter what Bernstein calls “the race for involvement.”

“It becomes a strategy, to know all the teachers, coach little league, text your children

20, 30 times a day,” she said in an interview.

The same changing standard of parenting can be seen in a recent law in California that threatens parents with legal liability if their children are truant, and another in five states that allows a pregnant woman to be jailed for drinking alcohol, she said. “What next?” she asked. “A doctor who reports a patient for not taking folic acid?”

Folic acid is good during pregnancy, alcohol is bad and parents should know their children’s teachers, she says. But “not every desirable child-rearing norm is a desirable legal standard.”

And not every child-rearing norm is good.

The inching of the law is dangerous not only because of the unintended consequences, she says, but also because of the inherent socioeconomic inequity. It takes money to parent intensively, she says, and defining this as the standard “in a multicultural society would force it on those who may be financially unable or ideologically unwilling to adopt it.”

What then should our measure of good parenting be? Our personal benchmark? Our social contract?

Two readers have asked me different iterations of this question in the past week. In the comment section of my post about [“Unhappy Helicopter Parents,”](#) Michelle wrote:

I get the point of this article. I do. It’s just that you’ve posted a lot about helicopter parenting over the last year or two and the topic increasingly leaves me wondering: What’s the difference between helicopter parenting and plain old parenting? It’s probably not intentional, but the feeling I get from reading related posts and the comments is that if you spend any time with your kids at all, then you are a helicopter parent. The gist of many comments seems to be that children should be left to their own devices and I should mostly ignore them in favor of my own pursuits. As a product of such a household, let me assure you that there are plenty of problems with that model of “parenting” too.

Then, today, Elise D. raised the same question a different way:

Many (if not most!) of the general population of parents want to think they’ve done a good job. But what does that really mean? With all of the different methods of parenting out there — helicopter parenting, attachment parenting . . . the buzzwords could go on forever — I wonder if we really focus on what’s important, the endgame. How do we know if we’ve been successful? Yes, of course, there are the basics: do you feed, clothe and educate your children? Of course these are the things you presumably sign up for when deciding to bring a child into your life. But at the end of the day, if you have done that, are you a “successful” parent? Is it creating a bond of love and unconditional support for this new being that helps guide them into productivity as an adult? As many of us struggle with our relationships with our own parents — and presumably, they have done many of the “basics” — and we second-guess their choices

and make different ones for our own children, how in the end is a successful parent defined?

I am going to take a stab at an answer, then give readers their turn.

I think the point of parenting is to guide children toward independence. The goal, starkly put, is for them to stop needing you.

The road from here to there is different from child to child and parent to parent. But a measure of success is whether we are doing things for our children that they should be ready to do for themselves. And that's where things get tricky. No bell sounds when they are "ready" — it is guesswork, hit and miss, and sometimes you guess wrong. Because doing it FOR them, protecting them from failure, erring on the side of holding on just a little longer — those things feel like love.

I am a better proponent than practitioner of this philosophy, I confess, but what I mean by helicopter parenting (and Michelle, it's a little like pornography, we recognize it in *other* people when we see it) is keeping your hand on the back of the metaphorical bike for too long. Of course you hold tight as long as they need you. But when they don't, are you willing to let go? Yes, there is a risk that they will fall. But if you don't fall, how do you learn to get up?

I wish I had failed and fallen more often as a child. I wish I'd let my children do more of both too. I have admitted to my own hovering tendencies here before. And I acknowledge that much of this new way of parenting comes from the feeling that the world is a scarier place, and from technology that makes constant contact easier, and from an educational system that demands more from students and therefore their parents, and from any number of other things that make this phenomenon far more complicated than just a bunch of pushy parents who can't let go, or who see their children's accomplishments as their own.

Success then, is fighting back against the new norms, and the guilt, and the nerves, and somehow raising an independent adult. The icing on success is raising an adult you really like. There is no one way to get there. And we can be too quick to label those who do it differently from the way we do, going so far, as Bernstein and Triger point out, to let overprotectiveness become law.