

Helium Parenting

By Rabbi David Wolpe (Huffington post 3/13/12)

Do you hover? Is your child's each vibration a source of concern to you? Honestly, do you harbor the suspicion that, without your patient, constant guidance, your teenager, or toddler, or ten year old, will topple into the abyss and never recover? In other words, was the term "helicopter parent" invented for you?

There are some colorful descriptions of "helicopter parenting," the practice of supervising children's every movement. Colleges complain that when students matriculate, they are often lost -- they do not know how to budget their time, handle disappointment or cook their own meals. An entire generation is writing sophisticated computer code and being confounded by laundry.

A few times, while I was teaching at UCLA, fathers and mothers accompanied students to meetings, to my astonishment. Years ago it would have been unspeakably humiliating to arrive at a professor's office with one's mother. One student who was caught cheating sat there, sad and imploring, as his mother built a case for his essential goodness. (Understand when I say caught cheating, I mean that at the end of the exam he stood up and notes tumbled from his hand. It was not a judgment call.) She assured me that his "capture" (her word) would rob him of a stellar career as a doctor, sabotage his chances to go to medical school and likely ruin his life. (For those who like their stories complete, I gave him a makeup exam and he flunked that, too. If such students can make it to medical school, I would guard your pancreas.)

How do we escape helicopter parenting? Sometimes a new practice requires a new image. For parents I have a new metaphor to aspire to --helium parenting.

We should hold on to our children as a child holds a balloon. Let them rise, float on their own, but keep a grasp on the string so that they do not float away to unknown parts. The time will come when we need to release the balloon but, in the meantime, instead of hovering from above, we should be holding lightly from below. Think of it as parental string theory.

When I was growing up my parents, who did not have cellphones or pagers, let us roam freely around the neighborhood. It never occurred to them that they were being irresponsible. They were, without benefit of the term, helium parenting. They knew where we went, whose homes we visited, which streets we used for touch football. They had hold of the tail, but we floated free.

Now we are so closely knit one to the other through the straightjacket of electronics that there is no true escape. We beep, buzz, Facebook, Skype and skulk our way around each other's space, especially that of our kids. We aren't just helicopter parents; we are helicopter parents with radar.

So often we forget that we are not trying to create "good kids," but competent, kind adults. Self-reliance is the fruit of practice, nurtured by failure, encouraged by appropriate risk. Coddle a kid and you get a coddled kid. Let them soar and you get an adult.

What we are protecting our children from is our own pain, not theirs. Too many parents cannot bear their kids' disappointment. So we assume it is the fault of the teacher or the coach or the other kids. Our helicopter is equipped with fault-finding weaponry. Yet the ability to blame oneself for failings is essential to growth. The balloon will sometimes go off course. That is to be expected. Hold lightly; the grasp is surer that way.

Helicopters are big, expensive, cumbersome and dangerous. Balloons are colorful, joyous and free. Be a helium parent. Pass it on.