

## Stop being a micromanaging mom

By Deborah Skolnik, Parenting.com

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Avoid a tendency to hover over your child and become a "helicopter mom."

### Story highlights

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Kids with overbearing moms may have more anxiety and depression

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Quality parenting doesn't mean constant hovering

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Children whose parents worry a lot tend to be far less apt to engage in spontaneous play

You finish your child's puzzles. You solve his spats. Heck, you'd cut his applesauce if he asked. It's time to stop being a micromanaging mom. Help has arrived...It's a bird! It's a plane! No, wait... it's you, the Helicopter Parent. That shadow over your kid?

It's yours -- as you nervously bend over him in his bed, making sure his chest is still rising and falling. That droning noise? It isn't chopper blades, it's you again, on the phone to his preschool teacher, complaining that he said some kid cut him in line. Before that, you were busy wiping his butt, even though he does it on his own at Grandma's house.

Sound familiar? You've got tons of company. Like, for instance, Joy Schoffler of Austin, Texas.

"My three-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Isabella, will ask to be carried down the stairs," she admits. "She sees me holding her brother and wants to be picked up, too. Of course, Tyler is ten months and can't walk, and Isabella can. But if I'm running out the door late, picking her up is easier than stopping and saying no."

Schoffler needs to start an online support group with Robin Parker of Atlanta, mother of 2-and-a-half-year-old Thomas: "He's learned to bring his dad or me any challenging task because we'll do it for him," she says.

Why do so many of us wait on our kids hand and foot, or micromanage their lives to jaw-dropping extremes? Are we trying to elevate troubleshooting to an Olympic sport (or land our own reality show)? There's plenty of evidence that this coddling is as unhealthy for them as it is exhausting for us. So you've gotta stop. But how? Read on for some insights, plus advice that'll help you land your crazy copter.

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### What the hell is going on?

Think back to your own childhood: Your folks probably didn't hover nearly as much as you do. Chances are, you got to play in the yard unattended, or even made your own snacks. Turns out some pretty powerful technological, economic, and social factors have turned us into a generation of over-zealous moms and dads, experts say.

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For starters, there's the explosion of cyberspace, and media in general: "Parenting information is available twenty-four-seven," observes Christie Barnes, author of "The Paranoid Parents Guide: Worry Less, Parent Better, and Raise a Resilient Child."

"You can go online and find out every scary thing that could happen to your child. You can also investigate every illness. So there's

endless opportunity for fear."

At the same time, the rules for setting your little one on the path to lifelong success have become murkier than ever, adds Margaret Nelson, a professor of sociology at Middlebury College, in Vermont, and author of "Parenting Out of Control: Anxious Parents in Uncertain Times."

"Even if you've managed to be financially comfortable and happy, you're aware your child may not be able to duplicate what you've accomplished, even if he does exactly what you did," she explains. "So you ask yourself 'What should I provide him with?' Without an answer, you start trying to provide absolutely everything you possibly can, including too much help." Kids with overbearing moms may have more anxiety and depression.

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### **Time to back off**

Once you've gotten used to being The Parent from Heli, it's hard to give up your pilot's license.

There's even a social element to it, notes Barnes: "So many times, our worries about our kids are what we talk about with other moms," she says. "There's almost a feeling that if you're not worrying enough, there must be something wrong with you. Worrying feels like love."

But a growing body of evidence indicates that being a (s)mother or a super-protective dad can backfire, badly.

Among the latest studies is one from North Carolina State University, in which researchers studied kids and their parents in 20 parks over a two-month period. They found that children whose folks hovered and fretted were far less apt to engage in spontaneous play and missed out on some much-needed exercise.

It's not just kids' little bodies that suffer when you hover; their psyches can pay the price, too. Psychologists at the University of Washington studied more than 200 kids and their moms for three years, and found that when a child already had pretty good judgment and self-control, having a heli-mom who provided too much guidance and not enough independence raised his risk of becoming anxious or depressed.

The kids in the study were mostly a little older (9 on average at the study's start), but it's easy to see how a micromanaging mom could frustrate a child of any age.

And what's all this doing to you? Probably nothing good either. One study showed that parents who judge their own self-worth by their children's accomplishments report sadness and diminished contentment with life in general.

They appear to have less happy marriages, too, says Nelson, who interviewed approximately 100 parents and found that as the amount of time they spend on childcare rises, "personal relationships seem to be the first thing to go." So don't go there! Keep reading for great ways to let go of your helicopter parenting ways.

OK, so now we've (hopefully!) convinced you that quality parenting doesn't mean constant hovering. But how do you start to ease up? Sounds tough, but it can be done. Here, advice from the trenches -- including both pros and real parents!

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### **Be a submarine mom or dad instead**

Says Silvana Clark, author of "Fun-Filled Parenting: A Guide to Laughing More and Yelling Less: "Instead of hovering around your child, stay close by -- in case of real danger -- but mostly out of sight, so he gets out of the habit of running to you for every problem."

Ask your child's other care-givers what tasks he does when you're not around, then hold him to that standard at home, says Natalie Caine of Empty Nest Support Services, in Los Angeles, who frequently leads parenting groups that include helicopter moms.

Does he put on his own rainboots at preschool but whine for you to do it on weekends? Insist you cut the crusts on his sandwiches, even though he'll eat crusts at your sister-in-law's house? Don't give in.

### **Make your kid a résumé**

"Take a piece of paper and write 'Sally is three. Here are some cool things Sally can do by herself,'" Clark says. "Then list some of her abilities, like clearing her plate and putting her stuffed animals on her bed, and put a star next to each. Every time your child masters a new task, add it to the list, with the star. She'll be much less apt to ask you to wait on her, since she'll be so proud."

And as you look at the growing list, you'll have evidence that you don't need to provide concierge service after all.

"There's almost a feeling that if you don't worry enough, something's wrong with you," says Barnes.

### **Practice some basic playground skills with your child**

Says "Paranoid Parents" author Christie Barnes: "Show him how to kick a ball, climb on the mini-monkey bars, or even just go down the slide. If you see he can do these things safely, you'll feel more comfortable sitting back on the bench during his next park playdate," she says.

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### **Sit down and have a cup of coffee.**

Make a brief time every day when your butt's in a chair and your metaphorical copter is on the landing pad, too. "If your child calls for you and it isn't an emergency, say 'I am drinking coffee right now,'" advises Caine. "If he really needs you, he'll come to you, and if you do this enough, he may stop asking for help with every little thing so often."

### **Help your child get the picture.**

"I found myself being a helicopter mom and knew I needed to change," says Dawn Arnold of Mazon, IL, mother of a 5-year-old. "I filled a small photo album with pictures of my daughter doing all the things she needs to do in the morning before school, after school, and before bed. Now she follows along every day. It lets her be independent, but the things that I think are important are still getting

done."

**Count to ten before liftoff.**

"You know how people always say that you should count to ten before you lose your temper?" says Clark. "I tell parents, as long as their child's not in danger, to count to ten before answering his cry of 'Help me! or 'I can't!' In that time, you may realize it's not necessary to rush in after all...or your child may decide he can actually do whatever it is that needs to be done all by himself."

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