



By Heidi Kiebler-Brogan,
M.A., LPC, NCC

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

for family improvement

As a licensed professional counselor, wife and mother of three school- aged children, I certainly see the difficulties that families are faced with in today's fast paced world. Be sure that whatever you are struggling with, you are likely not alone. We all hit bumps in the road and could use a little help and support from time to time. Check in with me each issue as I offer you some "Tools of the Trade" to help you better manage and enjoy your life and your family



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ARE YOU A HELICOPTER PARENT?

Helicopter parent is a colloquial, early 21st-century term for a parent who pays extremely close attention to his or her child's or children's experiences and problems, particularly at educational institutions. Helicopter parents are also known as overprotective parents who are thought to over parent their children. They are so named because they are said to hover closely around their children, rarely letting them out of their reach.

We all see them and swear we're not one of those of those "helicopter parents" who hover over their kids, micromanaging every aspect of their lives. Those parents fly into school in attack mode ready to confront the teacher or coach for "unfair" treatment of their kids. They obsess over teacher assignments. Some demand that their child be moved to another class before the school year has even begun. It has even gotten to the point where some parents are writing the essays on college applications for their child.

We are all guilty on some level, as a society we have come to inflate the egos of our children; we give them graduation ceremonies even when it's just from preschool; we give them a trophy at the end of the season even when they lose. And by the time they get to college and are asked to name their heroes, we secretly hope they will say those words we long to hear: My Dad. My Mom.

As parents, it's perfectly natural to want to advocate for and protect your child. But how far is too far?

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 to determine whether we are doing things for our children that they should be ready to do for themselves. And that's where things get tricky.

I think the biggest determining factor is probably the age of your child. Younger children clearly need closer supervision for safety reasons. They need parents to be at arms length in case they fall-literally or figuratively. Parental interceptions can be helpful in providing guidance and support. As children mature and become adolescents though, it becomes much more

tricky. We all read the articles (I have even written some) telling us how important it is that we stay in close touch with our teens, keeping communication lines open and being actively involved in their lives. However, as with anything, there is a fine line between helpful and hurtful, it's quite a difficult balancing act for parents.

One problem with helicopter parenting is that it doesn't help teens develop their own decision-making skills. Around middle school, it's part of children's natural development to identify more with their peer group. If they're constantly going back to Mom and Dad to make all their decisions, this process becomes more difficult. And if your child is always asking for help, then I advise parents to reassess how they have been responding to the requests. Work with your child and encourage them to consider questions such as "What's the good and the bad that can come from this?" and "What are my options in this situation?" It gives children confidence when they can solve problems themselves.

How/why have we come to helicopter parent?

Mary Elizabeth Hughes, a sociologist at Duke University, says helicopter parenting may be an outward sign of economic anxiety, particularly when parents consider the uncertain job market that may await their children. Parents are trying to get their children into the best colleges and will stop at nothing to achieve that goal. They try to apply the best qualities of their parents -- emphasizing education, independence and discipline -- but also want to improve upon their parents' shortcomings.

Over the last few decades parents' concern for their children's safety has also both shifted and intensified, and that is leading to the creation of monitoring and tracking tools that are increasingly sophisticated, according to a new report from the futurist research and consulting firm Social Technologies.

"The growing trend of 'helicopter parenting' is fueling this development," explains senior analyst Kevin Osborn. "It is characterized by micromanagement of kids from birth to college - and beyond - and carries the message that unwatchful parents are bad parents."

"Developments in information technology are providing a stream of new products designed specifically to alleviate parental concerns," he explains. "Parents can now monitor a child's activities with everything from toys to mobile phones."

New gadgets with GPS trackers are being built into wristwatches and running shoes, and in some cases they also include panic buttons that send alerts to law enforcement officials.

So what has happened to the days of walking to school independently with your friends? What has happened to this simple activity that carried the underlying implication that your parents trusted you and believed in your capability to make good choices and decisions?

True, times have changed and it is a much more dangerous world. We cannot halt the clock and calendar, but we can sensibly prepare our children—and ourselves—in a few practical ways. (And it is never too soon to begin!)

Prepare your children to take care of themselves. While this, of course, involves instilling lifelong values and morals, it also means your children should know how to do laundry, balance a budget, cook simple meals and a host of other tasks we often take for granted. In today's world—and the world of tomorrow—boys must know how to sew on a button and girls should understand the workings of a car's engine!

Let your children fail! Consistently share with your children the importance of dusting themselves off and starting all over again. It is not the people who never fail who truly succeed, but those who fail and begin again.

Children need a certain amount of space to grow and become their own person. This is difficult for any parent to accept and allow, but it is necessary. Children will not always be children. It all boils down to two important questions. How involved should you be, and how much space should you allow? This is a decision every parent must make.

The bottom line is that the tighter the leash, the greater the instinct to pull. *It is natural to want to protect and guide children, but it is not normal to control every aspect of a child's life or decision-making.* In fact, it can be more damaging to your child than anything he or she may do on their own.



The purpose of this column is to provide you with some "tools" that can be used in a variety of households and situations. I encourage you to adapt what you have learned to meet your needs and the needs of your individual family. If you have any questions about this topic, or have a suggestion for another article please contact me: Heidi Kiebler-Brogan, M.A., Licensed Professional Counselor at I. E. Counseling 908-456-1871 or email me at hkbrogan@iecounseling.com

DO YOU HAVE THE "WRITE" STUFF?

If you have always wanted to be reincarnated as a writer, by all means email me! Unleash your hidden talents with your own column and share your views/expertise with the local community! Denise@hometownquarterly.com