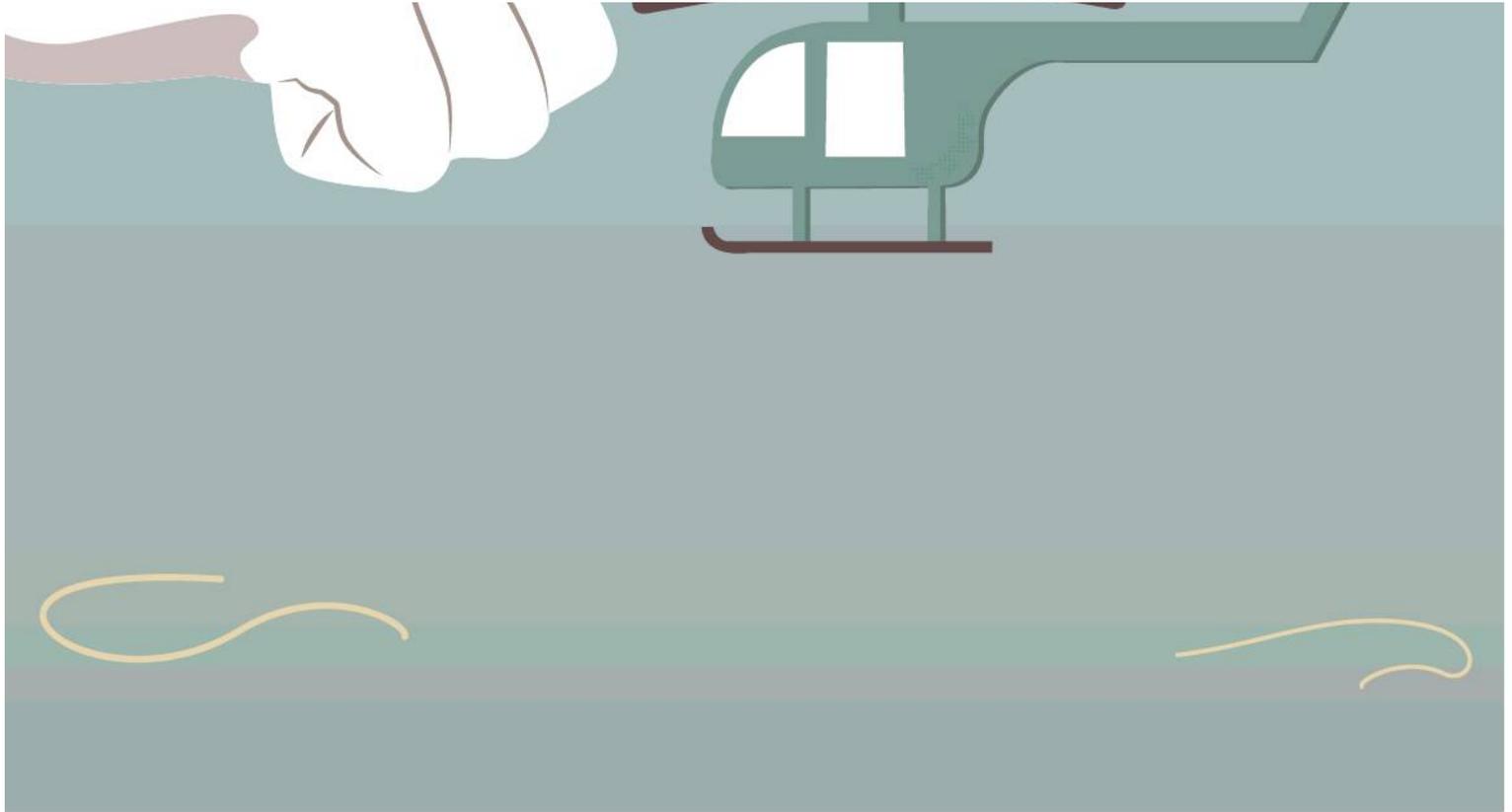


HELICOPTER PARENTING LOSES ALTITUDE

A new generation of parents is backing away from being hyper-involved in their children's lives.

By KEVYN BURGER • Special to the Star Tribune





Star Tribune illustration/iStock

Jillian Brooks knows what a helicopter parent is. “They’re parents who watch everything,” she said.

Brooks, a chemistry major at the University of Minnesota, wasn’t raised by helicopter parents, but many of her peers were.

“I have friends whose parents micromanage them,” she said. “They think they’re helping, but they make it difficult for their kids to figure things out on their own.”

The term was first used in a 1969 manual about managing teenagers to describe a negative mode of overprotective parenting. In the past 15 years or so, the term became a part of the popular lexicon as an increasing number of moms and dads hovered around their children, managing their offspring’s home, school and social environments.

But today, those who observe the subtle shifts in parenting styles say that the term is giving way to another aerial symbol.

“The analogy we hear is that today’s parents are jet fighter parents,” said Austyn Rask, a generational analyst at Wayzatabased Bridgeworks. “They keep their distance, swoop in for emergencies, then fly out.”

The change in approach may be linked to demographics, as a massive group of younger Americans

moves into prime parenting years.

“Millennials do not want to be helicopter parents,” said Jack Mackinnon, who tracks family trends as a senior principal/analyst at Gartner. “They know they get tagged with the negative connotations for being parented like this, and have taken a lot of heat for being protected and guided.

“They say they don’t want to do that to and for their kids.”

Gartner, a research and advisory company, recently completed a major demographic study that surveyed contemporary parents on their attitudes and behaviors. The study showed that more parents are comfortable allowing their children to succeed or fail on their own, without parental intervention.

“We found that 60 percent identified with ‘free range’ parenting, which sets some rules and guidelines, but with looser parameters and more freedom to explore in the real world,” he said. “They’ve read the child development research about the importance of unstructured play that hones a child’s creativity. They tell us they want to raise curious, brave children.”

That’s Lindy Vincent’s goal.

The Wayzata mother of three said that she and her husband made the conscious decision to back off and let their children make mistakes, even painful ones.

“We call it self-advocacy and we see the benefits. We explain our expectations, but we want them to develop their own voices and learn how to think critically about their choices,” said Vincent, 52, a nonprofit executive. “Life has challenges and they have to learn to face them. They have to step up or live with the consequences.”

As her children have grown, Vincent has made a point of allowing them to follow their own interests, take charge of their own schoolwork and be responsible for navigating the issues that inevitably come up with teachers, coaches and friends.

She thinks her eldest daughter, Chase, now a college student, helped set the tone for the family emphasis on independence.

“From Day 1, it was her personality to push back, to be determined to do her own thing. Chase knew about resistance before it was the big thing,” laughed Vincent. “She told us, ‘Don’t be invested in my life, let me live.’”

But it hasn’t been all smooth sailing. Last summer, as her daughter prepared for her freshman year, Vincent recalls reminding her to go online to register for her coursework. Chase procrastinated and didn’t get into the classes she needed as a prerequisite.

“We could have picked up the phone to call the college. I wanted to. With all the money we’re paying, we were sweating bullets,” Vincent said. “There were some tears and angst. We coached her to get in touch

with the instructors to see if she could work it out, and she did.

“She stumbled and skinned her knee, but I bet the next time she will be first in line to register.”

A dangerous world

The practice of parental hovering may have been a natural response to the times when millennials and their younger counterparts, Gen Z, were coming of age.

“For [their] parents, the world felt much more dangerous, with Amber Alerts, school shootings and then, after 9/11, the fear of terrorism,” said Ann Fishman, president of New York-based Generational Targeted Marketing. “Parents saw they couldn’t protect their children from getting blown up or shot.”

For some, that free-floating anxiety about the frightening and uncontrollable state of the larger world transformed itself into hyper-vigilance, driving parents to take control over what they could.

“As appropriate as it may be, protective parenting [can lead to] children who will avoid risk-taking as adults and become a generation of conformists,” Fishman warned.

The patterns often begin when children are very young.

“We looked at parents of toddlers and saw how some moms clearly exerted their influence over her child, guiding the child when they could have let the child lead,” said Nicole Perry, postdoctoral fellow at the Institute of Child Development at the University of Minnesota.

Perry collaborated on a research paper published in a scholarly journal last year. It tracked how parents and children interacted as they performed simple tasks, observing 2-, 5- and 10-year-olds.

“We saw some parents removing a child from an emotionally challenging situation or managing it themselves rather than letting them tackle it on their own,” Perry said. “Parents can build a child’s coping strategies, but not if they step right in. Those parents are unlikely to foster independence.”

Safety in autonomy

Perry said that learning when to help and when not to help is a skill, but she advises patience against intervening too quickly.

She noted that over-controlling parents tend to be full of good intentions, motivated by a sincere desire to help their children succeed and a heightened instinct to shield them from danger, real or perceived.

“They need to realize that supporting their child’s autonomy is also a way to keep them safe,” she said. “That helps them develop skills they need when you’re not there.”

Readying children to take their place in the world as they mature is the ultimate goal of parenting, regardless of the style.

“At the end of the day, you’re not going to college or to the first job with your children, although you hear those stories about parents doing that,” said Lindy Vincent. “For us, the goal is self-sufficiency.

“I love my children, but I don’t want them living with us when they’re adults.”

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