

## Beneath the Surface of Helicopter Parenting

By

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The prevalence and rise of anxiety is documented and, with the abundance of informational sources available at arms-length, you do not have to look far for bad news. A sense of danger, both subtle and blatant, projects from the screens that dominate attention. As the world gets bigger in an interconnected way, the interpersonal sphere of those closest and most important to us becomes more influential, particularly to the basic needs of children. The holding environment created by parents while children are dependent, as well as the health of the attachment, become crucial to the quality of two vital parenting responsibilities: providing the safety of “home base” as well as the conditions for exploration.

How some have chosen to engage this challenge may seem to have some value on the surface, but on a deeper level sabotages fundamentals of growth. “Helicopter” parenting, the hovering, overinvolved, and overprotective posture assumed by many moms and dads, attempts to spare children from pain, suffering, conflict, and the darker, cruder side of life. While it may appear to come from a place of positive intent, the approach derives from pain and fear. While hovering may have its roots in a parent’s personal history or lack of insight into healthy development, insulating children from the challenge and emotions of conflict, responsibility, and adversity comes at a cost.

Equal to the importance of providing nurturance and support, is what balances the authoritative parenting style: setting limits and building the coping and problem-solving skills so important to resilience, self-control, and personal responsibility. Interestingly, when we examine the four parenting styles that emerge from the combination of levels of the factors of support/nurturance and demand/expectations, only one style is associated positively with self-regulation: the authoritative style. This style is one that is high in support *and* demand. The authoritative parent acknowledges that building relationships, competence, and autonomy all require a flexible, resilient character, one that uses the ups and downs of life as opportunities to grow and learn. Self-regulation emerges both from modeling as well as allowing children the opportunity to experience, modulate, and manage the negative emotions that accompany conflict, disappointment, and adversity.

Hovering and clearing a sterile swath of problem-free terrain does not provide a realistic environment for children to grow from dependent to independence. Studies consistently point to the connection between this parenting approach and less than optimal developmental outcomes in the areas social-emotional, academic productivity, and self-regulation. The meta-message of hovering is “You are weak and you can’t handle this.” The fear that fuels protectiveness over time creates the conditions of entitlement, anxiety, and dependence. Helicopter parents assume that there are no consequences to their actions, and that independence and resilience are a

function of age and genetic make-up, and not experience. But the detriment to development surfaces very early as other children only will play with someone for so long when that child always has to have it his way and falls apart when he doesn't.

This does not mean parents should go looking for conflict and challenge. Everyday life offers plenty of opportunity to increase autonomy and resilience. For young children, play can be as challenging as it gets, full of negotiation, delaying gratification, and things just not going your way. For older children, peer relationships and developing a sense of competence are challenging with plenty of room to learn and practice coping skills, problem-solving, and regulating emotions.

Here are 5 strategies to help parents shift from helicopter mode to a more authoritative approach:

1. **Make sense of your experience of being parented.** Our most intense and intimate experience of parenting is the first-person experience of our own upbringing. A great deal of this time we were dependent upon our parents on our way to becoming independent. This point of view is critical to understanding how we learned about ourselves, relationships, and how the world works. A robust predictor of parenting is whether or not we have made sense of our experience of being parented. Simply put, if we have made a coherent narrative of the past, these experiences will not intrude upon the present. This is a hopeful notion for regardless of past conditions, we can make sense and parent in a proactive and responsive manner.
2. **Build problem-solving skills.** Problems are a regularly occurring part of life and are opportunities to build our thinking capacity as well as reciprocity within relationships. Studies find that intrusive and over-controlling parenting interferes with the development of emotional regulation and inhibitory control that children need to handle problems. Normalizing the inevitability of problems and modeling aloud the problem-solving process builds skills and reduces anxiousness.
3. **Process disappointments.** Feeling fully from start to finish when things do not go our way is a valuable experience. Processing the sequence of emotions, choices, and outcomes creates coherent narratives and is more likely to promote an *approach* attitude rather than the *avoidance* stance that is common in anxiety.
4. **Coach children through conflicts.** At the psychological core of well-being is the attitude of approach rather than avoid. Providing the appropriate scaffolding through conflict builds the cognitive and emotional resources needed for present and future challenges. This empowering stance is much different than letting kids figure it out for themselves for the literature points out that early on children require scaffolding and co-regulation from adults.
5. **Model resilience and composure.** Children learn substantial lessons by watching us. How we handle when things go our way and when things do not is in full view. We can use these moments purposefully in modeling the beliefs, skills, and attitudes that we say matters. Do not underestimate the power of walking your talk for this creates the conditions within the family culture for grit and resilience to develop.

## References

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## About the Author

John C. Panepinto, PsyD, LPCS, NCC, has worked in educational, clinical, and, private settings for over two decades. Presently, he balances roles as a consultant in early intervention, and as Clinical Psychologist for Carolina Developmental Pediatrics. He also maintains a private practice with a focus on development and parenting. Dr. Panepinto has written on parenting, development, emotional intelligence, resiliency, and performance psychology. He was the keynote speaker for the 2017 National Stay-At-Home Dad's convention, and blogs on fatherhood. More at [DrJohnPanepinto.com](http://DrJohnPanepinto.com).