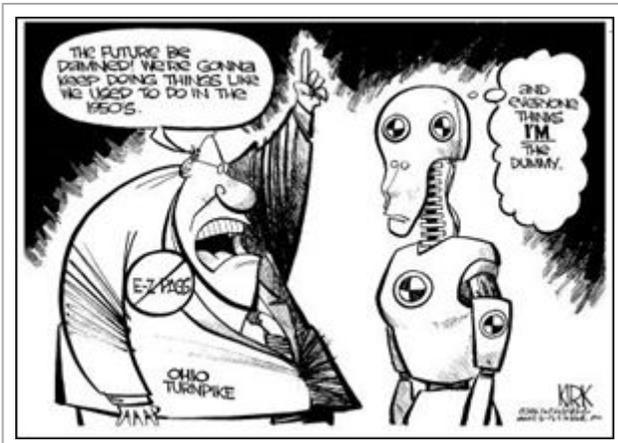


## Helicopter parents: They hover over their college-age children, unwilling to let go

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BY TAHREE LANE

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When they were little squirts, their parents fastened yellow Baby on Board signs on car windows, which served as both a point of pride and an alert to other drivers about their precious cargo.

When they went to school, the family minivan sported a My child is an honor student at Hotdiggity Elementary.

The Millennial Generation, born between 1982 and 2002, has been guided by vigilant parents who felt guilty if they missed a soccer game, considered braces for slightly uneven teeth, and sought therapy

for difficult behavior; parents who made sure homework was done, and equipped their adolescents with cell phones for safety's sake.

It should come as no surprise then, that when these young people head for college, their parents continue to be involved in their lives.

But according to university administrators, parents are often too involved. At campuses around the country, such doers are dubbed helicopter parents for their loving hovering. Not only do they hover, they often swoop down and come to the aid of their young adults. They call faculty to discuss a grade, request a change of roommate, or criticize the college's discipline of their misbehaving student.

Amanda Connelly, a freshman at the University of Toledo, fills her parents in about what's going on almost everyday.

If I have a problem and I don't take care of it right away, my mom will figure out a way to do something, said Ms. Connelly, 19, from suburban Cleveland.

She said her mother phoned Amanda's academic counselor to learn what impact summer classes would have on her scholarship, and another time, wrote an e-mail to Amanda's resident adviser about a problem with her roommate.

I felt like she can't let me do it by myself, said Ms. Connelly.

Cathy Vue, 18, said her parents remind her to take care of financial aid and other matters. I eventually get it done, but not in the time frame they want me to, said Ms. Vue, a first-year student at UT.

And Brandon Butorac, 19, said his parents asked for a copy of the syllabus for each of his courses. So they'll know when I have tests and if I'm keeping up with assigned reading, said Mr. Butorac, also a UT freshman.

He realizes he's under more of a microscope than most, but understands his parents' perspective. He didn't do well in high school, he said, and then worked for two years before attending college. He said they've given him one year to prove he can succeed and if he doesn't, the checkbook closes.

We're not going to waste money if he chooses not to do well, said Jane Butorac, his mother. Room and board is not cheap.

Ms. Butorac, of Cuyahoga Falls, said she pushed Brandon to meet with his advisor when he was struggling in German class, and he dropped the class rather than get a low mark that would damage his grade point average. She said she trusts him to be honest about his grades, and does not keep daily tabs on him as she does his younger brother, who's a freshman in high school.

### **Won't give up**

When Michael Coomes was a residential college student 35 years ago, he phoned home once a month. Gone is the day when parents figured offspring were ready to spring off the nest's edge at 18, he said.

Now, parents think, I have invested in you so heavily up to this point, I'm not going to give up on you yet, said Mr. Coomes, associate professor of higher education at Bowling Green State University.

Contributing to helicoptering is the world's longest umbilical cord, the ubiquitous cell phone. Young people often enjoy close relationships with their parents, and when they converse several times a week, students are likely to tell their parents all about their woes.

Administrators point to other factors, including the huge cost of college, students amassing five and six-figure debt, parents determined that their children be happy, and an increased consumer mentality about higher education.

There's a strong sense of entitlement on the part of parents and students. They [believe they should] have a say and university administrators should be responsive, said Mr. Coomes. Moms and dads are very ready to intervene at the top levels.

He was struck by a call he received the second day of class from a father about his 20-something student enrolled in a master's degree program. He wanted to make sure we were going to take good care of his daughter, said Mr. Coomes.

Another example: a student attending a special program in Washington telephoned a BGSU administrator to complain about his accommodations, then put the administrator on hold while he got his mother, from California, on the other line to buttress his case.

The most positive thing about them is they really are anxious for their student to do well and are invested in their student's success, Mr. Coomes said. But involvement at what level and to what age and to what length?

Indeed, mom and dad's increasing involvement in campus life and their demands on college staff was one of the top concerns at last week's annual conference of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators in Washington. Nonetheless, several speakers warned their

colleagues against tuning out parents and encouraged them to teach parents to give their kids space.

To some degree, colleges feed the trend. They expect parents to attend multi-day summer orientation sessions with their freshmen students, and they host parent and even sibling weekends. Some universities, including BGSU, begin asking parents for donations while they're still reeling from sticker-shock with their freshmen.

In a recent survey of 400 college students, 25 percent said their parents were involved in their lives to an embarrassing or annoying degree. Thirty-eight percent said their parents had called or attended meetings with academic advisers. And 31 percent said their parents had phoned a faculty member to complain about a grade their child had received.

The survey was conducted by Experience, Inc., a career-services firm used by universities and colleges.

I've also heard employers say parents have called them about performance reviews and interviews, said Janet Sun, vice president of marketing at Experience, Inc. These students feel a tremendous amount of pressure to get jobs.

She noted that companies recruiting students, as well as college career centers, say parents sometimes check to see if their young adults have applied for jobs or set up appointments with employers visiting campus. Some parents ask college staff to prod their kids into pursuing a job search, she said.

At the same time, 65 percent of young adults said they rely on their folks for advice.

Some administrators think helicopter is too benign and joke about Lear jet or stealth-fighter parents, and soccer moms who have morphed into security moms.

Colleges say they appreciate parental involvement, but hovering impedes students from making decisions and experiencing consequences essential for growing up. Moreover, administrators often can't give parents much information about their child because of institutional policies protecting student records. (At some universities, students and parents can sign waivers allowing parents to see their child's grades, and sometimes their medical records. Some institutions simply advise parents to ask their children to tell them their grades.)

In the future, colleges can expect even more parental involvement, said William Strauss, author with Neil Howe of *Millennials Go to College* (LifeCourse Books, 2003), and *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (Vintage Books, 2000).

Gen X parents, the generation that followed Baby Boomers and preceded Millennials, are tremendously protective and vigilant, acting more decisively. They're very, very watchful of their children, said Mr. Strauss.

Painting with a broad brush, he said Gen X-ers tend to focus on the bottom line and are acutely concerned about the cash value of college.

Working in higher education for 34 years, Pat Besner has increasingly seen students who have fewer follow-through skills and parents who want more say-so.

I have parents who have tried to apply for work for their kids, said Ms. Besner, UT associate vice president for student life and dean of students. They tend to want to know every piece of business about their students.

Julia Matuga's BGSU sophomores receive a course syllabus but also ask her to send regular e-mail reminders about what they should study and when assignments are due.

The impression I get from my students is they really are a little lost about who's going to tell them what to do, said Ms. Matuga, associate professor of educational psychology. I think there's a lot of pressure for parents to be involved and I think they're genuinely concerned about their students.

Dave Verhaagen suggests that parental values have undergone a cultural shift.

The focus has been almost to a fault on children, said Mr. Verhaagen, a North Carolina psychologist and author of *Parenting the Millennial Generation: Guarding Our Children Born Between 1982 and 2000* (Praeger Publishers, 2005).

Most American children are well-nurtured, he said. Their parents tend to be an anxious generation who feel pressured to do all the right things for their kids. As long as young adults are safe, parents can step back and let them experience natural consequences.

As they get older, let them make decisions that they have to own and be responsible for. To interfere with that is not to be helpful, he said.

College is a transition for both parents and young adults, said UT's Pat Besner. Parents and students have to be willing to build a trusting relationship and the parents have to be willing to let the bird fly out of the nest.

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