

Middle School Guidance Officer

Too much love: helicopter parents could be raising anxious or narcissistic children



The Age newspaper [recently highlighted](#) the issue of so-called “helicopter parenting” at universities. The report talked of parents contacting lecturers to ask about their adult children’s grades, sitting in on meetings with course coordinators and repeatedly phoning academics to inquire about students’ progress. Over-parenting involves parents using developmentally inappropriate tactics that far exceed the actual needs of their children. It involves excessive protection of children by their

parents. Over-parenting is often called “helicopter parenting”, as these parents hover over their children to make sure nothing goes wrong.

While commentators have been talking about the rise of helicopter parenting among school-aged children for [some years now](#), the idea parents would be using the same tactics on young adults is a bit more foreign. But researchers have been exploring over-parenting among university students for some years now too, and they’ve found negative consequences for these children, including higher levels of anxiety and narcissism.

What is over-parenting?

Research shows today’s [parents spend more time](#) per day parenting than in the 1980s. But we don’t know how many are over-parenting. That’s because most population studies of this nature rely on self-reports and parents are unlikely to admit to being over-zealous or controlling of their children. Sometimes over-parenting is called “lawnmower parenting”, illustrating how parents clear their children’s life path of obstacles. Others have called this type of parenting like growing up in a green house. Media also refers to children of such parenting as “cotton wool” kids or as being in “bubble wrap”.

Obviously, most parents want the best for their children. Research shows [children of loving and attentive mothers grow up more resilient](#) and less distressed. But at which point is this positive love and care going too far? And is over-parenting actually bad for children? In 2012, we asked 128 Australian psychologists and counsellors what they considered to be examples of over-parenting. Some of the [examples they gave](#) were:



- Cutting up a ten year old's food. Bringing a separate plate of food for a 16 year old to a party (picky eater).
- Constantly badgering the school to make sure their child is in a specific class the following year.
- Parents rushing to school to deliver items (forgotten lunches or assignments at the whim of their child).
- Parents believing that, regardless of effort, their child must be rewarded.

Why are parents so concerned?

Why this type of overbearing parenting seems to be increasing is explained in various ways. Some researchers say [economic pressures](#) are responsible for parents being more invested in their child's education so they get a well paying job. We know that more university students are living at home and so are more influenced by their parents. In general young people often have a more delayed growing up period. Some researchers have [dubbed this period of development](#) as "adulthood".

Regardless, whether over-parenting comes from too much love or the need to see yourself in your children, it is not the best way of parenting. A better way is allowing your child to make mistakes and learn from them. To help them when they ask for your help but not to always jump in. Each child is different and so is every parent, so one-size parenting does not fit all. But we know loving and attentive parents have resilient children, so let them be "free range" sometimes, and enjoy being a parent.

– [Marilyn Campbell](#), Professor Faculty of Education, School of Cultural and Professional Learning, [Queensland University of Technology](#)