

The Bad News About Helicopter Parenting: It Works

New research shows that hyper-involved parenting is the route to kids' success in today's unequal world.

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I recently met a Texan couple whose son was still in diapers. They were angling to get him into a preschool that feeds into a private preparatory school with a great record for college admissions.

The couple were ambivalent about doing this. They were from immigrant and working-class backgrounds and had thrived in public schools. In theory, they believed that all children should have an equal chance to succeed. But I suspected that if they got their son a spot in the preschool, they'd take it. These days, such chances are hard to pass up.

It's a familiar story. Psychologists, sociologists and journalists have spent more than a decade diagnosing and critiquing the habits of "helicopter parents" and their school obsessions. They insist that hyper-parenting backfires — creating a generation of stressed-out kids who can't function alone. Parents themselves alternate between feeling guilty, panicked and ridiculous.

But new research shows that in our unequal era, this kind of parenting brings life-changing benefits. That's the message of the book "Love, Money and Parenting: How Economics Explains the Way We Raise Our Kids," by the economists Matthias Doepke of Northwestern University and Fabrizio Zilibotti of Yale. It's true that high-octane, hardworking child-rearing has some pointless excesses, and it doesn't spark joy for parents. But done right, it works for kids, not just in the United States but in rich countries around the world.

The authors explain that when inequality hit a low in the 1970s, there wasn't that much of a gap between what someone earned with or without a college degree. Strict parenting gave way to an era of "permissive parenting" — giving children lots of freedom with little oversight. Why spend 18 years nagging kids to succeed if the rewards weren't worth it?

In the 1980s, however, inequality increased sharply in Western countries, especially the United States, and the gap between white- and blue-collar pay widened. Permissive parenting was replaced by helicopter parenting. Middle- and upper-class parents who'd gone to public schools and spent evenings playing kickball in the neighborhood began elbowing their toddlers into fast-track preschools and spending evenings monitoring their homework and chauffeuring them to activities.

American parents eventually increased their hands-on caregiving by about 12 hours a week, compared with the 1970s. Dutch, Spanish, Italian, Canadian and British parents ramped up their child care, too. (In Japan, hyper-involved mothers are known as “monster parents.”)

Not all the changes were rational. When some parents learned that talking to toddlers helps to develop their young brains, they began monologuing at them constantly.

But for the most part, the new parenting efforts seemed effective. Dr. Doepke and Dr. Zilibotti can’t prove causality (to do that, you’d have to randomly assign parenting styles to different families). But when they analyzed the 2012 PISA, an academic test of 15-year-olds around the world, along with reports from the teenagers and their parents about how they interact, they found that an “intensive parenting style” correlated with higher scores on the test. This was true even among teenagers whose parents had similar levels of education.

It’s not enough just to hover over your kids, however. If you do it as an “authoritarian” parent — defined as someone who issues directives, expects children to obey and sometimes hits those who don’t — you won’t get the full benefits.

The most effective parents, according to the authors, are “authoritative.” They use reasoning to persuade kids to do things that are good for them. Instead of strict obedience, they emphasize adaptability, problem-solving and independence — skills that will help their offspring in future workplaces that we can’t even imagine yet.

And they seem most successful at helping their kids achieve the holy grails of modern parenting: college and postgraduate degrees, which now have a huge financial payoff. Using data from a national study that followed thousands of American teenagers for years, the authors found that the offspring of “authoritative” parents were more likely to graduate from college and graduate school, especially compared with those with authoritarian parents. This was true even when they controlled for the parents’ education and income.

The benefits aren’t just academic. In a British study, kids raised by authoritative parents reported better health and higher self-esteem. In the American study, they were less likely to use drugs, smoke or abuse alcohol; they started having sex at older ages, and they were more likely to use condoms.

So why wouldn’t everyone just become an authoritative parent? Religious people, regardless of their income, are more likely to be authoritarian parents who expect obedience and believe in corporal punishment, the authors found.

Working-class and poor parents might not have the leisure time to hover or the budget to pay for activities and expensive schools. And they may rightly feel that they need to prepare their children for jobs in which rule-following matters more than debating skills.

Those who can afford to helicopter are probably making things even more unequal for the next generation. As with the Texan couple, this doesn't always match their political beliefs. In the "Hidden Tribes" survey published last year by the nonprofit group More in Common, respondents who valued self-reliance and creativity in children — staples of both authoritative and permissive parents — were more likely to have voted for Hillary Clinton in 2016. Those with more authoritarian views on parenting were more likely to have voted for Donald Trump.

Since there's apparently no limit to how much people will do for their kids, the prognosis for parenting doesn't look good. Yet another reason to elect people who'll make America more equal: We grown-ups can finally stop doing homework.