

Confessions of a Helicopter Parent

Ellen Bottner

Mother of Intern Bridge Founder, Richard Bottner

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When my husband and I decided to start our family, it fleetingly crossed my mind that we had not discussed our individual views regarding child rearing, nor did we have much experience with children. Somewhere in the recesses of my brain, I fantasized the little darlings would come into the world with instruction booklets neatly wrapped around their ankles.

I recall acknowledging that I sometimes did not have a clue as to whether I was making the proper decisions regarding their upbringing. My son was often at least two steps ahead of me and that started when he was about four! Even though I was certain that I was making some mistakes, I assured myself that those mistakes would be offset by the fact that our children were deeply loved. That love was translated into paying extremely close attention to their experiences and problems, always rushing to their sides to prevent any harm or failure from happening to them. I had determined that this was the basic doctrine for being a “good” parent.

My over-involvement in my children’s lives took many forms. For example, they submitted school projects under the guise of having independently worked on them, when in fact, many times we worked on them side by side. I proofread many papers, editing some of them to the point of almost rewriting them. I stood up to many teachers and camp counselors who treated my children “unfairly”. I practically made the decisions as to the colleges they would attend.

Forge ahead twenty years or so and our children have grown into wonderful, young adults. Our daughter is 26, has a master’s degree in Special Education and teaches second grade special needs students. Our son is 24 and has a bachelor’s degree in business administration. He operates a business in the field of human resources and higher education, specializing in developing internship programs for college students.

Last year, my son invited us to a presentation he was providing to a local HR group. There I proudly sat, glued to his every word, when I first heard the term “helicopter parent”. My son defined the term as referring to parents who “hover” closely over their children. These helicopter parents were accused of always being within reach, whether their children needed them or not, sometimes even against their children’s own wishes.

Imagine my utter dismay when I heard my son proclaim his expertise in this matter because he was the child of a helicopter mom. In fact, I was described as a “Blackhawk Mom”. I imagined every head in the room turning accusingly to look in my direction. In my head, I immediately started preparing my response to the accusation. At the presentation’s conclusion, I defended my innocence, complete with arguments, to which he responded, “I really didn’t mean to imply that you were anything but a wonderful mother. You are certainly not alone in this phenomenon. Just think about what I said.”

I have thought about what he said, at great length. I’ve been open minded enough to conclude that, in all honesty, **I AM A HELICOPTER PARENT**. My intentions were always well meaning and based on the purest motive: love for my children. Even the best meaning intentions, however, can go off kilter.

In retrospect, I wish I had fought my desire to be overly intrusive in their lives. I have wonderfully close relationships with my children, but I should have resisted the ongoing desire to have a constant connection with them, to assure myself that they are doing well in everything they do. I should have allowed them to make their own mistakes and, subsequently, learn from them.

I have come to realize that how you raise a child depends a lot on a child’s temperament and personality. Ironically, the child who rejected the hovering style was far less dependent on mom and dad than the child who embraced it. Our son didn’t allow me to be over involved – he fought for his independence. My husband and I often joked that by the age of twelve he was completely prepared to live on his own.

On the other hand, our daughter permitted us to be over protective – she invited it. As wonderful as she is, we did her an injustice. We sapped her of self reliance and self confidence. “Hovering” actually turned into hindering. To our credit, in recent years, we have encouraged and motivated her to become more independent. Once we gave her some space, she eventually found her inner strength.

I have to admit that being a helicopter parent drove me crazy – the constant worrying, the ever present anxiety and, once we moved apart, the anguish of always missing them. I realize now, with my son’s help, that kids need to learn to cope with adversity and disappointment in order to lead their lives effectively. We can’t micro-manage their lives in the belief that good parenting is synonymous with doing everything for them – that’s just plain wrong! One has to find a healthy balance between involved and over-involved.

They say that “awareness of the problem is part of the solution”. The Millennial Generation, of which our children are a part, has many pitfalls and challenges to face. Although, perhaps difficult to comprehend, one of the most pervasive issues facing young people today is the ripple effect caused by helicopter parenting.

I have been a helicopter parent for 26 years. Looking back, it has become clear to me how truly critical it is to let our children fall, sometimes lending them a hand to get back on their feet. I am happy to say that our children are grounded, motivated and, most of all, loving. Bottom line, they think of their parents almost as much as we think of them. That can’t be a bad thing!

Ellen Bottner is the mother of Intern Bridge founder, Richard Bottner. She lives in Charlotte, NC, where she works for the family business. In the absence of her children, she enjoys spending time with her husband, Steven, and her dog, Lexi. Most importantly, she is a proud, but recovering, helicopter parent.