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## Namby-pamby kids, highly-anxious parents

*Today's parent dilemma of how best to protect their child.*

A generation ago, we would have had difficulty finding any reference to terms such as 'helicopter parents', 'tiger mums' and 'over-identification traps.' These ideas would have meant little to parents.

So I guess we have to ask ourselves, why are these terms appearing more frequently? Why are increasing numbers of parents playing helicopter and hovering over their kids 24/7?

Why are some parents tending to over identify what everyday issues they perceive might emotionally harm their kids?

It's natural as parents to want to protect our kids and with ready access to internet, higher than ever incidents of bullying, and increased competitive pressures for our children to achieve excellent marks in order to gain access to top schools, we know that the world of children is tougher than ever.

As good parents our instinct is to protect our children – to put them in a protective bubble,

removing them from the pressures, threats and interpersonal issues that abound. Protecting our children from different sources of stress is fine – up to a point.

Here's the problem. When we over-protect our children shielding them from the mostly expected, normal pressures of growing up, we stifle their emotional maturity, we delay the development of their resilience and we prevent them from being independent when it comes to their own learning and as well as ability to cope with outside stress.

Despite our best intentions to insulate our children, we may, in fact, be unintentionally producing a generation of namby-pamby kids.

### **Parental high anxiety can lead to over-protectiveness**

Research indicates that a main reason many parents today over-protect their children is because they feel very anxious. Their anxiety,



however, is more focused on their children than on themselves. The high anxiety that parents have revolving around their children that leads to over-protectiveness is caused by two parenting beliefs that by in large are false.

1. 'My child should not have to and cannot tolerate emotional discomfort of any sort, and it is terrible and awful when they do'.  
This belief is not correct for two reasons. The first is that children are able to tolerate frustration and discomfort. The second is that the experience of discomfort is rarely awful and terrible – and oftentimes, helps to build emotional hardiness.
2. 'When my child does experience discomfort, it will have a long-lasting negative impact. Therefore, I must protect them from ever experiencing discomfort associated with friends, schoolwork and family interactions.'  
There is scant evidence that children who occasionally experience worry, anger or feelings of self-doubt will suffer long-term mental health problems. In fact, by protecting your child from negative feelings, they are deprived of learning how to manage negative feelings through the use of resilience, coping skills.  
(The exception to this is when a child is exposed to repeated and severe stressful events at home, school or with peers.  
When you become aware that your child is being bullied, socially rejected or physically threatened, you will naturally enough want to step in to protect your child).

## But my kids need me to look out for them

By overprotecting our kids from normal pressures and difficulties of growing up, we actually expose them to other risks. If we make decisions for them, if we shield them from all forms of risk taking, if we insist on solving their problems...we leave them without the skills, experiences and minor life lessons needed to handle the bigger challenges in life and move on as successful functioning adults.  
Learning how to deal with negative emotions, hurtful experiences and accepting that life can be sad, ugly and unfair at times, teaches our kids resilience.

In a 2013 study<sup>1</sup>, researchers at the University of Warwick in the UK reviewed 70 studies involving more than 200,000 children and found negative parenting, including overprotection, increased a child's chance of being bullied. Researchers used the data and categorized parenting behaviours such as abuse, neglect, maladaptive parenting, and overprotection as negative parenting behaviour... and authoritative parenting, communication, parental involvement, support, supervision and warmth as positive parenting behaviour.

According to Professor Dieter Wolke of Warwick's Department of Psychology and Division of Mental Health & Wellbeing, 'children need support but some parents try to buffer their children from all negative experiences. In the process, they prevent their children from learning ways of dealing with bullies and make them more vulnerable.'



Age-appropriate independence and autonomy help to give a child an overall feeling of well-being. Kids gain confidence and self-knowledge when we give them opportunities to experience life without constant parental controls.

As parents, our job description is to give our kids love and protection. But nowhere in the job description is it written that we have to protect our kids so completely that they grow up without knowing disappointment, pain, fear or frustration.

## **The emergence of the helicopter parent**

According to the Australian Psychological Society (APS), psychologists have observed the emergence of the helicopter parent in schools over the last decade. Research shows that more than 90 per cent of school psychologists and counsellors encounter over-involved parents. To help address this, some schools are staging parenting workshops to counter this behaviour. According to APS representative Darren Stops, "children are not allowed to be independent, they're overscheduled... we tend to see more young people who aren't able to accept the consequences of their own actions because mum and dad will jump in to defend them." The word from psychologists generally is that over-parenting is helping to produce a generation of anxious children, who aren't resilient, have poor life skills, a strong sense of entitlement and little sense of responsibility.

## **Long-term effects of hovering**

When our kids are young, it's easy to justify protection in terms of necessary parental control.

Every child is unique and as parents, we are in the best position to know our child and their capabilities and level of maturity. Part of healthy development is the desire for independence and encouraging that independence is part of our job description as parents. But when is it time for us as parents to back away?

What happens to kids who are over-protected over a long period of time?

A 2014 study<sup>2</sup> conducted by researchers from the University of Mary Washington in the United States shows that college students with over- controlling parents are more likely to be depressed and less satisfied with their lives. This so-called helicopter parenting style negatively affects students' wellbeing by violating their need to feel both autonomous and competent. The authors concluded that helicopter parenting is a highly involved, intensive, and hands-on method of parenting.

Their research suggests that intense involvement is considered by some parents to be supportive, whereas it may actually be perceived as controlling and undermining by their children.

## **Anxiety could be catching**

Is parenting more difficult today than it was a generation ago? Well, according to Public Agenda, a non-profit research group in New York City, a poll of parents found that 78% thought parenting is much harder than ever.

Only 4% said it was easier.

Given that our kids are being raised in a digital age (and all the risks that this can entail, increasing violence and terrorism, the fact that



we can have access to the latest news 24/7 (much of which is graphic and sensationalised), youth depression and suicide rates on the rise, and a lifestyle that means we're constantly engaged in commitment or activity, it stands to reason that parents have more to be concerned about.

But fears can be based on misconceptions and misinformation. Fears that our kids won't succeed, achieve and make the most of their lives are generally unfounded. We fear that our kids will miss out, so we overschedule their lives. We fear that they may not hold friendships, so we allow them to have a social media account. We fear they may hurt themselves on a school camp so we text them every hour on the hour. We fear they may not know what to take on holiday so we pack the case for them.

Sometimes called 'the trickle-down effect', researchers have found that children of parents diagnosed with an anxiety disorder are up to seven times more likely to develop an anxiety disorder themselves. Australian research<sup>3</sup> has also connected maternal anxiety and over-involvement (protectiveness and 'controlling' decision-making) with an increased risk of children developing symptoms of anxiety. Researchers believe it's possible that apart from genetic predisposition, the 'anxiety transmission' process may also be behavioural from parent to child and from child to parent.

## Developing resilience in our kids

When the going gets tough, kids need to know how to turn a situation around. Resilient kids are less likely to take part in risky behaviour; perform better at school; cope better with life's frustrations and have the ability to get back on track and put the negative event or issue into perspective.

Teaching kids that they can choose how they think about a negative situation, they can control their feelings, and that life isn't always going to be fair and great is a good starting point in helping them get the message.

If we are going to foster resilience in our kids, they need to learn strategies for coping. An emotionally immature child for example, is more likely to lack resilience. We can help by encouraging an emotional vocabulary to help them verbalise their feelings, as well as help them to build skills in communication and decision-making.

Putting things into perspective is a very useful way of thinking for both kids and adults. It's easy to over-sensationalise and play the drama queen. Adolescent communication is very much over-dramatised. Using a Catastrophe Scale<sup>4</sup> is a good way to maintain perspective:

The catastrophe scale measures "how bad is it really?" Working from the top (being run over by a bus: 100% awful, tragic and terrible) down to losing a pencil (mildly annoying or hardly worth worrying about), kids suggest what events would cause them the most anxiety. When a real life negative event is measured against the Catastrophe Scale, kids are more easily able to keep in perspective as to just how serious and traumatising the event really is.

## Additional ways to help our kids develop resilience

- Develop attitudes of tolerance and acceptance.
- Recognise opportunities – even in negative situations.
- Improve communication skills.
- Encourage a sense of self-worth.



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- Create supportive and stable family relationships.
- Support kids to take a risk and give it a go.
- Improve confidence by teaching kids how to stand up for themselves and resist bullying.
- See the empowerment of letting go, moving on, and putting the event behind them.
- Encourage supportive relationships – family and friends.
- Role model self-control, positive outlook and taking responsibility.
- Help kids to identify and express feelings.
- Practise empathy, understanding, compassion and kindness.
- Teach kids that mistakes are all part of learning.
- Instil family values.
- Praise perseverance
- Teach kids how anger and frustration can be constructive.
- Teach kids to walk away from situations where they will lose control.
- Play games that teach kids to think laterally, analyse, problem solve.
- As a family, have brainstorming days where kids are presented with a problem and are encouraged to come up with an answer – no matter how out of left field. The more imaginative the better and there are no wrong or right answers.
- Practise calming skills, like deep breathing or counting to 10, or just re-thinking the situation (what's another way I can think about this).