

Growth Inhibitors *Are We Stifling Our Own Progress?*

Over the last 20 years the U.S. has seen the rise of an interesting cultural phenomenon: the Helicopter Parent. Helicopter Parents are described as those who hover over their offspring, attempting to remove any obstacles their child might encounter while micromanaging every aspect of their lives. The term “Helicopter Parent” was coined by Foster Cline and Jim Fay in their book, *Parenting with Love and Logic: Teaching Children Responsibility*. Cline, a child psychiatrist, and Fay, a longtime educator, argue that over-parenting prevents children from learning how to make choices and solve their own problems, delaying social development. This creates a dependency and lack of self-confidence that manifests itself in poor decision-making skills and “failure to launch” issues, with adult offspring having difficulty achieving and maintaining independence and sometimes still living at home with parents.

In an article for *The New York Times* magazine, Renee Bacher describes her role as an over-involved helicopter mom with tales of outrageous behavior when her daughter, Hannah, became a high school senior and began looking at colleges. Bacher admits to questioning her daughter relentlessly in order to facilitate Hannah’s successful transition into higher education and living away from home; controlling every detail even after Hannah moved into her dorm. “By the new year, she despised me,” says Bacher.

Nor does it end when adult offspring have graduated from college. Patti K. See relates the following story in an article on the *Inside Higher Ed* website:

At a recent meeting our provost told a story about receiving a midmorning call from a mother asking if her son was in class.

“I always give my son a wakeup call,” the mother explained, “but he’s not answering.” Our provost — a dean at the time of this experience — told this concerned mother she cannot inform parents if their adult students are in class.

“Student?” the mother exclaimed. “No, he’s teaching the class.”

Parents of young children are particularly prone to hovering. In the last decade we have begun to see more instances of children with allergies, particularly to peanuts; children with ADD and ADHD; asthmatic children; and a host of other maladies that were rare or virtually unheard of in previous generations. Many public facilities are changing their policies in order to accommodate concerned parents.

The New York Times reports that some schools are banning peanut butter in lunchrooms and establishing “peanut-free zones” in response to threats of lawsuits by parents, to the extent of encouraging regular hand-washing to prevent an allergic child from coming into contact with peanut residue from another child (Hartocollis). Yet a *Time* magazine report found that “Of the roughly 3.3 million Americans who have nut allergies, about 150 die from allergy-related causes each year (Sharples).” That is about the same number of those killed by lightning strikes and one-tenth of people killed in gun accidents each year.

The Centers for Disease Control reports the following:

- From 1997 to 2007, the prevalence of reported food allergy increased 18% among children under age 18 years.
- The percentage of children with a parent-reported ADHD diagnosis increased by 22% between 2003 and 2007.
- From 2000 to 2008, the prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorders has increased from 6.7% to 11.3%.

Dr. Allen Francis suggests that such increases in childhood disorders can be explained as “follow-the-leader diagnostic fads.” He theorizes that the availability of self-diagnoses tools (books and the internet, for example) and media over-reporting have led to an epidemic of a “me

too” mentality in which healthy people manufacture symptoms of a disease or disorder so as not to feel left out of society; a sort of medical “keeping up with the Joneses.”

Over-parenting, or helicoptering, is detrimental to children in many ways. Over-parented children experience:

- Increased anxiety;
- Feelings of inadequacy;
- An inability to be self-sufficient;
- Unreasonable expectations of those around them;
- An absence of age-appropriate skills;
- Lack of responsibility for their actions.

When parents do everything for their children, the child does not learn to do for their self and has a difficult time functioning as an autonomous adult. A dependency is created that hampers self-esteem and inhibits achievement in life.

The United States government and special interest activists are becoming our Helicopter Parents.

Over-governing is just as detrimental as over-parenting. In an effort to assist Americans who are not thriving on their own, our government has enacted laws and benefit programs designed to aid people in everything from feeding themselves to providing basic living expenses.

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg is taking criticism for his controversial bans on numerous food items. Most recently Mayor Bloomberg has proposed a ban on sugared soft drink servings of more than 16 ounces in theaters, sporting venues, and restaurants, his reasoning being that sugary beverages contribute to obesity. In 2005, the city council voted to ban trans fat in restaurant menu selections, prompting several other cities to follow suit with similar

restrictions. In 2007, Bloomberg mandated that fast food restaurants include calorie counts on their overhead menus so the information would be in plain sight, despite the fact that most fast food restaurants already provided nutritional information on their website and in pamphlets on-site. In 2010, the Mayor unveiled a plan to force restaurants and packaged food manufacturers to reduce the amount of salt in their items by 25% (CNN).

Mayor Bloomberg has also prohibited private food donations to area homeless shelters, reasoning that, “the city can’t assess their salt, fat and fiber content” (CBSNY).

In 2002, two New York teenagers sued McDonald’s Corporation claiming that the fast food chain contributed to their obesity and diabetes by not providing clear warnings that some of the restaurant’s food choices were high in fat and calories. The case was dismissed in 2004 (Wald); however, in an effort to ward off further lawsuits, McDonald’s has eliminated their “super-size” menu options. Special interest groups have also targeted the Golden Arches. CNN reports:

An award-winning documentary called "Super Size Me" has heaped on more unwanted publicity. The lawsuit-inspired documentary, which chronicles the deterioration of filmmaker Morgan Spurlock's health during a month of eating nothing but McDonald's food, won a directing prize at the Sundance Film Festival and is set for wide release this spring (Carpenter).

In 2010 the Center for Science in the Public Interest filed a class-action lawsuit against McDonald’s, seeking to eliminate toys from Happy Meals in California area franchises. The organization stated, “McDonald’s must stop exploiting children at some point. Using toys, of all things, to lure young children to fast-food meals is not responsible corporate behavior.” The suit was thrown out in early 2012 (Gann).

In a North Carolina elementary school, a state agent confiscated a pre-kindergartener's home-packed lunch consisting of a turkey and cheese sandwich, potato chips, a banana, and juice on the grounds that it was not nutritionally complete. The missing component was...a carton of milk. The lunch was replaced by the cafeteria offering of chicken nuggets (Steer)

Delish.com, a subsidiary of MSN, lists 15 foods and beverages that are banned or strictly regulated in the United States. Among them are:

- Raw milk;
- Sassafras oil;
- Redfish;
- Beluga caviar;
- Chilean Sea Bass;
- Foie Gras.

However, food is not the only part of our lives that government and special interest groups seek to control. Most states have strict laws regarding: the use of helmets when riding a motorcycle; seatbelt use in motor vehicles; vehicle safety and booster seats, required until a child is up to 8 years old; and public tobacco use.

Health officials in Maryland have enacted a policy regarding the use of sunscreen at children's summer camps. Camp counselors are prohibited from helping their young charges apply sunscreen and require parental permission before allowing children to apply it to themselves (Fisher).

In most states, childcare workers are required to take a class and obtain a license before they may provide daycare. In many states part-time babysitters must be licensed. Caregivers are also required to claim their wages on their annual tax forms.

In April 2012, the Department of Labor proposed restricting the types of jobs minors could perform on family and neighboring farms and other agricultural venues. “Prohibited places of employment,” a Department press release read, “would include country grain elevators, grain bins, silos, feed lots, stockyards, livestock exchanges and livestock auctions.” The rule was withdrawn after protests by farm families and advocates (Richardson).

President Barack Obama included a slideshow titled *The Life of Julia* on his campaign website, highlighting the many ways government “helps” the average citizen. In the presentation, “Julia” attends a government sponsored Head Start program as a three-year-old; at seventeen, she participates in her school’s Race To The Top program in order to prepare for college and working life; when “Julia” is eighteen, she receives a federally-funded Pell Grant to help her pay for college; at twenty-two she has a surgical procedure, paid for by her parents’ health insurance courtesy of federal laws. Throughout her life, “Julia” receives government assistance for everything from education to health care. Although the president extols these government benefits, he does not mention the cost to taxpayers for “Julia’s” care throughout her lifetime.

Welfare programs in the United States were created to help poor, disabled and unemployed individuals obtain food, shelter, and basic living necessities. In the 1700’s, the colonies instituted Poor Laws: older and disabled people were given cash to pay for their living expenses; healthy but unemployed people were given public service jobs with pay. The Civil War Pension Program was passed in 1862 to aid Civil War veterans and their families. In 1935, in response to the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt created the Social Security Act, the Federal Unemployment Tax Act, the Aid to Dependent Children Act, and numerous other programs designed to assist families who were struggling financially. Payroll taxes were

instituted to pay for these benefits. As a consequence, the U.S. national debt rose dramatically, to 40% of our country's gross national product in 1941 with budget deficits of \$4.9 billion, or \$73 trillion in today's dollars (OMB).

Despite this government spending and assistance, the number of families living below the poverty level continues to grow and in 2010 22% of American children were living in poverty (Census). Despite bans and regulations a 100% safe world is not possible and Americans continue to be injured or die.

The statistics prove that "helicoptering" the citizenry does not make people safer or wealthier. The government cannot legislate common sense and self-control, nor can they mandate motivation and intelligence. Instead, people grow dependent and do not develop the skills needed to achieve in life. There is an inability to be self-sufficient and lack of responsibility - the same characteristics demonstrated by over-parented children.

Nanny Government, like Helicopter Parents, purports to have the best interests of the citizenry in mind when they go overboard with assistance, rules, and restrictions. Indeed there are instances when help is required for a successful outcome and many people need an initial boost in order to thrive.

However, in order for people to truly flourish, the government AND parents must take a more hands-off approach and stop hovering. Only by teaching people to achieve and then *allowing* them to do so can we create successful and accomplished adult human beings who will prosper and be a benefit to our society.

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