

Break That Hovering Habit Early

By Arlene Weintraub
Posted August 16, 2010

As a child in Evansville, Ind., Peter wasn't allowed to go to the mall or take karate lessons, for fear he'd get hurt. His mother micromanaged his education, selecting all his classes, vetting all his papers, and watching like a hawk to be sure the homework got done on time. When Peter entered the University of Evansville (Mom's choice), he did fine academically but struggled to make decisions, speak up in class, and form relationships with faculty members and classmates. "It got to the point where because I had been so enclosed, I didn't know how to talk to people," says Peter, who requested that his last name not be published. "I was depressed. I had to learn how to break out of that shell."



Elizabeth Stoltz, a student at Ithaca College, is home in York, Pa., with her family: mother Kim (left), father John (right), and brother Eric.

College administrators say they're coping with a growing crop of Peters, freshmen suffering the aftereffects of having been raised by overinvolved parents. These moms and dads may see their tendency to hover and help at every step as loving and protective. But the urge to ensure a child's success by calling teachers to complain about assignments or grades, selecting all activities, and even going so far as to complete tough homework assignments, is apt to lead to failure once independence is required. "These children don't have the confidence they need," says Robert Neuman, a retired

associate dean for student academic development at Marquette University in Milwaukee and author of the new book *Are You Really Ready For College?* "They're immature. It's a real scourge."

The phenomenon can be explained in part by stressed-out working couples' safety concerns and lack of time; it's much more efficient to just act than to be a coach. It also has to do with getting into college. As admission to more-selective schools has become increasingly competitive, parents have felt driven to overschedule and manage even very young children with an eye toward creating the perfect résumé. Technology has armed them with the tools

to constantly monitor their children's progress and behavior by E-mail and text message, even GPS.

And the burden of tuition in a struggling economy has made ensuring academic success even more critical. "It's the perfect storm in terms of parenting," says Maureen Tillman, a psychotherapist in Maplewood, N.J., whose College With Confidence counseling service prepares parents and students for the transition to college life. That competitive environment, she says, "has fueled the need for parents to connect and control in a new way."

To prep kids to thrive in college rather than struggle, parents should begin to break their overprotective habits long before it's time to think about the SAT. Tillman recommends that young teens devise their own schedules, figuring out how to fit in all their classes, activities, and chores; children need to learn early how to take charge of themselves and complete tasks that they don't want to do. "I see parents waking their kids up every day and picking up after every aspect of their lives," Tillman says. "Time management becomes a really big problem. Encourage them to find a system."

The key is to help kids solve problems rather than doing it for them. After Elizabeth Stoltz finished her sophomore year of high school in York, Pa., she told her parents, John and Kim, that she wanted to spend her summer organizing a walk to raise money for hungry children in Ethiopia. They advised her on setting up a nonprofit corporation and listed themselves as president and treasurer—but only because, by law, she needed people over 18 to fill those roles. "We supported her, but left it up to her to make it work," John says.

When it came time for Elizabeth to apply to college, Dad helped her set up comparison charts on the computer, but she figured out the pros and cons of each school. Both parents accompanied her on her college visits, but she asked the questions and handled the interviews alone. Her search led her to Ithaca College in New York, where she is now a sophomore. "They help us make decisions, but I never feel they're making choices for us," Elizabeth says of her parents, herself, and her brother. "It works really well for us."

Parents, if those science fair projects and French reports have tended to bear your fingerprints, force yourself to stay clear the minute your child hits high school. "Know what courses your child is taking, find out what's on [the] reading list, and talk about a book at

the dinner table," says Katherine Cohen, founder of IvyWise, a New York-based college admissions counseling company. But resist the urge to sharpen a pencil.

That's not to say parents should be entirely hands-off when it comes to performance. If Junior comes home with a D on an assignment, they can suggest he ask the teacher for one-on-one help or seek out other support, well before one D becomes an unacceptable grade on a final transcript. "There is so much a parent can do to empower children to help themselves," says Cohen, who stresses that parents must keep their distance during the college admissions months. "I get parents saying 'We're applying to Michigan' or 'We got a 2100 on the SAT.' I know you want to be proud, but you can be proud without taking ownership."

Another skill kids need to stand on their own two feet (and live with roommates) is the ability to handle disputes, which they won't master if Mom and Dad are always running interference. Psychologists say the best approach parents can take when a child has a conflict with a teacher or coach or pal is to brainstorm with the child about ways to start a dialogue, not call up the other party themselves. Otherwise, the child's confidence and effectiveness are apt to suffer.

Self-confidence is nurtured, too, by bonding with other adults while in high school and college. "Parents need to encourage their children to find a trusted adult with whom they can have a consultative relationship," advises Ian Birky, director of the counseling center at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania. "By the time they leave the university, they need to have other adults—faculty, coaches, administrators—helping them make the transition to careers."

Robert Epstein, a visiting scholar and lecturer at the University of California--San Diego, has conducted research showing that one of the top predictors of a good parent-child relationship is the parent's ability to foster independence and autonomy. "When you hover, the message you give your children is 'I know what's best for you—you cannot do it on your own,'" says Epstein, who is also the former editor-in-chief of *Psychology Today*. "Once your child is no longer a child, if you are still hovering—and we know millions are—you have a real problem."

He recalls reforming his own helicoptering ways after his two older children rebelled during their teen years. He's still a hands-on dad with his four younger children, he says,

but focuses on helping them solve their own problems. When his 11-year-old son, Jordan, recently expressed concerns about competing in a swim-a-thon for charity at school, Epstein talked with him about how best to handle his fears, encouraged him to practice, and gave him the choice of skipping the event. Jordan decided to compete. "I could have sent a note to school, I could have gone with him," Epstein says. "Instead I empowered him."

As for University of Evansville grad Peter, now 31, he has a steady job and a fiancée, and he owns his own home. But it was a painful road to get to this place, he says, which has left him with a few words of wisdom for parents. "Allow your children to explore the world and find out who they are," he says. "Allow them to make mistakes. It's a good lesson." And one best learned before the stakes grow high.

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