# **10 Warning Signs That You Might Be a Helicopter Parent (And How to Stop)**

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Isn’t it amazing how you turn out to be exactly the kind of parent you swore you would never become?

Before I had kids I was pretty sure I wouldn’t ever be a hovering Helicopter Parent. After all, I had grown up running free on my family farm with my brother and cousins, coming home only for lunch and dinner.

But somewhere along the way the wires between trying to be a supportive, positive parent and a hovering, helicopter parent got crossed.

Before I knew it, I’d got a job at the pre-school my children attended just so I could keep an eye on them. My son’s teacher started to avoid me at school pick-up because I would “chat” and subtly ask for a progress report or suggestions about what else we could do at home to help him reach his full potential.

Heck, my [helicoptering tendencies](http://www.parents.com/parenting/better-parenting/what-is-helicopter-parenting/) had sneaked into even the most mundane aspects of our everyday life. At one point, I had a 20 minute safety routine just so the kids could play in the yard.  Complete with sunhats, sunscreen, locking the gates to the fenced (of course) backyard, and putting out three reflective cones into the cul-de-sac so cars would know to drive slowly lest one of the children figure out how to undo the lock and make a break for freedom.

And then I followed 2 feet behind them for the entire 15 minutes we were outdoors.

Sounds a bit familiar? Nobody sets out to be a helicopter parent. But, it kind of creeps on you, doesn’t it? Here are 10 more signs.

## **You Might Be a Helicopter Parent if…**

1. You only let your child play on playgrounds with shredded rubber mulch.
2. The first thing you did when your 4th grader came home crying from school because her best friend Jill called her a name is to call Jill’s mom to sort things out yourself.
3. You have found yourself up at 11pm [rewriting your child’s English essay](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/10578136/One-in-six-parents-do-all-the-homework.html) because you know that they could have done a better job if they hadn’t been so tired.
4. Your 8 year old still has the training wheels on his bike. Not that you let him ride it that often. The sidewalks are dangerous and they go too fast for you to keep up!
5. You have a bad back from stooping down and following your toddler’s every step.
6. You get heart palpitations at the thought of letting your child go on a field trip with their class.
7. Having them help out by [preparing dinner](https://afineparent.com/healthy-families/healthy-family-meals.html) or cleaning the house has never crossed your mind. Knives are sharp and the cleaning fluids are too dangerous!
8. As a Christmas gift you gave your daycare a webcam so you could watch the daily happenings while you are at work.
9. You and your son are having a meeting with the teacher and when she asks him a question you answer it for him.
10. Your child didn’t get accepted to his preferred major at college so you call the Chair of the department to negotiate for an exception.

Full disclosure: I am guilty of 5 of these. Okay, 6.  The others are all confessions from fellow recovering Helicopter Parents.  For number 10, however, I was on the other side of the table with the Chair receiving the parent’s phone call.

had always been one of those parents who would race around the playground following 18 month old Evan to whatever equipment caught his eye. I was terrified that he would fall and I caught him every time he threatened to topple over.

Then his brother Henry came along.  One day I couldn’t be there to catch Henry when he fell as he toddled along.  I saw him lose his balance.  I sucked in all the available oxygen around me and braced for a horrible fall.

But what he did amazed me.

He felt himself wobble and he naturally shifted his weight and plopped down safely onto his bottom.

It had literally never before occurred to me that they would have this natural instinct of bracing themselves.  I had always expected and assumed they would stiffen and go down like a tree, cracking their heads in the process.

Maybe I didn’t need to be so “on the spot?”  Fine. I’ll stand up and follow from 2 feet away. Just in case.

Soon after that incident, we moved to Switzerland where helicopter parenting is almost unheard of and the social norm is to not “interfere”.

We had been here a month and my neighbor pulled me aside and said, “You know that your 9 year old can go to the park by himself, right?” She went on to say that the other parents would look at me funny or say something to me if I stood next to him as he played on the equipment.

I went to the park with him anyway.  I noticed differences in strength, balance, and confidence with the Swiss children. I noticed he had trouble in resolving disagreements – blew them out of proportion; expected instant sharing; didn’t show as much [grit and determination](https://afineparent.com/building-character/what-is-grit.html).

[He was upset](https://afineparent.com/emotional-intelligence/emotional-meltdown.html) and crying that he was so much less able physically than his Swiss peers.

For the first time, I had the suspicion – perhaps my hovering and over-protectiveness was causing more harm than good?

## **Let’s Talk About What it is to Be a Helicopter Parent**

In [To Kill a Mockingbird](https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0446310786/ref%3Das_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0446310786&linkCode=as2&tag=persfinaforst-20&linkId=EEGB5VZXLBPH6RHY) Atticus Finch says, “There’s a lot of ugly things in this world, son. I wish I could keep ’em all away from you.”  It’s like the parents of the late 1990s read that and decided they were going to be the generation that finally succeeds in protecting their child from all that ugliness.

What we forget is that he continues the line with, “That’s never possible.”

Parenting is a nerve wracking proposition.

No one knows what they’re doing, especially with a first child. It doesn’t help that TV dramas and news programs continuously pump nightmare What-If scenarios into our homes and imaginations.

It also doesn’t help that should you actually try to give your kids some freedom you run the chance that neighbors [will call child protective services to report you](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/maryland-couple-want-free-range-kids-but-not-all-do/2015/01/14/d406c0be-9c0f-11e4-bcfb-059ec7a93ddc_story.html).

Born out of these fears and worries, Helicopter Parenting is an extremely regimented and directed parenting style with the goal of protecting the physical and mental well-being of the child, sometimes even at the risk of stifling the child.

We’ve all had our Helicopter Parenting moments.

Pacing around the equipment at the park, arms extended like Frankenstein, their first time climbing up and around the equipment.

Helping your toddler retrieve their toy from another toddler who snatched it away.  Or at the library trying to convince another child to share a book that your son or daughter wants.

Trying out your best Ninja-Dad impression as you follow your teen through the mall to keep an eye on them.

We’ve all been there.

Why does it matter?  Who cares if I’m making weekly chiropractor appointments for my bad back or calling up my son’s teacher on a weekly basis to check on his progress?

In 2008, Edward Deci and Richard Ryan [published their Self-Determination Theory](http://psycnet.apa.org/?&fa=main.doiLanding&doi=10.1037/0708-5591.49.1.14). According to them, the 3 innate needs that all human beings need for healthy development are:

* Basic need for autonomy
* Basic need to be confident in one’s abilities and accomplishments
* Basic need to feel they are loved and cared for

The closer we are to having these 3 basic needs met the more satisfied we are with our lives.

In 2013, Holly H. Schiffrin and Miriam Liss and their co-authors used this theory to measure the [effects of Helicopter Parenting on college students](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10826-013-9716-3).

They found being too involved or over-parenting in a child’s life undermined these 3 basic needs to different degrees.

They also found a higher degree of depression and anxiety as well as a lower general satisfaction with life. In their words –

Furthermore, when parents solve problems for their children, then children may not develop the confidence and competence to solve their own problems… Our data suggest that a sense of competence may be the basic nutriment most essential to well-being.

As if that weren’t bad enough, Helicopter Parenting can strain the [parent-child relationship](https://afineparent.com/be-positive/parent-child-relationship.html). As children enter their tween and teen years they start craving independence and privacy.

How many times have I heard, “Why can’t you just let me do it myself?”  and “Moooaaaammmmm!” hissed through gritted teeth when I try to help.

Helicoptering in to save the day can actually [cause embarrassment](http://tweenparenting.about.com/od/behaviordiscipline/tp/EmbarrassedTweens.htm) and result in your teen and young adult pushing you away just at the moment you most hope they will want to confide in you.

Even children as young as 2 years old need moments of independence.  Remember that “MYSELF!” phase? Boy, I do!  That was the worst phase for this helicopter parent.

A [new study](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/sode.12108/full) just out in 2015 by Jean Ispa and co-authors in Social Development have found that Toddlers who are given space to explore and interact with their surroundings on their own have a better relationship with their parents.  They seek their mothers out for play and interaction more often than do the children with helicopter mothers.

Both these studies concluded: Be available for your child, but let them take steps to come to you.

So how do we find out what is going on with our children and keep them safe if we’re not hovering? This is where all that work practicing [active listening](https://afineparent.com/emotional-intelligence/active-listening.html) pays off.  Active listening builds bridges of communication that allow ideas, concerns, and trust to flow freely between you and your child.

## **How I (Mostly) Stopped Hovering**

Like most bad habits, breaking out of Helicopter Parenting hasn’t been easy. But I’ve come a long way enough to consider myself a reformed Helicopter Parent now. Here are a few things that helped me –

**1. Take stock.** The first thing I did was to look at what I was doing for him that he could and should be doing for himself. I actually wrote a list.

**2. Use a realistic, phased approach to stop helicoptering.**Once I had the list, I highlighted the things on the list that I would be comfortable with him doing tomorrow; then picked another color for within 6 months; and another color for a within a year.

When I saw the list it was clear that a lot of the things I had been preventing him from doing were about me and not his ability to actually do them successfully.  I have to admit that the graduated introduction of these responsibilities was about my needing a safety net just as much as him needing time to adjust.

**3. Learn to accept that their work won’t always be perfect.**The carrots would not be perfectly cut and his grades wouldn’t always be A’s. I give feedback when asked, but it’s up to him to decide to fix it.

**4. Let them fight their own battles.**If someone isn’t sharing that’s too bad. If he has had a falling out with his best friend that’s something for him to work through. I am still his shoulder to cry on and I will actively listen to coach him through some situations, but (with a few exceptions) it’s up to him to work it out.

**5. Let them take risks.** There are things he asked to do as his confidence was growing that I felt nauseous about saying yes to.

Remember that classic team building exercise where you fall backwards, trusting that your teammate will catch you? You’re all giggly and nervous as you stand there with your eyes closed and then you feel the rush of relief and joy as your partner actually saves you?  We Organization Development consultants have you do it because taking a risk and seeing the success that comes from that risk builds trust.  Trust provides a crucial foundation that allows you and your team (and families are a team of sorts) to have even more amazing successes.

One day, after weeks of begging, we allowed Evan to take the tram alone.  It was only 3 stops and his dad was watching him get on the tram and I was there to meet the tram, but I thought I would have a heart attack waiting for him.

However, the smile on his face when he got off that tram transformed me.  Sir Edmund Hillary could not have had a bigger smile after scaling Mt. Everest.

His success made his confidence in himself bloom and it also boosted the confidence and trust I had in him.

**6. Let consequences stand.**And don’t say they aren’t fair. He came home once crying about the C he got on an essay.  I knew how hard he had worked and I felt equally disappointed, but I had to back up the teacher.  If she thought it was a C paper then he earned the C.  I had to let him not like it and have him talk me through what he did well and what he could do better next time.

**7. Learn to leave the room.**If I feel the need to take over and “help”, I leave the room. I can give one piece of unsolicited advice or demonstration, but that is it.  If I feel like I need to do more I literally back away. Also I allowed myself to say “No” when he asked for help, followed by “I think you can do it by yourself.”

**8. Journal the journey.**Writing things out helps me sort things out in my mind.  The impulse to leap in and do it for them is always there inside me. Reading my questions and struggles out loud helps me judge if I have a legit concern or if I’m taking his [successes](https://afineparent.com/mindset/growth-mindset-introduction.html) and [failures](https://afineparent.com/mindset/growth-mindset-for-kids.html) too personally.

As parents we instinctively want to protect our kids and keep them safe. Sometimes, without quite realizing it, this can lead us to become Helicopter Parents. The trick is to recognize when these instincts kick in and to intentionally back off to let our kids learn to take care of themselves.

Because, no matter how much we want to, we really can’t protect them all the time. Might as well equip them to protect themselves the best they can.

## **The 2-Minute Action Plan for Fine Parents**

Time for our 2-minute contemplation questions –

* Do you see yourself exhibiting any of the warning signs that trigger your Helicopter Parenting tendencies?
* Do you act on them or do you tamp down on them?
* Do you just have a few Helicopter Parenting tendencies now and then, or has hovering becoming a habit, turning you into a Helicopter Parent?
* How does your hovering – occasional or persistent – impact your kids?

## **The Ongoing Action Plan for Fine Parents**

Over the next few weeks, pick tasks and responsibilities that your kids can do by themselves, and let them. This list of [50 simple challenges for teaching responsibility](https://afineparent.com/building-character/teaching-kids-responsibility.html) could be a good start.

Keep practicing [active listening](https://afineparent.com/emotional-intelligence/active-listening.html).  Active listening is a great safety net for helicopter parents because it keeps those lines of communication open while letting your child feel like their independence is being respected.

Look for calculated risks that your child can take that will boost your child’s confidence in themselves and help build trust. This list of [50 things to do to make your kids street smart](https://afineparent.com/emotional-intelligence/street-smart.html) can help you get started.

Journal! Journal! Journal!  Parenting is a complex and messy business. Getting your thoughts, feelings, fears, and hopes out on paper can help you sort through the messiness and bring some calm and peace to your life.