

Kids of Helicopter Parents Are Sputtering Out

Recent studies suggests that kids with overinvolved parents and rigidly structured childhoods suffer psychological blowback in college.

By Julie Lythcott-Haims



What helicopter parenting hath wrought.

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Excerpted from **How to Raise an Adult: Break Free of the Overparenting Trap and Prepare Your Kid for Success** by Julie Lythcott-Haims, out now from Henry Holt and Co.

Academically overbearing parents are doing great harm. So says Bill Deresiewicz in his groundbreaking 2014 manifesto **Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life**. “[For students] haunted their whole lives by a fear of failure—often, in the first instance, by their parents’ fear of failure,” writes Deresiewicz, “the cost of falling short, even temporarily, becomes not merely practical, but existential.”

Those whom Deresiewicz calls “excellent sheep” I call the “existentially impotent.” From 2006 to 2008, I served on Stanford University’s mental health task force, which examined the problem of student depression and proposed ways to teach faculty, staff, and students to better understand, notice, and respond to mental health issues. As dean, I saw a lack of intellectual and emotional freedom—this existential impotence—behind closed doors. The “excellent sheep” were in my office. Often brilliant, always accomplished, these students would sit on my couch holding their fragile, brittle parts together, resigned to the fact that these outwardly successful situations were their miserable lives.

In my years as dean, I heard plenty of stories from college students who believed they *had* to study science (or medicine, or engineering), just as they’d *had* to play piano, *and* do community service for Africa, *and, and, and*. I talked with kids completely uninterested in the items on their own résumés. Some shrugged off any right to be bothered by their own lack of interest in what they were working on, saying, “My parents know what’s best for me.”

The data emerging confirms the harm done by asking so little of our kids when it comes to life skills, yet so much of them when it comes to academics.

One kid's father threatened to divorce her mother if the daughter didn't major in economics. It took this student seven years to finish instead of the usual four, and along the way the father micromanaged his daughter's every move, including requiring her to study off campus at her uncle's every weekend. At her father's insistence, the daughter went to see one of her econ professors during office hours one weekday. She forgot to call her father to report on how that went, and when she returned to her dorm later that evening her uncle was in the dorm lobby looking visibly uncomfortable about having to "force" her to call her dad to update him. Later this student told me, "I pretty much had a panic attack from the lack of control in my life." But an economics major she was indeed. And the parents got divorced anyway.

In 2013 the news was filled with worrisome statistics about the mental health crisis on college campuses, particularly the number of students medicated for depression. Charlie Gofen, the retired chairman of the board at the Latin School of Chicago, a private school serving about 1,100 students, emailed the statistics off to a colleague at another school and asked, "Do you think parents at your school would rather their kid be depressed at Yale or happy at University of Arizona?" The colleague quickly replied, "My guess is 75 percent of the parents would rather see their kids depressed at Yale. They figure that the kid can straighten the emotional stuff out in his/her 20's, but no one can go back and get the Yale undergrad degree."

Here are the statistics to which Charlie Gofen was likely alluding:

In a **2013 survey** of college counseling center directors, 95 percent said the number of students with significant psychological problems is a growing concern on their campus, 70 percent said that the number of students on their campus with severe psychological problems has increased in the past year, and they reported that 24.5 percent of their student clients were taking psychotropic drugs.

In 2013 the American College Health Association **surveyed** close to 100,000 college students from 153 different campuses about their health. When asked about their experiences, at some point over the past 12 months:

- 84.3 percent felt overwhelmed by all they had to do
- 60.5 percent felt very sad
- 57.0 percent felt very lonely
- 51.3 percent felt overwhelming anxiety
- 8.0 percent seriously considered suicide

The 153 schools surveyed included campuses in all 50 states, small liberal arts colleges and large research universities, religious institutions and nonreligious, from the small to medium-sized to the very the large. The mental health crisis is not a Yale (or Stanford or Harvard) problem; these poor mental health outcomes are occurring in kids everywhere. The increase in mental health problems among college students may reflect the lengths to which we push kids toward academic achievement, but since they are happening to kids who end up at hundreds of schools in every tier, they appear to stem not from what it takes to get into the most elite schools but from some facet of American childhood itself.

As parents, our intentions are sound—more than sound: We love our kids fiercely and want only the very best for them. Yet, having succumbed to a combination of safety fears, a college admissions arms race, and perhaps our own needy ego, our sense of what is "best" for our kids is completely out of whack. We don't want our kids to bonk their heads or have hurt feelings, but we're willing to take real chances with their mental health?

You're right to be thinking *Yes, but do we know whether overparenting causes this rise in mental health problems?* The answer is that we don't have studies proving causation, but a number of recent studies show *correlation*.

In 2010, psychology professor Neil Montgomery of Keene State College in New Hampshire surveyed 300 college freshmen nationwide and found that students with helicopter parents were less open to new ideas and actions and more vulnerable, anxious, and self-conscious. "[S]tudents who were given responsibility and not constantly monitored by their parents—so-called 'free rangers'—the effects were reversed," **Montgomery's study found.** A **2011 study** by Terri LeMoyné and Tom Buchanan at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga looking at more than 300 students found that students with "hovering" or "helicopter" parents are more likely to be medicated for anxiety and/or depression.

Helicopter parenting has crippled American teenagers. Here's how to fix it.



Dan Griffin says that the key is figuring out how to get kids to tune into their own motivation, and to get the parents to tune out of their motivation to shield their kids from failure and disappointment.

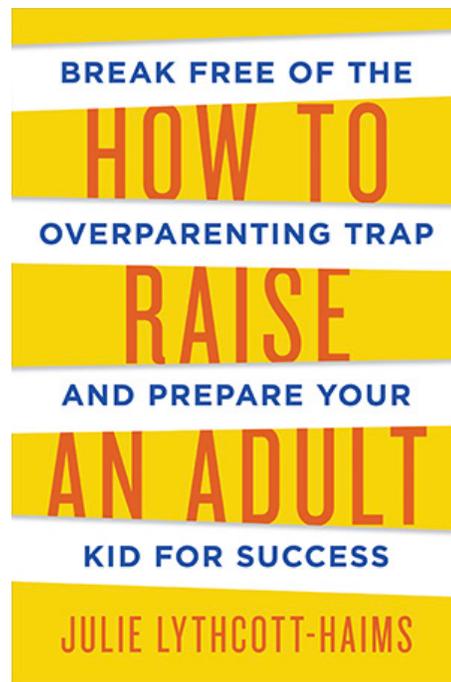
A **2012 study** of 438 college students reported in the *Journal of Adolescence* found “initial evidence for this form of intrusive parenting being linked to problematic development in emerging adulthood ... by limiting opportunities for emerging adults to practice and develop important skills needed for becoming self-reliant adults.” A **2013 study** of 297 college students reported in the *Journal of Child and Family Studies* found that college students with helicopter parents reported significantly higher levels of depression and less satisfaction in life and attributed this diminishment in well-being to a violation of the students’ “basic psychological needs for autonomy and competence.” And a **2014 study** from researchers at the University of Colorado–Boulder is the first to correlate a highly structured childhood with less executive function capabilities. Executive function is our ability to determine which goal-directed actions to carry out and when and is a skill set lacking in many kids with attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

The data emerging about the mental health of our kids only confirms the harm done by asking so little of them when it comes to life skills yet so much of them when it comes to adhering to the academic plans we’ve made for them.

Karen Able is a staff psychologist at a large public university in the Midwest. (Her name has been changed here because of the sensitive nature of her work.) Based on her clinical experience, Able says, “Overinvolved parenting is taking a serious toll on the psychological well-being of college students who can’t negotiate a balance between consulting with parents and independent decision-making.”

When parents have tended to do the stuff of life for kids—the waking up, the transporting, the reminding about deadlines and obligations, the bill-paying, the question-asking, the decision-making, the responsibility-taking, the talking to strangers, and the confronting of authorities, kids may be in for quite a shock when parents turn them loose in the world of college or work. They will experience setbacks, which will feel to them like failure. Lurking beneath the problem of whatever thing needs to be handled is the student’s inability to differentiate the self from the parent.

When seemingly perfectly healthy but overparented kids get to college and have trouble coping with the various new situations they might encounter—a roommate who has a different sense of “clean,” a professor who wants a revision to the paper but won’t say specifically what is “wrong,” a friend who isn’t being so friendly anymore, a choice between doing a summer seminar or service project but not both—they can have real difficulty knowing how to handle the disagreement, the uncertainty, the hurt feelings, or the decision-making process. This inability to cope—to sit with some discomfort, think about options, talk it through with someone, make a decision—can become a problem unto itself.



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