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Raising Successful Children

By MADELINE LEVINE

PHRASES like “tiger mom” and “helicopter parent” have made their way into everyday language. But does overparenting hurt, or help?

While parents who are clearly and embarrassingly inappropriate come in for ridicule, many of us find ourselves drawn to the idea that with just a bit more parental elbow grease, we might turn out children with great talents and assured futures. Is there really anything wrong with a kind of “overparenting lite”?

Parental involvement has a long and rich history of being studied. Decades of studies, many of them by Diana Baumrind, a clinical and developmental psychologist at the University of California, Berkeley, have found that the optimal parent is one who is involved and responsive, who sets high expectations but respects her child’s autonomy. These “authoritative parents” appear to hit the sweet spot of parental involvement and generally raise children who do better academically, psychologically and socially than children whose parents are either permissive and less involved, or controlling and more involved. Why is this particular parenting style so successful, and what does it tell us about overparenting?

For one thing, authoritative parents actually help cultivate motivation in their children. Carol Dweck, a social and developmental psychologist at Stanford University, has done research that indicates why authoritative parents raise more motivated, and thus more successful, children.

In a typical experiment, Dr. Dweck takes young children into a room and asks them to solve a simple puzzle. Most do so with little difficulty. But then Dr. Dweck tells some, but not all, of the kids how very bright and capable they are. As it turns out, the children who are not told they’re smart are more motivated to tackle increasingly difficult puzzles. They also exhibit higher levels of confidence and show greater overall progress in puzzle-solving.

This may seem counterintuitive, but praising children’s talents and abilities seems to rattle their confidence. Tackling more difficult puzzles carries the risk of losing one’s status as “smart” and

deprives kids of the thrill of choosing to work simply for its own sake, regardless of outcomes. Dr. Dweck's work aligns nicely with that of Dr. Baumrind, who also found that reasonably supporting a child's autonomy and limiting interference results in better academic and emotional outcomes.

Their research confirms what I've seen in more than 25 years of clinical work, treating children in Marin County, an affluent suburb of San Francisco. The happiest, most successful children have parents who do not do for them what they are capable of doing, or almost capable of doing; and their parents do not do things for them that satisfy their own needs rather than the needs of the child.

The central task of growing up is to develop a sense of self that is autonomous, confident and generally in accord with reality. If you treat your walking toddler as if she can't walk, you diminish her confidence and distort reality. Ditto nightly "reviews" of homework, repetitive phone calls to "just check if you're O.K." and "editing" (read: writing) your child's college application essay.

Once your child is capable of doing something, congratulate yourself on a job well done and move on. Continued, unnecessary intervention makes your child feel bad about himself (if he's young) or angry at you (if he's a teenager).

But isn't it a parent's job to help with those things that are just beyond your child's reach? Why is it overparenting to do for your child what he or she is almost capable of?

Think back to when your toddler learned to walk. She would take a weaving step or two, collapse and immediately look to you for your reaction. You were in thrall to those early attempts and would do everything possible to encourage her to get up again. You certainly didn't chastise her for failing or utter dire predictions about flipping burgers for the rest of her life if she fell again. You were present, alert and available to guide if necessary. But you didn't pick her up every time.

You knew she had to get it wrong many times before she could get it right.

HANGING back and allowing children to make mistakes is one of the greatest challenges of parenting. It's easier when they're young — tolerating a stumbling toddler is far different from allowing a preteenager to meet her friends at the mall. The potential mistakes carry greater risks, and part of being a parent is minimizing risk for our children.

What kinds of risks should we tolerate? If there's a predator loose in the neighborhood, your daughter doesn't get to go to the mall. But under normal circumstances an 11-year-old girl is quite capable of taking care of herself for a few hours in the company of her friends. She may forget a

package, overpay for an item or forget that she was supposed to call home at noon. Mastery of the world is an expanding geography for our kids, for toddlers, it's the backyard; for preteens, the neighborhood, for teens the wider world. But it is in the small daily risks — the taller slide, the bike ride around the block, the invitation extended to a new classmate — that growth takes place. In this gray area of just beyond the comfortable is where resilience is born.

So if children are able to live with mistakes and even failing, why does it drive us crazy? So many parents have said to me, "I can't stand to see my child unhappy." If you can't stand to see your child unhappy, you are in the wrong business. The small challenges that start in infancy (the first whimper that doesn't bring you running) present the opportunity for "successful failures," that is, failures your child can live with and grow from. To rush in too quickly, to shield them, to deprive them of those challenges is to deprive them of the tools they will need to handle the inevitable, difficult, challenging and sometimes devastating demands of life.

While doing things for your child unnecessarily or prematurely can reduce motivation and increase dependency, it is the inability to maintain parental boundaries that most damages child development. When we do things for our children out of our own needs rather than theirs, it forces them to circumvent the most critical task of childhood: to develop a robust sense of self.

There is an important distinction between good and bad parental involvement. For example, a young child doesn't want to sit and do his math homework. Good parents insist on compliance, not because they need their child to be a perfect student but because the child needs to learn the fundamentals of math and develop a good work ethic. Compare this with the parent who spends weeks "helping" his or her child fill out college applications with the clear expectation that if they both work hard enough, a "gotta get into" school is a certainty. (While most of my parent patients have graduated from college, it is always a telltale sign of overparenting when they talk about how "we're applying to Columbia.")

In both situations parents are using control, in the first case behavioral (sit down, do your math) and in the second psychological ("we're applying.") It is psychological control that carries with it a textbook's worth of damage to a child's developing identity. If pushing, direction, motivation and reward always come from the outside, the child never has the opportunity to craft an inside. Having tutors prep your anxious 3-year-old for a preschool interview because all your friends' children are going to this particular school or pushing your exhausted child to take one more advanced-placement course because it will ensure her spot as class valedictorian is not involved parenting but toxic overparenting aimed at meeting the parents' need for status or affirmation and not the child's needs.

So how do parents find the courage to discard the malpractice of overparenting? It's hard to swim upstream, to resist peer pressure. But we must remember that children thrive best in an environment that is reliable, available, consistent and noninterfering.

A loving parent is warm, willing to set limits and unwilling to breach a child's psychological boundaries by invoking shame or guilt. Parents must acknowledge their own anxiety. Your job is to know your child well enough to make a good call about whether he can manage a particular situation. Will you stay up worrying? Probably, but the child's job is to grow, yours is to control your anxiety so it doesn't get in the way of his reasonable moves toward autonomy.

Parents also have to be clear about their own values. Children watch us closely. If you want your children to be able to stand up for their values, you have to do the same. If you believe that a summer spent reading, taking creek walks and playing is better than a specialized camp, then stick to your guns. Parents also have to make sure their own lives are fulfilling. There is no parent more vulnerable to the excesses of overparenting than an unhappy parent. One of the most important things we do for our children is to present them with a version of adult life that is appealing and worth striving for.

Madeline Levine is a clinician, consultant and the author, most recently, of "Teach Your Children Well: Parenting for Authentic Success."



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